

The CRC Office of Deacon Post Synod 2015

In 2015 the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) approved the recommendations from the report of *The Task Force to Study the Offices of Elder & Deacon (Task Force)*. While this particular document highlights some of the more salient changes for deacons, the full report itself contains important information and guidance for all church council members as well as classical leaders and delegates. You can download the 2015 Agenda For Synod online at http://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/2015_agenda.pdf. The full report of the Task Force is located on pages 380---410 of the Agenda.

CHANGES TO CHURCH ORDER ARTICLES RELATED TO THE OFFICE OF DEACON (Abridged)

PREVIOUS Article 1a

The Christian Reformed Church, confessing its complete subjection to the Word of God and the Reformed creeds as a true interpretation of this Word, acknowledging Christ as the only head of his church, and desiring to honor the apostolic injunction that in the churches “everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor. 14:40), regulates its ecclesiastical organization and activities in the following articles.

NEW Article 1a

The Christian Reformed Church, confessing its complete subjection to the Word of God and the Reformed creeds as a true interpretation of this Word, acknowledging Christ as the only head of his church, and desiring to honor the apostolic injunction that in the churches “everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor. 14:40) *in order to be equipped “for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up”* (Eph. 4:12), regulates its ecclesiastical organization and activities in the following articles.

Ground: Adding the quotation from Ephesians 4:12 clarifies that the church has a church order not merely for the sake of orderliness, but for the sake of ministry.

PREVIOUS Article 4a-b

- a. In calling and electing to an office, the council shall ordinarily present to the congregation a nomination of at least twice the number to be elected. When the council submits a nomination which totals less than twice the number to be elected, it shall give reasons for doing so.
- b. Prior to making nominations the council may give the congregation an opportunity to direct attention to suitable persons.

NEW Article 4a-b

- a. In calling and electing to an office, the council shall ordinarily present to the congregation a nomination of *suitably gifted persons* of at least twice the number to be elected. When the council submits a nomination which totals less than twice the number to be elected, it shall give reasons for doing so.
- b. Prior to making nominations the council may give the congregation an opportunity to direct attention to *suitably gifted persons*.

Ground: Adding the phrase “suitably gifted” clarifies that suitability for office is a matter of spiritual giftedness.

PREVIOUS Article 12a

A minister of the Word serving as pastor of a congregation shall preach the Word, administer the sacraments, conduct public worship services, catechize the youth, and train members for Christian service. The minister, with the elders, shall supervise the congregation and fellow officebearers, exercise admonition and discipline, and see to it that everything is done decently and in order. The minister, with the elders, shall exercise pastoral care over the congregation, and engage in and promote the work of evangelism.

NEW Article 12a

A minister of the Word serving as pastor of a congregation shall preach the Word, administer the sacraments, conduct public worship services, catechize the youth, and train members for Christian service. The minister, **with other officebearers**, shall supervise the congregation and fellow officebearers, exercise admonition and discipline, see to it that everything is done decently and in order, exercise pastoral care over the congregation, and engage in and promote the work of evangelism **and diaconal outreach**.

Ground: According to Article 30 of the Belgic Confession, ministers of the Word are called to common tasks with elders *and* deacons in equipping the church. Likewise, the second half of the article is intended to give an illustrative list of those tasks that the minister is called to do with other officebearers. Making reference in the article to elders alone is confusing, since some of the tasks belong to other officebearers as well, such as supervising fellow officebearers (*see Art. 82-84 and Supplement*), and exercising pastoral care (*see Art. 65*). The NEW language removes this confusion by making a generic reference to other officebearers and including diaconal outreach in the tasks that the minister does in common with other officebearers.

PREVIOUS Article 25a

The elders and deacons shall serve for a limited time as designated by the council. As a rule a specified number of them shall retire from office each year. The retiring officebearers shall be succeeded by others unless the circumstances and the profit of the church make immediate eligibility for reelection advisable. Elders and deacons who are thus reelected shall be reinstalled.

NEW Article 25a

The elders and deacons shall serve for a limited time as designated by the council. **The length of term should be appropriate for continuity and succession of ministry leadership, accountability for ministry outcomes, and the regular infusion of gifts.** Retiring officebearers shall be succeeded by others unless the circumstances and the profit of the church make immediate eligibility for reelection advisable. Elders and deacons who are thus reelected shall be reinstalled.

Ground: While the PREVIOUS article was written to give councils flexibility in the length of terms of office, the “as a rule” language has suggested that flexibility is discouraged, and this has hindered the equipping work of some officebearers in some contexts. The NEW revision does not change the meaning of the article – terms should still be limited to a specified period of time – but it does better emphasize flexibility and the purpose for which that flexibility should be employed.

PREVIOUS Article 25c

The deacons shall represent and administer the mercy of Christ to all people, especially to those who belong to the community of believers, and shall stimulate the members of Christ’s church to faithful, obedient stewardship of their resources on behalf of the needy—all with words of biblical encouragement and testimony which assure the unity of word and deed.

