Report of the Commission on Church Order

The Commission on Church Order (CCO) met October 13–15, 2016, in Chicago, Illinois, and again January 30–February 1, 2017, in New York City, New York. Communication also occurred through numerous emails and phone calls. The CCO worked with other commissions of the General Synod on the work assigned to it by the General Synod. The commission also provided advisory responses to requests for interpretations of the Book of Church Order (BCO).

1. Referrals from 2016 General Synod

No referrals from last year’s General Synod were received.

2. Task Force on Diaconal Assemblies

A member of the CCO participated on the Task Force on Diaconal Assemblies created as a result of R-51, adopted by the 2015 General Synod (MGS 2015, p. 242).

3. Board of Benefits Services

The RCA’s Board of Benefits Services (BOBS) requested guidance regarding ways to enforce compliance by consistories with BCO Formulary No. 5 (related to retirement plan contributions and life and long-term disability insurance) and ways to compel classes to fulfill their obligations under BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 3 (2016 edition, p. 53) to ensure that consistories honor their obligations under Formulary No. 5.

4. Work with the Commission on Theology regarding Commissioned Pastors

The 2016 General Synod voted to refer three separate recommendations regarding commissioned pastors to the General Synod’s Commission on Theology (COT) in consultation with the CCO (see MGS 2016, R 16-20 to R 16-25, pp. 146-149). The role of the CCO was to offer proposed changes to the BCO in response to the action of the Commission on Theology’s recommendation of whether the commissioned pastor is to be recognized as an elder or a minister in our polity.

The CCO presents the following paper, concluding with proposed amendments to the BCO:

THE COMMISSIONED PASTOR IN THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

History

The history of commissioned pastors in the RCA was reported to the General Synod by the Commission on History in 2015 (MGS 2015, pp. 197-211). The 2016 General Synod also received a report from the Commissioned Pastor Summit, held in March 2016 (MGS 2016, pp. 142-152). In response, the 2016 General Synod directed the Commission on Theology (COT) to review the place of commissioned pastors in our polity. Should the church order recognize the commissioned pastor through the office of elder or as a servant of the church who functions as a minister? There is an expressed desire throughout the church to remove the restrictions that prevent commissioned pastors from serving as delegates to the broader assemblies. Would the commissioned pastor be sent as an elder or as a minister delegate?
The Work of the Commission on Theology and Commission on Church Order

The COT looked at the commissioned pastor from many angles, and also looked at how our assemblies are formed. It concluded that office is the most significant identifying characteristic when forming our synods. Likewise, delegates are not present in broader assemblies because they function in a particular manner. They come as “officers of the church.” The office that a commissioned pastor bears and to which the person is ordained is the office of elder. Therefore, if commissioned pastors are to attend the synods as delegates, they would attend as elders because they are elders. The COT sent the following statement to the CCO requesting that changes in the *BCO* be drafted:

The Commission on Theology commends the Commission on Church Order to join us in recommending a change to the *BCO* so that commissioned pastors may be selected as delegates to General Synod and regional synod. Our recommendation to CCO is that the proposed definition of 16-24 be set aside and the current *BCO* text (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 1 [pg. 58, 2016 edition]) be retained.

Furthermore, we commend the Commission on Church Order construct a change to the current *BCO* statement (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 9) that reads, “The commissioned pastor shall be a member of classis during the period of commissioned service, but shall not serve as an elder delegate.” We recommend that it be amended to read: “The commissioned pastor shall be a member of classis during the period of commissioned service, and shall not serve as an elder delegate to the classis from a local church. A commissioned pastor may serve as an elder delegate to a regional and/or General Synod.” (additions underlined)

The underlying rationale for this is their ordination as elder.

With this directive from the COT, the CCO has been given the task of applying this directive to the role of commissioned pastors in the RCA as expressed throughout the *Book of Church Order*. The General Synod has called for an overall review of the place of commissioned pastors in our polity and an application of this understanding to the text (*MGS 2014*, R-56, p. 267). How do we apply this understanding of “elder” to the role of commissioned pastor as set forth in the *BCO*? We begin by looking at what has been said about the office of elder in the RCA.

Understanding the Office of Elder in the Reformed Church

“The *BCO* is far more than a manual of definitions and procedures—it is decidedly not an ecclesiastical version of *Robert’s Rules of Order*. A foundational principle of Reformed governance is that government builds on doctrine, order on confession. We might think of the *BCO* as the agent that the church uses to live out in practical day-by-day existence its evangelical faith” (*Faithful Consistories*, pp. 3-4).

“In Reformed thought an office, with its authority and powers, is not a response to community need, or even to the needs of the world, but to Christ’s ministry to and through his people, as shown above: Office does not follow function; function follows office” (*Faithful Consistories*, p. 6).

“The elder takes responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the congregation in a missional church, ascertaining that its members are nurtured through Scripture, worship, the sacraments, and prayer” (*Faithful Consistories*, p. 18).

The office of elder serves the local church. The purpose of this office is for the governance of the congregation and for the effectiveness of the local church in ministry. We see this application in the definition of the office of elder in the *BCO* (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1; 2016 edition, pp. 12-13):

*Sec. 7.* Elders are confessing members of the local church who have been inducted into that office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established or recognized by the Reformed Church in America.

*Sec. 8.* The office of the elder is one of servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. In the local church elders are chosen members of spiritual discernment, exemplary life, charitable spirit, and wisdom grounded in God’s Word. Elders, together with the installed minister/s serving under a call, are to have supervision of the church entrusted to them. They are set apart for a ministry of watchful and responsible care for all matters relating to the welfare and good order of the church. They are to study God’s Word, to oversee the household of faith, to encourage spiritual growth, to maintain loving discipline, and to provide for the proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments. They have oversight over the conduct of the members of the congregation and seek to bring that conduct into conformity with the Word of God, thereby empowering all members to live out their Christian vocation in the world. Elders exercise an oversight over the conduct of one another, and of the deacons, and of the minister/s. They make certain that what is preached and taught by the minister/s is in accord with the Holy Scripture. They assist the minister/s with their good counsel and in the task of visitation. They seek to guard the sacraments of the church from being profaned. An elder may administer the sacraments, if authorized by the board of elders.

Commenting on this section of the *BCO*, Allan Janssen makes the following observations in his book *Constitutional Theology: Notes on the Book of Church Order of the Reformed Church in America*:

The elder is charged with oversight of the life of the members of the congregation (p. 47).

In recent years, the Reformed Church in America has expanded the responsibilities of the office of elder to permit elders, under certain circumstances, to preside at the Lord’s Table. This permissive action was taken that congregations not be bereft of the sacrament when circumstances prevent the availability of ministers. This action needs to be taken cautiously. The authorization is very simple: the board of elders designates one of its members to preside. This is not ordination to a new office” (p. 49).

The Reformed Church understands that the office of elder is imperative to the formation of the local church. The elder serves the local church and serves through the local church. Elders derive authority to act not from ordination, but by being granted that authority by the board of elders. For example, an elder may preside at the Lord’s Table not because the person is an elder but when the board of elders or the classis has authorized the action. Elders need to be connected to the local church for the office to have any meaning. To say this another way, an elder needs the local church in order to be an elder as much as the local church needs elders in order to be the church.
Understanding the Role of Commissioned Pastor in the RCA

“Commissioned pastor” is not an office. It is a role or a function for service. It was created to serve and equip the local church for ministry.

The commissioned pastor designation was never intended or designed to serve as a replacement for the minister of Word and sacrament, nor was it intended to be an easier path to professional ministry; it was intended to support, and be supervised by, ministers in a specific place within a classis for a specific period of time (report of the Commission on History, *MGS 2015*, p. 203).

