

The Church Order

Purpose of the Church Order

Article 1

In accordance with the apostolic injunction (1 Cor. 14:40) that in the Church of Christ all things are to be done decently and in order, the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, in this CHURCH ORDER, regulate their organisation and activities, so that they may fulfil their calling according to the Scriptures and the Reformed Confessions.

The main subjects treated in this Order are the Church's Offices, Assemblies, Task, and Discipline.

Offices of the Church

Two Kinds of Offices

Article 2

The ordinary and perpetual offices of the Church, as instituted by the authority of Christ for the Church, may be classified under two heads, as Elders and Deacons.

Eligibility for Office

Article 3

Only Communicant Members of the Church who meet the biblical requirements for office-bearers are eligible for office. No one shall hold and exercise an office in the Church without a lawful call and ordination or installation.

Legal Call to the Office

Article 4

The call to an office shall be executed by the session as follows:

1. Prior to making nomination, the session shall ordinarily give the congregation an opportunity to place names in nomination.
2. From these names and/or nominations made by the session, twice the number to be elected shall ordinarily be presented to the congregation.
3. The names of those being presented by the session shall be announced to the congregation on two successive Lord's Days to allow for lawful objections.
4. After prayer the election by the congregation shall take place under supervision of the session.
5. The right to vote shall be limited to communicant members in good standing.

Ordination/Installation**Article 5**

All office-bearers shall be ordained or installed in public worship services with the use of the prescribed forms.

Duration of Office**Article 6**

Elders and Deacons shall ordinarily serve a term of three years or more, according to local regulations.

Re-election or Extension of Tenure of Office**Article 7**

Retiring Elders and Deacons shall be succeeded by others unless the circumstances and the well-being of any church render re-election or extension of time advisable.

Installation Only**Article 8**

When any office-bearer has already been ordained, upon re-election to the same office, he shall be installed only.

Form of Subscription**Article 9**

When office-bearers are ordained or installed, they shall be required to sign the Synodically accepted Form of Subscription.

Ministers of the Word

Who Is Eligible for Call**Article 10**

The following shall be eligible for call as Ministers of the Word and Sacraments:

1. Those who have followed the Synodically prescribed course of study, and have subsequently been declared candidates by Presbytery;¹
2. Those who are already in the ministry of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand or a sister-church;
3. Ministers of other denominations who have been declared eligible for call by Presbytery;

¹ Theological candidates are eligible for call who have successfully completed the prescribed course of study at the Reformed Theological College, Geelong, Australia, or its equivalent (Acts 1989, Art. 19.b).

4. Those who have been declared candidates according to Article 12 of this Church Order.

Colloquium Doctum

Article 11

No Minister shall be received from any other denomination without a colloquium doctum prior to his installation (a colloquium doctum is understood to be a thorough investigation of the theological training and ministerial record and a careful examination regarding soundness in the Reformed Faith, exemplariness of life, and motives for seeking the ministry in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand).²

Exemptions in the Case of Exceptional Gifts

Article 12

Persons who have not pursued the regular study in preparation for the ministry of the Word shall not be admitted to the ministry, unless there is assurance of their exceptional gifts, godliness, humility, modesty, common sense and discretion, as also gifts of public address.

When such persons present themselves for the ministry, the Presbytery, with the consent of Synod, shall first examine them, and further deal with them as it shall deem edifying, according to the general regulations of the Churches.

Credentials Necessary to Move Elsewhere

Article 13

A minister once lawfully called may not leave the congregation with which he is connected to accept a call elsewhere, without the consent of the session and knowledge of the Presbytery.

Likewise, no other church may receive him until he has presented a proper certificate of dismissal from the Church and the Presbytery where he served.

Proper Support; No Rash Dismissal

Article 14

The session, as representing the congregation, shall provide for the proper support of its ministers and shall not dismiss them from service without the knowledge and approbation of the Presbytery and Synodical Examiners.

² The colloquium doctum for ministers coming from sister-churches is to be understood as not being the equivalent of a final examination, but is to focus on soundness of doctrine, sanctity of life and knowledge and appreciation of the practice and usage of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand (Acts 1989, Art. 19.d).

Secular Vocation**Article 15**

Ministers of the Word may not enter upon a secular vocation except for such weighty reasons as shall receive the approval of Presbytery.

Leave of Absence**Article 16A**

A minister who for weighty reasons desires a temporary release from service to the congregation must have his application for release approved by his session, which continues to have supervision over him.