NEW Article 25c

The deacons shall represent and administer the mercy of Christ to all people, especially to those who belong to the community of believers. *Deacons shall lead the members in ways that inspire faithful stewardship of their time, talent, and resources and so give life in this world the shape of God's kingdom. Thus, deacons shall create and encourage participation in structures and ministries of mercy, justice, and reconciliation, both locally and globally.* All of this shall be done with words of biblical encouragement and testimony.

Ground: The NEW revision gives a more comprehensive description of the mandate for deacons as understood and practiced by many diaconates and described in various deacon handbooks, resources, and the 1982 Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons

PREVIOUS Article 62

Offerings for benevolence shall be received regularly in the worship services. Offerings also shall be received for other ministries of the congregation and the joint ministries of the churches.

NEW Article 62

Opportunity shall be given regularly, as part of worship, to offer gifts, both financial and otherwise, to develop and sustain ministries of the congregation, locally within its own community, the shared ministries of the denomination globally, and other causes that the church supports.

Ground: The NEW language offers a more comprehensive description of the nature of offerings and promotes meeting the needs of the poor in a variety of ways as many congregations do – through more than just offerings of benevolence

Among other changes recommended by the Task Force that were approved by Synod 2015 are **changes to the Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons (Form)**. I am including the two major sections of the form that relate specifically to deacons in this post. **Changes from PREVIOUS form (1982) are noted in boldface text.** The first paragraph is a more general explanation of how deacons serve. The second paragraph contains the NEW changes to the *Charge to Deacons*.

NEW Form for the Ordination Deacons

Deacons serve by **leading and equipping the church to serve its members and the world in a rich diversity of ministries, awakening compassion, demonstrating mercy, seeking justice, and collaborating with God's Spirit for the transformation of persons and communities. In imitation of Christ's mercy, deacons summon the church to help relieve victims of injustice, equip the church for ministries of reconciliation and peacemaking, seek opportunities for advocacy, and call God's people to faithful stewardship of the gifts of creation.** By this they show that Christians live by the Spirit of the kingdom, fervently desiring to give life the shape of things to come. Deacons are therefore to **identify and develop gifts in both the church and community, assess needs, promote generous stewardship, and offer wise and respectful care for the poor. By adding to all this words of encouragement and hope, deacons demonstrate in word and deed the care of the Lord himself.**

NEW Charge to the Deacons

I charge you, deacons, to inspire faithful **ministries of service to one another, to the larger community, and to the world. Remind us that the Lord requires us “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [our] God” (Micah 6:8).** Prompt us to seize new opportunities to **love God, our neighbors, and the creation with acts of generous sharing, joyful hospitality, thoughtful care for the poor, and wise stewardship of all of God’s gifts. Weigh our opportunities for giving and service, that we might use the church’s resources discerningly. Offer wise care to victims of injustice, and teach us holistic responses that respect their dignity and mend the broken relationships and exploitative structures and systems that contribute to poverty. With respectful compassion for the needy and awareness of the often hidden needs of the wealthy, teach us to minister to rich and poor alike, both within and outside the church. Encourage all with words that bring hope to their hearts and with deeds that bring joy into their lives. Show us by your example how to be critics of the waste, injustice, and selfishness in our society, and to be sensitive counselors to victims of such evils. Let your lives be above reproach and live as examples of Christ Jesus, looking to the interests of others. And in all your ministries help us anticipate and participate in the renewal of all things when God’s kingdom comes.**

In addition to the description and Charge, the Task Force also included what most folks would consider a **job or position description** for deacons. (*The letters "CO" at the end of each statement of responsibility indicates the Church Order article to which the responsibility is linked.*)

Deacon Position Description:

Qualifications:

1. Adult confessing member who meets the biblical requirements (CO3a)
2. Must be officially called and ordained or installed to hold and exercise office in the church (CO3b)
3. Signify agreement with the doctrine of the church by signing the Covenant for Officebearers (CO5)

Responsibilities:

1. Serve for a limited time (CO25a)
2. Represent and administer the mercy of Christ to all people, stimulate members to faithful stewardship on behalf of the needy (CO25c)
3. Lead the congregation in ways that inspire faithful stewardship of time, talent, and resources (CO25c---NEW)
4. Call the members to be ambassadors of reconciliation in all areas of life (CO25c-NEW)
5. Create and encourage participation in structures and ministries that use member gifts in areas of compassion, community transformation, creation care, justice, stewardship, and pastoral care, both locally and globally (CO25c---NEW)
6. Give an account of its work to the council (CO35c)
7. Meet at least once per month (CO36a)
8. Extend pastoral care to all members (CO65)
9. Enable the needy under their care to make use of Christian institutions of mercy (CO74b)
10. Confer and cooperate with diaconates of neighboring churches (CO74b)
11. Seek mutual understandings with agencies in their community which are caring for the needy (CO74b)
12. Subject to general and special discipline (CO82)
13. Shall not lord it over another officebearer (CO85)