Recommended Changes to the BCO

The Commission on Church Order offers a series of changes to the *BCO* to more fully integrate the commissioned pastor into our polity as a servant of the local church who is both an elder and a member of the classis.

The commission presents the following amendments to the *BCO* to the 2017 General Synod:

R 17-41
To adopt the following changes to the *Book of Church Order* for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part I

*Article 1. Definitions*

*Sec. 1.* A consistory is the governing body of a local church. Its members are the installed minister/s of that church serving under a call, and the elders and deacons currently installed in office and commissioned pastors authorized by the classis. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 8.) A consistory is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through committees. An organizing church has a classis-appointed governing body that functions similarly to both a consistory and a board of elders.

*Sec 8.* ... Elders, together with the installed minister/s serving under a call and/or commissioned pastor/s (if any), are to have supervision of the church entrusted to them. ... Elders exercise an oversight over the conduct of one another, and of the deacons, and of the minister/s. They make certain that what is preached and taught by the minister/s is in accord with the Holy Scripture. They assist the minister/s with their good counsel and in the task of visitation.

*Article 2. Responsibilities of the Consistory*

*Sec. 9.* A consistory or its minister may request the classis to terminate the minister’s relationship to that church. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 8.) A consistory or its commissioned pastor may request the classis to terminate the commissioned pastor’s commissioning to that church.
Sec. 11.

e. Ordinarily, the preaching of the Word shall be performed by a Minister of Word and Sacrament, a commissioned pastor under contract with the congregation, a preaching elder under contract with the congregation, or a candidate for ministry appointed pursuant to Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 7.

1. A consistory or a governing body may issue an invitation to preach to a minister of another denomination whose character and standard is known.

2. A consistory or governing body may determine whether to issue an invitation to preach to a minister whose character and standard is not known to them once that minister has first furnished the consistory or governing body with written evidence of recent date of that minister’s good ministerial standing and the minister’s authorization to preach the Word.

3. A consistory or a governing body may authorize, in occasional or special circumstances, other persons to preach.

Sec. 11.

e. The consistory of a church may invite or permit ministers of other denominations whose character and standard are known to preach for them. Ministers of other denominations or their counterparts whose character and standard are not known shall not be engaged to preach in a local church until they have furnished to the consistory written evidence of recent date of their good ministerial standing and of their authorization to preach the Word. The consistory shall then determine whether to issue an invitation to preach. Ordinarily, the preaching of the Word shall be performed by an ordained minister or a theological student appointed pursuant to the Government of the Reformed Church in America, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 7. In special circumstances, an elder commissioned by the classis as a preaching elder may preach. However, a consistory may authorize, in occasional or special circumstances, other persons to preach.

Chapter 1, Part II

Article 1. Classis Defined

The classis is an assembly and judicatory consisting of all the enrolled ministers of that body, commissioned pastors serving under a commission approved by the classis, and the elder delegates who represent all the local and organizing churches within its bounds. The classis is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through committees. Voting rights shall be limited to elder delegates, and those enrolled ministers who are actively serving
as ministers either under the jurisdiction of or with the approval of the classis, and commissioned pastors serving under a commission approved by the classis.

Article 2. Responsibilities of the Classis

Sec. 2. The classis shall exercise a general superintendence over its enrolled ministers, its commissioned pastors, and over the interests and concerns of the congregations within its bounds, and shall enforce the requirements of the Government of the Reformed Church in America.

Sec. 8. The classis shall examine candidates for ministry throughout their training process and prior to granting a certificate of licensure, students of theology for licensure, and licensed candidates for the ministry for ordination. The classis shall examine candidates for commissioned pastor throughout their training process and/or prior to commissioning.

Sec. 10. The classis shall approve and disapprove calls and contracts, and effect and dissolve the relationship between ministers and churches or congregations. The classis shall approve and disapprove contracts, and effect and dissolve the relationship between commissioned pastors and churches or congregations.

Article 4. Sessions of Classis

Sec. 1. Stated sessions of classis shall be held at least annually at such times as the classis may determine. All classis sessions shall begin and end with prayer. There shall be a sermon preached, or a devotional service, or both, at each stated session. The presence of (a) a majority of elder delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of commissioned pastors and those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis is required.

Sec. 2. The president of classis shall call a special session of classis whenever special business requires it or upon the written request of two ministers or classis members and two elder delegates. At least ten days’ notice of any special session shall be given to all the ministers members and elder delegates of the classis. The notice shall state the purpose of the special session. The presence of three ministers classis members and three elder delegates shall constitute a quorum to transact the business stated in the notice of such special session.

Article 6. Transaction of Business

Sec. 4. Except as otherwise provided in the Book of Church Order, a members of a classis committees, commissions, or boards shall be a member of the classis or a confessing members of one of its churches or congregations in the classis.

Article 7. Superintendence of the Local and Organizing Churches

Sec. 1. The classis shall annually engage the ministers its members and
COMMISSIONS

elder delegates in a review of the ministry of the separate congregations by addressing the following questions. The answers shall be entered in the minutes of classis for the information of the synods:

m. Does the consistory or governing body regularly engage its minister/s and/or commissioned pastor/s in a mutual reflection on the ministerial needs and challenges of the congregation?

n. Do the salary, housing, arrangements for professional development, and all other benefits received by the minister/s and/or commissioned pastor/s meet the terms of the original call or contract, subsequent revisions thereof, and the minimum standards of the classis?

Article 15. Supervision of Ministers of Word and Sacrament

Sec. 12. The classis shall keep a record book in which the declarations for licensed candidates, commissioned pastors, and ministers are clearly written. Those who are received on examination or on certificate shall subscribe to the proper declaration in the presence of the classis.

Article 17. Commissioning and Supervision of Commissioned Pastors

Sec. 1. A commissioned pastor is an elder who is trained, commissioned, and supervised by a classis for a specific ministry within that classis and under the auspices of a local church or congregation that will include the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments. The commission shall be valid for the period of assigned service.

Sec. 2. Preparation for Commissioning

a. A consistory or governing body may recommend a confessing member of a Reformed church to the classis as a candidate to become a commissioned pastor.

b. Sec. 3. Upon acceptance of the consistory’s application on behalf of a candidate, the classis shall approve and supervise a training plan for that person. The classis shall satisfy itself that the candidate exhibits ministry competence in 1) maturity of faith, 2) personal integrity, 3) understanding of the Old and New Testaments and biblical interpretation, 4) Reformed theology, 5) church history, 6) knowledge of and adherence to the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America (the Government, the Standards, and the Liturgy), 7) nature and administration of the sacraments, 8) ability to preach, 9) capability to minister within the church, and 10) understanding of and adherence to pastoral ethics and practices.

c. Sec. 4. In satisfying itself concerning a candidate’s ministry competence, the classis shall employ criteria established by the General Synod Council.
Sec. 3. Confirming an Invitation to Ministry

a. Sec. 5. Upon satisfaction by the classis of the candidate’s ministerial competence, the classis shall identify and confirm the specific form of commissioned service appropriate to the gifts and training of the candidate. When the classis receives an invitation for a ministry from one of its local churches or congregations, it deems appropriate for the candidate, and upon the candidate’s acceptance of this invitation to ministry, the classis shall 1) authorize the ministry, 2) approve a contract, and 3) commission the candidate to the authorized ministry to the extent of the contract. A church or congregation shall not enter into a contract with a commissioned pastor except by the approval of the classis.

b. Sec. 6. After a classis approves a candidate for commission to an authorized ministry, the classis shall appoint a time and place for a commissioning service at a regular or special classis session. The service shall utilize a liturgy approved by the General Synod. The commissioned pastor shall read aloud and sign the Declaration for Commissioned Pastors (Appendix, Formulary No. 16) shall be made orally by the candidate in the presence of the classis as part of that order for commissioning. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 12.)

c. Sec. 7. The classis shall assign a mentor for each commissioned pastor for the period of training and ministry.