Leave of Absence**Article 16B**

- a. A minister who is not eligible for retirement or worthy of discipline may for weighty reasons be released from service in a congregation through action initiated by himself or by his session. Such release shall be given only with the approval of presbytery, with concurring advice of the synodical examiners, and in accordance with synodical regulations.
- b. The session shall provide for the support of a released minister in such a way and for such a time as shall receive the approval of presbytery.
- c. A minister of the Word who has been released from service in a congregation shall be eligible for call for a period of two years, after which time the presbytery, with the concurring advice of the synodical examiners, shall declare him to be released from ministerial office.

Emeriti Minister's Title Retained Article 17

Ministers who by reason of sickness or otherwise are rendered incapable of performing the duties of their office, shall nevertheless retain the honour and title of a Minister and the Church which they have served, shall provide honourably for them (likewise, for the orphans and widows of ministers) out of the common fund of the churches, according to the general regulations of the churches.

Preaching Elsewhere Without Consent Article 18

A minister shall not be permitted to conduct worship services in the locality of a Reformed Church other than his own without the consent of the session of that church.

A minister shall not conduct a worship service in a non-sister church without informing the session of the local Reformed Church.

Duties in Regular Service**Article 19**

The task of the minister is: to expound the Holy Scriptures, to vindicate sound doctrine

against heresies and errors, to administer the sacraments, to continue in prayer, to watch over his brethren, the elders and deacons as well as the congregation, to catechise the youth, and with the other elders to exercise church discipline and to see to it that everything is done decently and in order.

Licensed Students to Exhort in Public**Article 20**

Only students who are licensed according to Synodical regulations shall be permitted to exhort in the public worship services.

Students Conducting Worship Services**Article 21**

Students who have received permission, according to the rule in this matter, and persons who have, according to Article 12, been judged competent to be prepared for the Ministry of the Word, shall, for their own training and for the sake of becoming known to the congregations, be allowed to conduct worship services under proper supervision.

Christian Education**Article 22**

The Session shall encourage the parents to make every possible effort that the children of believers receive proper Christian education and catechetical instruction.

Ruling Elders

Duties of Elders**Article 23**

The task of the elders is to rule in the name of the ascended King, and as servants of the great Shepherd, care for the flock.

They shall therefore: ensure that the Gospel is preached every Sunday, see to it that the Sacraments are faithfully administered, exercise Christian discipline, resist false doctrine and error, visit the members of the congregation at least annually in order that they may comfort, instruct and encourage each one according to need, visit the sick and the bereaved, promote evangelism, see to it that everything is done decently and in order and that their fellow office-bearers faithfully discharge their respective offices, having particular regard to the doctrine and conduct of the Minister of the Word.

Deacons

Duties of Deacons**Article 24**

The task of the deacons is: to diligently collect alms and other contributions of charity, to faithfully and diligently distribute the same to the poor as their needs may require after mutual counsel, to visit and comfort the distressed, to encourage the congregation to

show Christian mercy to those in need at home and abroad, to render an account to the session.

Assemblies of the Church

Three Kinds of Assemblies

Article 25

The assemblies of the church are: the Session, the Presbytery, and the Synod.

Legal Matters to Consider

Article 26

In major assemblies only such matters shall be dealt with as could not be determined in minor assemblies: or such as pertain to the churches of the major assembly in common.

In all assemblies only ecclesiastical matters shall be dealt with.

Decisions by Common Consent Preferred

Article 27

Decisions of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be reached only upon due consideration and whenever possible by common consent; if unanimity on an issue cannot be reached, the minority shall abide by the judgment of the majority.

Appeal to Major Assemblies

Article 28

If any one complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to a major assembly.

Compliance on Matters of Conscience

Article 29

Assemblies may not compel compliance on the part of a minority in matters of conscience not clearly defined in the Word of God and the Forms of Unity.

Devotionals

Article 30

All assemblies shall begin and end their sessions with prayer.

Credentials and Instructions

Article 31

Those who are delegated to the assemblies shall bring with them their credentials and instructions, signed by those sending them, and they shall have a vote in all matters, except such as particularly concern their own persons or churches.

Advisory Members

Article 32

All office-bearers may be seated at major assemblies as advisory members, but only those delegated shall have the right to vote.

Duty of the Clerk

Article 33

In all assemblies there shall be not only a Moderator, but also a Clerk to keep a faithful record of all important matters.

Duties of the Moderator

Article 34

The task of the Moderator is to state and explain the business to be transacted, and to see that good order is maintained. In the case of major assemblies this function shall cease when the assembly is dismissed.