Sec. 4. The Commissioned Pastor

a. Sec. 8. The commissioned pastor shall be authorized to preach the Word and celebrate the sacraments. The classis may authorize the commissioned pastor to any or all of the following functions:

1. Serve as presiding officer of the consistory at its request and may be appointed supervisor of that consistory.

2. Preside at the ordination and installation of elders and deacons.

3. Perform a service of Christian marriage when approved by consistory and subject to state and provincial law.

b. Sec. 9. The commissioned pastor shall be a member of classis during the period of commissioned service, but shall not serve as an elder delegate to the classis from a local church. A commissioned pastor may serve as an elder delegate to a regional and/or General Synod.

c. Sec. 10. The classis shall evaluate the performance of the
commissioned pastor at least annually.

d. **Sec. 11.** Upon completion of the authorized ministry by a commissioned pastor, the classis shall provide to that person a written statement of the training received and the ministry that was performed.

e. **Sec. 12.** The commissioned pastor shall remain a member of a local church, but is amenable solely to the discipline of the classis as set forth in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3 of the *Book of Church Order*, for the period of commissioned service.

f. The classis in which a commissioned pastor’s membership is held is the only classis to which the commissioned pastor is amenable.

g. **Sec. 13.** Upon request of the regional synod, the classis shall submit to an annual review upon request of regional synod of the processes used by the classis for commissioned pastor selection, preparation, commissioning, support, and supervision.

The advice of the All-Synod Advisory Committees, as expressed by the All-Synod Advisory Committees Summarizing Team, was to vote in favor of R 17-41. See pp. 273-282 for the Report of the All-Synod Advisory Committees Summarizing Team.

A motion was made and supported to amend R 17-41 as follows (additions and deletions that are part of the proposed amendment are highlighted).

Chapter 1, Part II

*Article 17. Commissioning and Supervision of Commissioned Pastors*

**Sec. 4. The Commissioned Pastor**

a. **Sec. 8.** The commissioned pastor shall be authorized to preach the Word and celebrate the sacraments. The classis may authorize the commissioned pastor to any or all of the following functions:

1. To serve as a member of consistory.

*(subsequent sections re-numbered)*

**VOTED:** To adopt the amendment to R 17-41.

**VOTED:** To adopt R 17-41 as amended.

The final text of R 17-41 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

**R 17-41**

To adopt the following changes to the *Book of Church Order* for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):
Chapter 1, Part I

Article 1. Definitions

Sec. 1. A consistory is the governing body of a local church. Its members are the installed minister/s of that church serving under a call, and the elders and deacons currently installed in office, and commissioned pastors authorized by the classis. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 17, Section 8.) A consistory is a permanent, continuing body which functions between stated sessions through committees. An organizing church has a classis-appointed governing body that functions similarly to both a consistory and a board of elders.

Sec 8. … Elders, together with the installed minister/s serving under a call and/or commissioned pastor/s (if any), are to have supervision of the church entrusted to them. … Elders exercise an oversight over the conduct of one another, and of the deacons, and of the minister/s. They make certain that what is preached and taught by the minister/s is in accord with the Holy Scripture. They assist the minister/s with their good counsel and in the task of visitation.

Article 2. Responsibilities of the Consistory

Sec. 9. A consistory or its minister may request the classis to terminate the minister’s relationship to that church. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 8.) A consistory or its commissioned pastor may request the classis to terminate the commissioned pastor’s commissioning to that church.

Sec. 11.

e. Ordinarily, the preaching of the Word shall be performed by a Minister of Word and Sacrament, a commissioned pastor under contract with the congregation, a preaching elder under contract with the congregation, or a candidate for ministry appointed pursuant to Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 7.

1. A consistory or a governing body may issue an invitation to preach to a minister of another denomination whose character and standard is known.

2. A consistory or governing body may determine whether to issue an invitation to preach to a minister whose character and standard is not known to them once that minister has first furnished the consistory or governing body with written evidence of recent date of that minister’s good ministerial standing and the minister’s authorization to preach the Word.
3. A consistory or a governing body may authorize, in occasional or special circumstances, other persons to preach.

Sec. b.-

e. The consistory of a church may invite or permit ministers of other denominations whose character and standard are known to preach for them. Ministers of other denominations or their counterparts whose character and standard are not known shall not be engaged to preach in a local church until they have furnished to the consistory written evidence of recent date of their good ministerial standing and of their authorization to preach the Word. The consistory shall then determine whether to issue an invitation to preach. Ordinarily, the preaching of the Word shall be performed by an ordained minister or a theological student appointed pursuant to the Government of the Reformed Church in America, Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 7. In special circumstances, an elder commissioned by the classis as a preaching elder may preach. However, a consistory may authorize, in occasional or special circumstances, other persons to preach.

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Sec. 2. The classis shall exercise a general superintendence over its enrolled ministers, its commissioned pastors, and over the interests and concerns of the congregations within its bounds, and shall enforce the requirements of the Government of the Reformed Church in America.

Sec. 8. The classis shall examine candidates for ministry throughout their training process and prior to granting a certificate of licensure, students of theology for licensure, and licensed candidates for the ministry for ordination. The classis shall examine candidates for commissioned pastor throughout their training process and/or prior to commissioning.
Sec. 10. The classis shall approve and disapprove calls and contracts, and effect and dissolve the relationship between ministers and churches or congregations. The classis shall approve and disapprove contracts, and effect and dissolve the relationship between commissioned pastors and churches or congregations.

Article 4. Sessions of Classis

Sec. 1. Stated sessions of classis shall be held at least annually at such times as the classis may determine. All classis sessions shall begin and end with prayer. There shall be a sermon preached, or a devotional service, or both, at each stated session. The presence of (a) a majority of elder delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of commissioned pastors and those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis is required.

Sec. 2. The president of classis shall call a special session of classis whenever special business requires it or upon the written request of two ministers classis members and two elder delegates. At least ten days’ notice of any special session shall be given to all the ministers members and elder delegates of the classis. The notice shall state the purpose of the special session. The presence of three ministers classis members and three elder delegates shall constitute a quorum to transact the business stated in the notice of such special session.

Article 6. Transaction of Business

Sec. 4. Except as otherwise provided in the Book of Church Order, a members of a classis committees, commissions, or boards shall be a member of the classis or a confessing members of one of its churches or congregations in the classis.

Article 7. Superintendence of the Local and Organizing Churches

Sec. 1. The classis shall annually engage the ministers its members and elder delegates in a review of the ministry of the separate congregations by addressing the following questions. The answers shall be entered in the minutes of classis for the information of the synods:

m. Does the consistory or governing body regularly engage its minister/s and/or commissioned pastor/s in a mutual reflection on the ministerial needs and challenges of the congregation?

n. Do the salary, housing, arrangements for professional development, and all other benefits received by the minister/s and/or commissioned pastor/s meet the terms of the original call or contract, subsequent revisions thereof, and the minimum standards of the classis?
Article 15. Supervision of Ministers of Word and Sacrament

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Sec. 2. Preparation for Commissioning

a. A consistory or governing body may recommend a confessing member of a Reformed church to the classis as a candidate to become a commissioned pastor.

b. Sec. 3. Upon acceptance of the consistory’s application on behalf of a candidate, the classis shall approve and supervise a training plan for that person. The classis shall satisfy itself that the candidate exhibits ministry competence in 1) maturity of faith, 2) personal integrity, 3) understanding of the Old and New Testaments and biblical interpretation, 4) Reformed theology, 5) church history, 6) knowledge of and adherence to the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America (the Government, the Standards, and the Liturgy), 7) nature and administration of the sacraments, 8) ability to preach, 9) capability to minister within the church, and 10) understanding of and adherence to pastoral ethics and practices.

c. Sec. 4. In satisfying itself concerning a candidate’s ministry competence, the classis shall employ criteria established by the General Synod Council.

Sec. 3. Confirming an Invitation to Ministry

a. Sec. 5. Upon satisfaction by the classis of the candidate’s ministerial competence, the classis shall identify confirm the specific form of commissioned service appropriate to the gifts and training of the candidate. When the classis receives an invitation for a ministry from one of its local churches or congregations it deems appropriate for the candidate, and upon the candidate’s acceptance of this invitation to ministry, the classis shall 1) authorize the ministry, 2) approve a contract, and 3) commission the
candidate to the authorized ministry to the extent of the contract. A church or congregation shall not enter into a contract with a commissioned pastor except by the approval of the classis.

b. **Sec. 6**—After a classis approves a candidate for commission to an authorized ministry, the classis shall appoint a time and place for a commissioning service at a regular or special classis session. The service shall utilize a liturgy approved by the General Synod. The **commissioned pastor shall read aloud and sign the Declaration for Commissioned Pastors** (Appendix, Formulary No. 16) shall be made orally by the candidate in the presence of the classis as part of that order for commissioning. (See Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 12.)

c. **Sec. 7**—The classis shall assign a mentor for each commissioned pastor for the period of training and ministry.

**Sec. 4. The Commissioned Pastor**

a. **Sec. 8**—The commissioned pastor shall be authorized to preach the Word and celebrate the sacraments. The classis may authorize the commissioned pastor to any or all of the following functions:

1. **To serve as a member of consistory.**

2. a. Serve as presiding officer of the consistory at its request and may be appointed supervisor of that consistory.

3. b. Preside at the ordination and installation of elders and deacons.

4. c. Perform a service of Christian marriage when approved by consistory and subject to state and provincial law.

b. **Sec. 9**—The commissioned pastor shall be a member of classis during the period of commissioned service, but shall not serve as an elder delegate to the classis from a local church. A commissioned pastor may serve as an elder delegate to a regional and/or General Synod.

c. **Sec. 10**—The classis shall evaluate the performance of the commissioned pastor at least annually.

d. **Sec. 11**—Upon completion of the authorized ministry by a commissioned pastor, the classis shall provide to that person a written statement of the training received and the ministry that was performed.
e. Sec. 12. The commissioned pastor shall remain a member of a local church, but is amenable solely to the discipline of the classis as set forth in Chapter 2, Part I, Article 3 of the Book of Church Order, for the period of commissioned service.

f. The classis in which a commissioned pastor’s membership is held is the only classis to which the commissioned pastor is amenable.

g. Sec. 13. Upon request of the regional synod, the classis shall submit to an annual review upon request of the processes used by the classis for commissioned pastor selection, preparation, commissioning, support, and supervision. (ADOPTED)

5. Furloughing Missionaries

The BCO currently provides that furloughing missionaries may serve as delegates to General Synod (see Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1; 2016 edition, p. 65, and Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 3, Section 5; 2016 edition, p. 67). The issue with these sections of the BCO is that RCA Global Mission no longer uses the designation of “furloughing missionaries.” After conversations with RCA Global Mission staff, the CCO is proposing that BCO Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 3, Section 5 (2016 edition, p. 67), be revised to reflect current terminology and practices.

The commission presents the following amendments to the Book of Church Order to the 2017 General Synod:

R 17-42
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 1

… Certification Agency; a number of furloughing missionary and chaplain delegates; and corresponding delegates provided for in the bylaws of General Synod …

Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 3

Sec. 5. The classis may appoint as a delegate one of its members who is a furloughing missionary on home assignment at the time of appointment with at least five years of service in the field shall be eligible for appointment to the General Synod. The missionary delegate from the classis of membership once during each furlough and shall not be counted as one of the regular delegates of that classis and may serve as a missionary delegate only once every five years. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of R 17-42.
6. Supersession of a Consistory

After receiving questions about the supersession process, the commission worked on Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9 (2016 edition, pp. 37-39), in order to simplify and clarify the necessary steps for supersession. Two particular topics were addressed: 1) the relationship of the pastor/s to the action of supersession; and 2) the repeated requirement in the text for a supermajority vote by the classis to take actions.

Regarding the relationship of the pastor to the action of supersession, the commission understands that if the consistory is dissolved then the call to the pastor/s no longer exists. In other words, the pastoral relationship dissolved since there isn’t a consistory with which to have such a relationship. Therefore, the proposed text plainly states that the pastoral relationship is dissolved. Please note that (a) a minister whose call is dissolved as a part of a supersession process may nevertheless continue to serve under contract in a capacity agreed upon by the minister and the group of persons exercising the functions that are necessary for the administration of the church, and (b) nothing prevents a reconstituted consistory from extending a new call to the minister whose call was dissolved as a part of the supersession process. These notes are intended to remind the General Synod and the broader church that supersession is a reparative process with an ultimate goal of “righting the ship.”

The commission presents the following amendments to the Book of Church Order to the 2017 General Synod:

R 17-43
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9

Sec. 2. Classis shall be directed by the following rules when superseding a consistory:

a. Before superseding a consistory, the classis shall notify the church consistory and the ministers (if any) of its intention and summon the governing body consistory to show cause why that consistory should not be dissolved and the church and its property be administered under the direction and supervision of the classis. If the basis for supersession is the request of the consistory, the consistory need not show cause why it should not be dissolved and may instead advise the classis of its approval of this action.

Sec. 3. The notice required by Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9, Section 2 shall include the following:

a. The basis upon which the classis is seeking supersession, with specific reference to a condition found in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9, Section 1.

b. Notice that the action of supersession causes the termination of the ministerial relationship.
2c. The time, date, and location of the classis meeting where supersession shall be considered.

3d. A statement that the consistory must appear at the meeting identified in Section 13(a)(2) to show cause why it should not be dissolved.

b. If the basis for supersession is the request of the consistory, the consistory need not show cause why it should not be dissolved and may, instead, advise the classis of its approval of this action.

Sec. 4. After having heard the consistory, the classis may act to supersede the consistory. A decision to supersede requires a two-thirds vote at a stated session or special session where a quorum is present, meeting the requirements of a quorum of a stated session of classis. In combination with a decision to supersede or thereafter, the classis may also elect, in accordance with the laws of the state in which that church is located, to:

a. Terminate whatever authority the consistory or any other body has as trustees of the church property.

b. Take the church under its direction by appointing such trustees as are required for the protection, preservation, management, and ownership of the property during such time as the classis shall determine.