Authority of Major Assemblies

Article 35

Each assembly exercises, in keeping with its own character and domain, the ecclesiastical authority entrusted to the Church by Christ; the authority of sessions being original, that of major assemblies being delegated.

The Presbytery has the same authority over the Session as the Synod has over the Presbytery.

Session

Constituency of Session

Article 36

In all churches there shall be a session, composed of elders (ruling and teaching) who shall meet regularly according to local regulations, but at least once a month.

According to local regulations, the deacons may meet with the session and shall invariably do so whenever the total number of elders is less than three.

Formation of a Session

Article 37

In places where the session is to be constituted for the first time, this shall only take place with the advice of the Presbytery.

Where There Is No Session

Article 38

Where as yet no session can be constituted, groups of believers shall be placed under the care of a neighbouring session.

Vacant Church, Counsellor**Article 39**

When a church is without a minister, the session shall request presbytery to designate a minister of a neighbouring church as counsellor. The session shall consult the counsellor on all important matters, especially regarding the calling of a minister. The counsellor shall attend the session meetings whenever requested to do so.

Meetings of Deacons**Article 40**

The deacons shall meet regularly according to local regulations but at least once per month to transact the business pertaining to their office.

Cooperation of the Congregation**Article 41**

The session, besides seeking the co-operation of the congregation in the election of office-bearers, may also invite its judgment about other matters, except those which pertain to the supervision and discipline of the congregation.

Congregational Meeting**Article 42**

The session shall call a meeting at least annually of all members entitled to vote. Such a meeting shall be conducted by the session.

Authority Remains with the Session**Article 43**

Although full consideration shall be given to the judgment expressed by the congregation, the authority of making and carrying out final decisions remains with the session as the governing body of the Church.

Congregational Judgment on Property**Article 44**

In matters of acquiring and disposing of property, the session shall not act against the judgment expressed by the majority of the congregation.

Presbytery**Constituency of Presbytery****Article 45**

The presbytery meetings shall consist of neighbouring churches that respectively delegate, with proper credentials, at least two office-bearers (ordinarily a minister and an elder) to meet at such time and place as was determined at the previous presbytery meeting.

Regularity of Meetings

Article 46

Presbytery meetings shall ordinarily be held at least once in four months.

The Task of Presbytery

Article 47

At least annually the moderator shall present the following questions to the delegates of each church:

1. Are the session meetings regularly held in your church and are they held according to the needs of the congregation?
2. Are all the office-bearers individually and collectively striving earnestly to serve the congregation?
3. Is church discipline faithfully exercised?
4. Does the session diligently promote the cause of Christian education (including Christian day schools)?
5. Does the session diligently promote the cause of missions, both at home and abroad?
6. Does the session seek presbytery's advice on any matter?

Church Visitation

Article 48

Presbyteries shall make provision for church visitation at least once per year. Each church shall be visited by two elders normally (at least one of whom shall be a minister). The synodically approved questionnaire shall be followed in general and a report of each visit rendered to presbytery.

Synod

Constituency and Meetings of Synod

Article 49

The churches shall meet in General Synod at least once every three years.

The Calling Church

Article 50

At the close of each synod the time and place of the next synod shall be fixed and a particular church designated to convene it. The calling church, by request of a majority of the other churches, may reset the time and/or place.

Synodical Committees**Article 51**

Synod shall appoint such committees as it deems expedient to execute its decisions.

Delegates to Synod**Article 52**

Each church shall be represented in Synod by two elders (one of whom shall ordinarily be a minister). Under exceptional circumstances one delegate may be a deacon.

Supervision of Public Worship**The Call to Corporate Worship****Article 53**

The session shall call the congregation for corporate worship ordinarily twice on the Lord's Day. Corporate worship services on other days than the Lord's Day are left to the freedom of the churches.

Supervision of Worship Services**Article 54**

The worship services shall be conducted under the supervision of the session and shall be in keeping with synodical regulations.

Sermons for Reading Services**Article 55**

In reading services only sermons approved by the sessions shall be used.

Exposition of Confessional Standards**Article 56**

Ordinarily at one of the services on each Lord's day the Word shall be expounded as summarised in the Confessional Standards.

The Administration of the Sacraments**Article 57**

The sacraments shall be administered by the authority of the session in a public worship service (ordinarily by a minister of the Word) with the use of the prescribed forms.

Baptism**Article 58**

The Covenant of God shall be sealed by Holy Baptism unto children of believers, including children legally adopted by members of the congregation. The session shall see to it that baptism is requested and administered as soon as feasible.