Sec. 5. e. If the classis, after having heard the consistory, continues in its intention, it shall dissolve the consistory and otherwise terminate the formal organization of that church and:

a. When a consistory is superseded, the consistory is dissolved and any ministerial relationships of that church are terminated. The classis shall take such steps as may be necessary to bring that church, its ministry, and its property under the direct administration of the classis.

d-b. Such a church shall not have a consistory, but the classis shall designate those persons, not necessarily members of that church, who, in lieu of the consistory, shall exercise the functions of a consistory or a board of elders or a board of deacons as may be necessary for the administration of the church. These persons shall serve the church in the same capacity as a consistory until such time as the life of the church has reached an end or a consistory for the church is reconstituted (Chapter 1, Part II, Article 9, Section 7). The supersession board is authorized to carry out the responsibilities of Chapter 1, Part I, Articles 2, 5, and 6, without further acts of the classis. In carrying out these responsibilities, the supersession board shall follow the requirements of Chapter 1, Part I, Article 4. The classis may grant additional authority to the supersession
board or may impose restrictions on the authority automatically granted to the supersession board.

c. The final action of the classis to dissolve a consistory shall require a two-thirds vote. The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of (a) a majority of elder delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis.

Sec. 3. When the classis has superseded a consistory, it shall have the authority, in the exercise of its discretion and in accordance with the laws of the state in which that church is located, to:

a. Terminate whatever authority the consistory or any other body has as trustees of the church property.

b. Take the church under its direction by appointing such trustees as are required for the protection, preservation, management and ownership of the property during such time as the classis shall determine.

All actions of the classis under this section shall require a two-thirds vote. The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of (a) a majority of elder delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis.

Sec. 64. The classis shall have the authority to reconstitute the consistory of a church when, in the judgment of the classis, sufficient growth has been achieved or suitable stability created so that the church can continue ministry without classis administration. The classis shall guide the consistory selection process (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 14). The decision to reconstitute the consistory requires a two-thirds vote at a stated session or special session where a quorum is present, meeting the requirements of a quorum of a stated session of classis. All actions of the classis under this section shall require a two-thirds vote. The classis shall have a quorum present consisting of (a) a majority of elder delegates and commissioned pastors, and (b) a majority of those ministers who are actively serving in ministries under the jurisdiction of the classis. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of R 17-43.

7. Minister of Word and Sacrament

It is commonly understood that all ministers are ordained to the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. However, discussions with ministers and candidates new to our denomination have shown that the current BCO text can be interpreted to mean that pastors are Ministers of Word and Sacrament, but specialized ministers have their own office. To clear away this misinterpretation, the CCO presents the following changes to the BCO.
This proposed text does not introduce new meaning, but clarifies the intended meaning of the current text.

The commission has agreed that for consistency of style the word “sacrament” should be capitalized when used in the phrase “Minister of Word and Sacrament.” Accordingly, other references to “Minister of Word and Sacrament” throughout the BCO will be adjusted as an editorial change.

Additionally, the commission is proposing to delete the word “only” in the proposed version of Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1, Section 3, since the use of that word implies one could have multiple memberships. Also, the phrase “under the authority of the consistory” is added to Section 4a since the consistory oversees the administration of sacraments in the local church.

The commission presents the following amendments to the Book of Church Order to the 2017 General Synod:

R 17-44

To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1

Sec. 3. Ministers are those men and women who have been inducted into the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament—that office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established or recognized by the Reformed Church in America. Ministers of Word and Sacrament They are equal in authority as ministers and as stewards of the mysteries of God. Ministers shall ordinarily be confessing members of only the Reformed Church in America, except as otherwise provided in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 1 and in Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 4. No person who has relinquished the ministry for which installed or commissioned or who has been suspended or deposed from the ministry shall exercise that office.

Sec. 4. The Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament is one of servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. Ministers are called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the ministry of the Word of God.

a. A minister serving a congregation is the In the local church the minister serves as pastor and teacher of the congregation to build up and equip the whole church for its ministry in the world. The minister preaches and teaches the Word of God, administers the sacraments under the authority of the consistory, shares responsibility with the elders and deacons and members of the congregation for their mutual Christian growth, exercises Christian love and discipline in conjunction with the elders, and endeavors that everything in the church be done in a proper and orderly way. As pastor and teacher the minister so serves and lives among the congregation
b. A specialized minister is a Sec. 5. The office of the minister in a specialized ministry is to serve as pastor and teacher of the people among whom the minister works, to build up and equip those people, and to serve with the whole church in its ministry in the world. The specialized minister proclaims the Word of God in word and deed and administers the sacraments when appropriate under the authority of the classis. The minister so serves and lives among the people that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

c. Proper ecclesiastical designation of ministers shall accord with the nature of their ministry, such as pastor, teacher, professor, missionary, chaplain, president, executive secretary, director, or other appropriate designation.

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to amend R 17-44 as follows (additions and deletions that are part of the advisory committee’s amendment are highlighted).

Sec. 4. The Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament is one of servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. Ministers are called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the ministry of the Word of God.

a. A minister serving a congregation is the In the local church the minister serves as pastor and teacher of the congregation to build up and equip the whole church for its ministry in the world. The minister preaches and teaches the Word of God, administers the sacraments under the authority of the consistory, shares responsibility with the elders and deacons and members of the congregation for their mutual Christian growth, exercises Christian love and discipline in conjunction with the elders, and endeavors that everything in the church be done in a proper and orderly way. As pastor and teacher the minister so serves and lives among the congregation that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

VOTED: To adopt the amendment to R 17-44.

VOTED: To adopt R 17-44 as amended.

The final text of R 17-44 as amended and adopted reads as follows:

R 17-44
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):
Chapter 1, Part I, Article 1

Sec. 3. Ministers are those men and women who have been inducted into the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament that office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established or recognized by the Reformed Church in America. Ministers of Word and Sacrament are equal in authority as ministers and as stewards of the mysteries of God. Ministers shall ordinarily be confessing members of only the Reformed Church in America, except as otherwise provided in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 1 and in Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 4. No person who has relinquished the ministry for which installed or commissioned or who has been suspended or deposed from the ministry shall exercise that office.

Sec. 4. The Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament is one of servanthood and service representing Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. Ministers are called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the ministry of the Word of God.

a. A minister serving a congregation is in the local church the minister serves as pastor and teacher of the congregation to build up and equip the whole church for its ministry in the world. The minister preaches and teaches the Word of God, administers the sacraments under the authority of the consistory, shares responsibility with the elders and deacons and members of the congregation for their mutual Christian growth, exercises Christian love and discipline in conjunction with the elders, and endeavors that everything in the church be done in a proper and orderly way. As pastor and teacher the minister so serves and lives among the congregation that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

b. A specialized minister is in a specialized ministry the minister serves as pastor and teacher of the people among whom the minister works, to build up and equip those people, and to serve with the whole church in its ministry in the world. The specialized minister proclaims the Word of God in word and deed and administers the sacraments when appropriate under the authority of the classis. The minister so serves and lives among the people that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

c. Proper ecclesiastical designation of ministers shall accord with the nature of their ministry, such as pastor, teacher, professor, missionary, chaplain, president, executive secretary, director, or other appropriate designation. (ADOPTED)
8. Supervisor of Consistory

The commission received a request from a task force of the Regional Synod of Albany asking the commission to consider proposing a BCO amendment that would authorize supervision of consistories with no installed minister by a minister from another classis. This authorization could make it possible for the classis responsibility to be more broadly held, thereby relieving stress when one classis has too many vacancies for its ministers to service.

The commission presents the following amendments to the Book of Church Order to the 2017 General Synod:

R 17-45
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendations to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7

Sec. 3. The classis shall appoint one of its ministers as supervisor of all proceedings of the consistory of a church without an installed minister. If the minister to be appointed as supervisor is a member of another classis, then the classis shall consult with the minister’s classis of membership prior to making such appointment. The classis shall determine the appropriate responsibilities for the supervisor. (ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of R 17-45.

9. Affiliation of a Local Church with More Than One Denomination

Affiliation occurs when one local church maintains membership status in at least two denominations. An affiliated church differs from a union church and a federated church. Both the union and federated models begin with two churches coming together as one system. The affiliation model begins with one church connecting with more than one denomination. Examples of affiliated churches already exist in our denomination. CCO is hearing of other churches expressing interest in such a relationship. In order to provide an orderly way for affiliation with other denominations, the commission is providing language in our church order to allow affiliation. The commission does not offer an opinion on the merits of affiliation. The commission is presenting this new article so that the denomination can determine the merits of affiliation. This amendment proposes a new Article 9 to be added to Chapter 1, Part 1 of the Book of Church Order.

The second sentence in Section 1 of the new Article 9, “A church that affiliates with another denomination remains subject to the provisions of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America,” means that the church’s relationship with the RCA—such as the requirements of Formulary No. 15, oversight of property, etc.—remain the same in an affiliated relationship as they were prior to such relationship. In the same manner, a church that chooses to affiliate with the RCA may also remain subject to its denomination. This provision is stated in Section 2e of the new article.

The commission presents the following amendments to the Book of Church Order to the 2017 General Synod:
To adopt the following amendments to the Book of Church Order for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part I

Article 9. Affiliated Churches

Sec. 1. A consistory, with approval of its congregation and classis, may affiliate its church with another denomination in which the General Synod has declared the Reformed Church in America to be in full communion. A church that affiliates with another denomination remains subject to the provisions of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.

Sec. 2. A church from a denomination with which the General Synod has declared the Reformed Church in America to be in full communion may affiliate with a classis of the Reformed Church in America. The approval of the classis that is most geographically proximate to the church and will receive the church, and the approval of the church’s current denomination(s), as well as congregational approval, are required before affiliation may occur.

a. Unless otherwise determined by the receiving classis, delegates from an affiliating church shall be corresponding delegates to the classis.

b. A minister of an affiliating church shall remain subject to the discipline of the minister’s denomination.

c. A church that affiliates with the Reformed Church in America remains subject to the governance of its current denomination, unless it is otherwise agreed. (NOT ADOPTED)

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Church Order and Governance was to vote in favor of R 17-46.

10. Request for Clarification regarding the Formation of “Leadership Team” (Consistory)

A stated clerk requested assistance from CCO to respond to the matter of a church that has chosen to name its governing body a “leadership team” rather than use the term “consistory.” Furthermore, that leadership team is composed of elders and a pastor, no deacons.

The BCO is clear that the governing body of an organized Reformed church is a consistory. A church can call the governing body by another title, but its composition and function must fulfill the requirements set forth in the BCO for a consistory. The classis is right to address and expect the leadership team to respond as the consistory of the church. Furthermore, it is clear and plain in the BCO that a consistory is composed of elders, deacons, and Ministers of Word and Sacrament and/or a commissioned pastor (that is, a member of the classis). In the absence of any one of these offices, a consistory simply cannot exist. The classis should
instruct the church to create a consistory (by whatever name the church chooses to use) that includes deacons as well as elders and pastor/s (i.e., all the mandated offices).

11. Communication from Commission on Theology (COT) regarding Inclusion of General Synod Professor as a Mandatory COT Member

The commission discussed a request from the General Synod’s Commission on Theology to prepare a proposed amendment to the Bylaws of General Synod that would have the effect of requiring that the COT’s membership always include a member of the professorate. The commission suggested possible wording for the change but referred the matter back to the COT.

12. Communication from Commission on Race and Ethnicity regarding Its Membership

The commission reviewed a communication from the Commission on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) regarding CORE’s desire to propose amendments to the Bylaws of General Synod that would cause the racial composition of CORE to include at least one Native American and two Asian Americans (one from the executive committee of the Council for Pacific and Asian American Ministries). The commission also discussed the matter with a member of CORE. The commission concluded that no amendments to the Bylaws of General Synod are necessary to enable CORE to achieve the results it seeks and encouraged CORE to contact Native American congregations directly regarding possible nominees.

13. Transferring Churches

The commission reviewed a communication from a classis leader whose classis had recently processed a declaration by a consistory that their church was withdrawing from the denomination for the purpose of transferring to another denomination. The classis leadership suggested that the BCO rubrics were not clear enough nor strong enough to prevent the church from leaving. The commission sympathized with the classis and its frustrations with the application and perceived shortcomings in the process but did not identify any particular issues related to RCA order and governance that weren’t already in place that would improve the process. Accordingly, the commission took no action regarding this matter.

14. Selection of Moderator and Secretary; Appointment of Corresponding Delegate

The commission elected Larry Schuyler to serve as both its moderator and secretary for the annual period commencing July 1, 2017. The commission also appointed Larry Schuyler to serve as its corresponding delegate to the 2017 General Synod.

The commission thanks General Synod professor Allan Janssen and attorney Bruce Neckers for their service on this commission and therefore to the General Synod. Both Al and Bruce have completed six years of service on the commission and are rotating off its membership at the end of June.

Respectfully submitted,
Larry Schuyler, moderator
Report of the All-Synod Advisory Committees
Summarizing Team

The commissioned pastor designation began with a group of RCA pastors around 1998. A plan for starting new churches was envisioned where exponential growth would take place. The number one bottleneck to seeing hundreds of new churches started was that the RCA had been dependent on seminary-trained pastors and teachers to lead churches for almost 375 years. Yet there was a lack of approved seminary-trained pastors and teachers to lead church planting efforts. A new type of position was needed to give proven, effective leaders a chance to serve in the RCA who may not have access to the traditional pathway to the ordination of the minister of Word and sacrament.

The commissioned pastor model intended to draw from Jesus’ apprenticing model in the New Testament, a Rabbinical tradition of competency-based, in-ministry formation, and the Pauline model of raising leaders from within. The result was “commissioned pastors.” These local, talented, theologically trained servants with missiological skills from their own context would serve in specific areas to advance the growth of the church.

The commissioned pastor process of leadership development empowers local churches, classes, and ministers of Word and sacrament to be proactive and effective in this crucial skill of multiplying leaders for the church’s mission. The role of commissioned pastor was created to serve and equip the local church for ministry. The Commission on Church Order offers a series of changes to the Book of Church Order (BCO) to more fully integrate the commissioned pastor into polity as a servant of the local church who is both an elder and a member of the classis (see pp. 252-257).

R 17-41 seeks to recognize the commissioned pastor through the office of elder. This reflects the desire throughout the church to remove the restrictions that prevent commissioned pastors from serving as delegates to the broader assemblies.

The Advisory Group Process

The 2017 all-synod advisory committees met to discuss R 17-41. Eighteen committees, including the moderator committee, met for a two-and-a-half-hour prayerful process. First, moderators met to run through their own process to prepare for facilitating the other 17 committees. Next, they guided the remaining 17 groups, consisting of General Synod delegates, through the process.

Each meeting opened with introductions, including their name, synod role, where they are from, and their relationship, if any, to a commissioned pastor. Time was then spent discerning together the guiding principles and core values the group deemed helpful to the process, such as listening well to each other, being fully present, and trusting the process. Since the work being done depended on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, each group spent time in prayer, following the wisdom of Philippians 2:1-11.

After prayer, each advisory committee was subdivided into four smaller groups and tasked with evaluating reports from the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on Theology, and R 17-41. Each group then presented the main points as well as the pros and cons they discerned from the reports and recommendations. Each delegate was then asked to weigh items of importance from the feedback offered during the discussion. Each group also looked for common themes and patterns that emerged.