Public Profession of Faith**Article 59**

Members by baptism and adults who have not been baptised shall be admitted to communicant membership upon public profession of faith with the use of the prescribed form. Before the profession of faith, the session shall examine them concerning motives, doctrine and conduct. Those who have not been baptised, shall receive holy baptism upon profession of faith.

Certificates of Membership**Article 60**

Communicant members coming from other Reformed Churches of New Zealand shall be admitted to communicant membership upon the presentation of certificates of membership attesting their soundness in doctrine and life. The same rule shall apply to those coming from other denominations with which the Reformed Churches of New Zealand maintain sister church relationships.

Guests at the Lord's Table**Article 61**

Persons belonging to denominations other than sister churches may be admitted as guests at the Lord's Table only if the session has ascertained that they profess the true religion and walk uprightly.

Admitting Members from Non-sister Churches**Article 62**

Persons coming from denominations other than sister churches shall be admitted to communicant membership only after the session has examined them concerning doctrine and conduct.

The session shall determine in each case whether or not public profession of faith shall be required.

Lawful Objections to Profession of Faith Candidates**Article 63**

The names of those who wish to make a public profession of faith shall be announced to the congregation at least one Lord's Day beforehand, so that lawful objections may be raised, should any exist.

Lord's Supper**Article 64**

The Lord's Supper shall be administered at least once every three months.

Marriages and Funerals**Article 65**

Christian marriages should be solemnised with the approved forms. Ministers shall not solemnise any marriage which is not approved beforehand by the session of the church. Upon request, the session should provide for the preaching of the Word of God at the funeral of deceased members of the congregation.

Psalms and Hymns**Article 66**

In the worship services of the church only the 150 Psalms and the collection of Hymns for church use, approved and adopted by Synod, shall be sung.

However, while the singing of Psalms in divine worship is a requirement, the use of the approved hymns is left to the freedom of the churches.

Discipline of Church members**The Purpose of Discipline****Article 67**

The purpose of Christian discipline is:

1. To vindicate the honour of the Lord,
2. To maintain the purity of the Church, and
3. To promote the welfare of the believer.

Who Is Subject to Christian Discipline**Article 68**

All members of the church are subject to Christian discipline respecting both doctrine and life. Likewise, all members are responsible to watch over and admonish one another in love.

The Means of Christian Discipline**Article 69**

Christian discipline is exercised exclusively by spiritual means, which are:

1. **Admonition:** Tenderly and solemnly confronting the offender with his sin, warning him of his danger and exhorting him to repentance and to greater fidelity to the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. **Rebuke:** A form of censure more severe than admonition, which consists in setting forth the serious character of the offence, reproving the offender, and exhorting him to repentance and to more perfect fidelity to Christ.

3. **Suspension:** Depriving of the privileges of membership in the church, or office, or of both, either for a definite or an indefinite time.

Suspension of an officer-bearer from the privileges of membership shall always be accompanied by suspension from office, but the latter does not necessarily involve the former.

4. **Deposition:** Depriving an office-bearer of his office.
5. **Excommunication:** A solemn declaration by a church assembly that it no longer regards the offender as a member of the Body of Christ.

Disciplinary Steps only after Investigation **Article 70**

Disciplinary measures shall be applied only after an adequate investigation has been made and the accused has been given ample opportunity to present his case.

Private and Public Offenses **Article 71**

Christian discipline is concerned with offenses that are either private or public.

Private Offenses **Article 72**

Private offenses are those which are known to an individual only or, at most, to a very few individuals. In these cases the rule prescribed by Christ in Matthew 18:15-17 shall be followed.

Public Offenses **Article 73**

Such private sins as have been dealt with according to the previous article shall be deemed to have assumed the character of public offenses if the admonition and rebuke of the Session also is despised.

What is a Public Offence **Article 74**

Public offenses are such as have become widely known.

Reconciliation of the Offender **Article 75**

Public offenses shall be reconciled by the session upon sufficient evidence of repentance. In case of extremely grave offence a session may demand public confession of the sin. This shall not take place without the concurrence of presbytery.

Suspension of Members**Article 76**

Communicant members who obstinately reject the admonition and rebuke of session shall be suspended from the privileges of communicant membership.

Excommunication of Members**Article 77**

Communicant members who have been suspended and persist in disregarding the admonition and rebuke of the session, shall finally be excommunicated with the use of the prescribed form.