Based on this information, delegates returned to their smaller groups to draft an advice
statement they felt accurately reflected the shared wisdom of the committee. Selected delegates then worked to coalesce the four statements into one final group statement, while the rest of the delegates bathed the entire process in prayer.

The advisory committee moderators selected a summary team from its members who consolidated all 18 statements into this final report.

Affirmations (Pros)

The all-synod advisory committees named a number of affirmations of R 17-41, which included the following:

1. R 17-41 clarifies the role of the commissioned pastor in the BCO, allowing for their inclusion at broader assemblies in the RCA. In so doing, it acknowledges and validates the place of commissioned pastors in the life of the church. These changes provide a way for the commissioned pastor to have a voice in decisions, directions, and missions discerned by and for the church.

2. It should also be noted that much of the conversation was spent affirming the work, service, and impact of commissioned pastors in the life of the church. It appears that the all-synod advisory committees feel that commissioned pastors are one way of affirming the priesthood of all believers by raising up, training, mentoring, and supervising leaders from within local congregations for ministry.

3. The all-synod advisory committees affirmed commissioned pastors as one way to increase diversity and provide access to training not otherwise available to people.

Concerns (Cons)

The all-synod advisory committees named a number of concerns of R 17-41, which included the following:

1. Affirming R 17-41 may decrease the representation of elders who are not commissioned pastors at broader assemblies, skewing the ideal concept of equal balance between elder and minister representation.

2. Furthermore, it may inhibit the presence at broader assemblies of persons in professions that make them less able to set aside time for participation at those levels.

3. R 17-41 confines commissioned pastors to a church ministry without providing language to embrace commissioned pastors who serve in more broadly defined ministries outside of the traditional church model.

Note: There were also a number of concerns and observations raised about the ministry of commissioned pastors that were not germane to a yes or no vote on R 17-41. These concerns and observations will be addressed with additional comments and recommendations at the end of this report.

Advice

The advice of the all-synod advisory committees is to vote yes on R 17-41.
Reasons:

1. A clear majority advised yes. Twelve committees advised to vote yes, five committees advised to vote no and one committee abstained. Based on the clear majority of the advice statements, the synod is advising itself to vote yes.

2. The discussion during the all-synod advisory committee sessions overwhelmingly gave appreciation for the ministry of commissioned pastors and supported their representation at the broader assemblies.

For action by the General Synod regarding R 17-41, see the Report of the Commission on Church Order on pp. 249-272.

Additional Recommendations

Furthermore, a number of strong observations and concerns were raised during the all-synod advisory committee discussions. The most significant observations and concerns included:

There remains a title disparity between “commissioned pastor” and “ordained elder.” There is significant confusion around the function and authority of commissioned pastors.

The training and implementation processes for commissioned pastors vary significantly throughout classes. Therefore, the advisory committees have indicated that it is difficult to trust that commissioned pastors are adequately trained and assessed in such a way as to preserve a high standard for ministry leadership. Additionally, without a standardized training path, the theological identity and polity practices of churches led by commissioned pastors may become diluted.

There are currently no protections provided for commissioned pastors regarding salary and benefits. This may put commissioned pastors at risk of not being provided with adequate compensation.

For these reasons, the all-synod advisory committee moderator summarizing team offers the following recommendations:

**R 17-47**
To instruct the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, to investigate the tensions around the title of commissioned pastor, and, if appropriate, to present a new designation in place of “commissioned pastor” for presentation to General Synod 2018. (ADOPTED)

**R 17-48**
To request that the stated clerks discuss and share their best practices of commissioned pastor training and compensation at their next stated clerks meeting. (ADOPTED)

**R 17-49**
To direct the general secretary to coordinate a video project that gathers the stories of commissioned pastors in ministry, using a model that requires no increase in assessments, and to present this video to the broader assemblies no later than General Synod 2019. (ADOPTED)

The following motion was made and supported:
R 17-50
To urge the GSC to consider a return to the former system of advisory committees, in which all delegates served on committees related to denominational commissions or concerns, and offered counsel based on their interest, expertise and spiritual gifts. (ADOPTED)

APPENDIX

General Synod 2017 All-Synod Advisory Committee Advice Statements

Advisory Committee #1

After reading R 17-41, we feel the intention is good and values the ministry and role of commissioned pastors. However, there are sections that seem limiting to the intent and expression of commissioned pastors for the RCA’s ministry and mission.

Advisory committee #1 advises a no vote as it has been presented.

A yes vote could happen with appropriate edits to the recommendation that provide more consistency to the role of a commissioned pastor within a classis (church, congregation, specialized minister, etc.) and with the various judicatories.

Reasons:

1. If considered a “minister” as a permanent member of classis, that should not change through our judicatories but should be consistent.
2. A commissioned pastor as an elder at regional and General Synods potentially reduces and/or could eliminate true elders.
3. The proposed wording does not allow for specialized ministry positions within a classis (i.e., chaplains, classis ministers, camp directors, etc.). The language limits it to “church or congregation.”

Note: Possibly explore a fifth office of commissioned pastors.

Advisory Committee #2

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, we recommend voting yes in affirmation of the recommendation.

Our reasons for this advice are:

1. It recognizes the role and value of commissioned pastors in the ministry of the local church, classis, and greater assemblies of the RCA.
2. It reflects the language and intent of the BCO regarding commissioned pastors as both elders and their functional roles as pastors in a variety of ministry contexts.

Additionally, we include these cautions and concerns along with our endorsement of R 17-41:

- We recognize the need to create a uniform training process across the denomination to ensure all classes are giving adequate training to commissioned pastors in training.
We highly value the voice of the laity at all denominational levels and do not want to see their voices diminished at the higher assemblies as a result of these changes.

Advisory Committee #3

Group #3 abstained from advising yes or no.

Reasons:
1. We, advisory committee #3, believe R 17-41 moves in the right direction in clarity and role definition for commissioned pastors.
2. We have a lingering concern that the 50/50 elder/minister of Word and sacrament participation at General Synod is deliberate and important, and the commissioned pastors attending as elders may dilute that balance, reducing the elder voice.
3. We’re not sure how to fix this but would like some attention to unintended consequences.

Advisory Committee #4

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, advisory committee #4 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Our reasons for this advice are:
1. It normalizes and clarifies the role of commissioned pastors.
2. It validates the work commissioned pastors are called to do.
3. It establishes oversight, accountability, and support to commissioned pastors.
4. It gives commissioned pastors a voice within local churches, classes, and synods.

Advisory Committee #5

Advisory committee #5 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Reasons:
1. It further defines the commissioned pastor’s role—clarity of the training oversight of this position is long overdue. This will help with greater acceptance and implementation of more commissioned pastors.
2. Allows for participation in the higher bodies (regional/classes/GS).
3. Allows use of commissioned pastors when there are not enough ordained clergy in particular regions.
4. Additional training ensures consistency of understanding and execution of the role.
5. This will help with growth and revitalize the church.
6. To be more of an influence on the emerging (potential) leaders of the church.

Advisory Committee #6

Advisory committee #6 came up with the following advice statement:

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of its commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, we find the participation of commissioned pastors and increased accountability at both classis and synod levels to be a joyful clarification for this important and unique ministry.
Advisory committee #6 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Reasons:
1. We value participation by commissioned pastors at classis and synod levels.
2. We value diversity of voices.
3. We value clarity of roles that is provided in the BCO changes, which helps us to do things decently and in good order.
4. We value accountability and oversight at the classis level.

We would recommend that classes consider:

- Setting a recommended rate of compensation for the commissioned pastor as a way to honor the covenant relationship between the commissioned pastor and the congregation.

**Advisory Committee #7**

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, advisory committee #7 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Our reasons for this advice are:
1. The recommendation gives greater clarity to the role of commissioned pastor.
2. It provides consistency throughout the BCO.

Furthermore, recognizing additional clarification is needed concerning the role of commissioned pastors, advisory committee #7 recommends the GSC bring to General Synod 2018 the following, but not limited to: educational requirements, duties and responsibilities, and compensation for further clarification.

**Advisory Committee #8**

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, we find that the two concerns regarding office and function have been brought together very well.

Advisory committee #8 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41:

Reasons:
1. It clarifies the role of a commissioned pastor by recognizing its office of elder as well as its function as pastor.
2. It does not transfer any fundamental power to the church or its offices and the offices have parity.
3. This takes the priesthood of all believers seriously while allowing for congregations to have pastoral leadership where vacant, thereby allowing the church to grow through the gifts of the commissioned pastor.
4. The commissioned pastor is counted in classis quorum as a pastor.

Addendum (caution):

- There is need to clarify what the training and assessment of commissioned pastors is from classis to classis, so there is not such a wide variance.
Advisory Committee #9

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, and despite the ongoing confusion regarding the definition of the role of commissioned pastor, advisory committee #9 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Reasons:
1. We affirm the effort to provide a voice for commissioned pastors at higher judicatories, thereby creating the potential of greater diversity at the judicatories.
2. We affirm the effort to acknowledge covenantal theology between judicatories as it pertains to commissioned pastors.
3. We like the balance that at classis level they are recognized for their ministry but at higher levels of assembly for their office as elders.
4. This provides checks and balances between the commissioned pastor, the church, and the classis.
5. This is a consistent expression of Reformed polity.

Concerns:

- We are concerned about the higher level of confusion about commissioned pastors, their role, and lack of defined training.
- We are also concerned about skewing representation at judicatories.

In light of our concerns, we urge an initiation of the formation of a standard education and curriculum for commissioned pastors across the denomination.

Advisory Committee #10

Advisory committee #10 advises General Synod to vote no on R 17-41.

Reasons:
1. If the definition of a classis quorum would be changed, care is needed to clarify who has voting rights so that a church would not exceed standard voting representation. (In example, a church sending ministers, elders, and several different commissioned pastors.)
2. Lay elders would lose representation at higher assemblies if commissioned pastors took the place of lay elders at regional and General Synod.
3. We urge the General Synod Council to find a pathway, employing proper commissions, to create standards for constituting the grounds for commissioned positions and the approval of a commissioned pastor. Our institutions for theological education shall be leveraged in the teaching and training of commissioned pastors as standards are formed.

Advisory Committee #11

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, advisory committee #11 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Reasons:
1. Clarity about the role of commissioned pastors at synods. They have a function, not an office.
2. Gives them a voice and an identity.
Advisory Committee #12

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission of Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, our committee has developed a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the role of commissioned pastor. We are grateful for the increase in clarity concerning the role of commissioned pastor in conjunction with the office of elder.

Accordingly, advisory committee #12 advises the General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Our reasons for this advice are:
1. an increase in clarity as the roles relate to, and/or conjoin with each other;
2. and that commissioned pastors be given a voice in higher bodies.

However, our committee would raise two concerns and recommend:

• that a standard of curricula be established across classes, in order to ensure commissioned pastors are fully equipped for their ministry;
• that measures are taken to ensure that elders are not deprived of a voice in synods, should a commissioned pastor be assigned to fill the position of elder delegate.

Advisory Committee #13

Advisory Committee #13 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

After study and discussion of R 17-41, this advisory committee affirms the language of the suggested changes from the commissions.

Reason:
1. It brings clarity to the extent and role of the commissioned pastor, consistory, and classis, and higher assemblies.

Advisory Committee #14

After studying the reports, advisory committee #14 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.

Reason:
1. The recommendation serves to allow commissioned pastors to attend the broader assemblies as elder delegates, giving them an opportunity to have a voice in the conversation.

However, there are several areas of concern which should be addressed.

• We believe it should be noted that commissioned pastors being sent as elder delegates creates and sustains confusion of the office of minister and elder in both form and function of commissioned pastors. There is currently a widespread confusion throughout the denomination about the role of a commissioned pastor, which has seemingly evolved since its inception.
• This confusion also surrounds the question of the authority, practice, and educational standards of commissioned pastors within the RCA.
• In addition, allowing commissioned pastors to attend broader assemblies as elder delegates may risk potential loss of “lay elder” participation and presence.
Finally, we feel this confusion will always remain because a commissioned pastor has the title of “pastor” and not “elder.”

Advisory Committee #15

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, we affirm and celebrate the report from the COT.

However, advisory committee #15 advises the General Synod to vote no on R 17-41, but refer this recommendation back to the CCO.

Our reasons for this are:

1. Preserve balance of voice between ministers of Word and sacrament, delegated elder delegates, and commissioned pastors.
2. Find a way to divide the motion/recommendation according to the articles or bodies (i.e., GS, regional synod, classis, consistory)
3. Concerns around maintaining RCA identity.
4. And to clarify the role of commissioned pastors on consistories.

Advisory Committee #16

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, advisory committee #16 wants to affirm the work of the commissions in creating the avenue for the important voice and gifts of the commissioned pastors to be represented in our assemblies.

However, we recommend a no vote on R 17-41.

Reasons:

1. Functionally, in the life of the church, a commissioned pastor acts more like a minister of Word and sacrament than an elder. Yet the proposed amendment situates the commissioned pastor in the role of elder within the broader assemblies.
2. If General Synod approves the recommendation from the diaconal task force, the number of elder delegates in assemblies could be reduced, further limiting the voice of “regular” elder delegates.
3. The 2015 report of the Commission on History states that, “The commissioned pastor designation was not intended to be an entry point into ministry, but was intended to enhance and resource people who were already in ministry, with the goal of helping these people to eventually enter seminary and work toward the possibility of the ministry of Word and sacrament” (MGS 2015, p. 202). Therefore, while the commissioned pastors should have roles within consistories and classes for the specific ministries to which they are commissioned, provisions should not be made for representation within the broader assemblies.

Advisory Committee #17

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-41, advisory committee #17 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-41.
Advisory committee #17 reasons:
1. The commission has done a good and thorough job addressing a difficult problem.
2. Very well considered and fills gap that needed to be filled.
3. It affirms the importance of commissioned pastors.
4. It clarifies the role of commissioned pastors.
5. The committee has done a faithful work in crafting the reports.

Advisory Committee #18

Advisory committee #18 (the moderator group) affirms commissioned pastors’ gifts and the contributions to the ministries; however, we cannot support the language of proposal R 17-41. The advisory committee of moderators advises General Synod to vote no on R 17-41.

Our reasons for this advice are the following:
1. There is an inconsistency of the title of the elder and the function of a pastor.
2. There is tension between original intent versus the current reality of commissioned pastors.

We recognize, however, that commissioned pastors fill a vital role in the church and should be represented at our assemblies. We recognize the commissioned pastor process allows for an increased diversity (racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, etc.) of individuals who, by pursuing commissioned pastor ministry, are allowed a path to leadership that they might not otherwise pursue.

Therefore, we urge the General Synod Council, Commission on Theology, and Commission on Church Order to attend to the following:

- To standardize the process denomination wide for classes to prepare and recognize commissioned pastors.
- To bring clarity around the role and expected compensation guidelines for commissioned pastors.
- To bring consideration for the designation of commissioned pastor of Word and sacrament (much similar to specialized ministers of Word and sacrament)