Announcement before Excommunication**Article 78**

The session, before excommunicating anyone, shall make three announcements in which the obstinacy of the sinner and the nature of his offence are explained, and the congregation is urged to pray for him and to admonish him.

1. In the **first** announcement neither the name of the sinner nor the sin shall be mentioned;
2. In the **second** announcement (with the concurrence of the presbytery) the name of the sinner and the sin shall be made known;
3. In the **third** announcement, the congregation shall be informed that, unless the sinner repents, he will be excommunicated at a specified date.

Reconciliation of the Excommunicant**Article 79**

When anyone who has been excommunicated desires to become reconciled to the church, the session, having satisfied itself as to the sincerity of his repentance, shall announce this fact to the congregation. If no valid objections are presented, he shall be restored to the fellowship of the church, with the use of the prescribed form.

Rebuke of Baptised Members**Article 80**

Mature members by baptism who are delinquent in doctrine or life, shall be rebuked, and if they persist, shall be excluded from the Church of Christ.

Return into the Membership of Baptised Members**Article 81**

Members by baptism who have been excluded from the church and who later repent of their sin, shall be received again into the church only upon public profession of faith.

Discipline of Office-bearers

Suspension and Deposition from Office

Article 82

Office-bearers, besides being subject to general discipline with all other members of the church, are also subject to special discipline which consists of suspension and deposition from office.

Special Discipline of Office-Bearers

Article 83

Special discipline shall be applied to office-bearers if they violate the form of subscription, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office or in any other way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct.

Concurrence of Suspension from Nearest Session

Article 84

Suspension from office shall ordinarily precede deposition and shall be imposed by the session only with concurrence of the session of the nearest church in the same presbytery.

Deposition with Concurrence of Presbytery

Article 85

If the suspended office-bearer does not give heed to repeated admonition and rebuke on the part of both the session and the presbytery, the session shall depose him with the concurrence of presbytery.

Deposition of a Minister

Article 86

In case of a minister such a deposition shall not take place without the consent of presbytery and all the synodical examiners.

Suspension Lifted upon Repentance

Article 87

The suspension of an office-bearer shall be lifted either upon sufficient evidence of repentance or by successful appeal.

Prerogative of Assembly

Article 88

The lifting of suspension upon sufficient evidence of repentance is the prerogative of the assembly which imposed the suspension.

Restoration of Deposed Office-Bearer

Article 89

A deposed office-bearer shall not be restored unless he gives sufficient evidence of repentance and it be evident that this restoration will be for the good of the church.

Censura Morum**Article 90**

Office-bearers shall, before the celebration of the Lord's Supper, exercise Christian censure (*censura morum*) among themselves and in a brotherly spirit admonish one another with regard to the discharge of their office.

Administrative Discipline**Certificate of Membership****Article 91**

Communicant members who move to another Reformed Church are entitled to a certificate, issued by the session, concerning their doctrine and life.

Who Receives the Certificate**Article 92**

Certificates of membership shall ordinarily be given to the member concerned, and in addition, a notice shall be sent to the church nearest to their residence.

Certificate of Membership by Baptism**Article 93**

Members by baptism who move to another Reformed Church shall be granted a certificate of membership by baptism, to which such notations as are necessary shall be attached. Such certificates shall, as a rule, be mailed to the church of their residence.

Those Who Move without Requesting a Certificate**Article 94**

In cases of communicant members and members by baptism, who move to another area without requesting a certificate, notice shall be sent to the nearest Reformed Church.

Lording over One Another**Article 95**

No church shall in any way lord it over another church and no office-bearer shall lord it over another office-bearer.

Revision of the Church Order**Article 96**

This Church Order, having been adopted by common consent, shall be faithfully observed, and any revision thereof shall be made only by Synod.

Form of Subscription

We, the undersigned, office bearers of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, do hereby, sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, declare by this our subscription that we heartily believe and are persuaded that the whole system of doctrine as taught in the Belgic and Westminster Confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, does fully agree with the Word of God.

We therefore promise to teach diligently and to defend faithfully the aforesaid doctrine, without either directly or indirectly contradicting the same by our public preaching or writing.

We declare moreover that we not only reject all errors that militate against this doctrine, but that we are disposed to refute and contradict these and to exert ourselves in keeping the church free from such errors.

And if hereafter any difficulties or different sentiments respecting the aforesaid doctrines should arise in our minds, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, teach, or defend the same, either by preaching or writing, until we have first revealed such sentiments to the Session, Presbytery or Synod, that the same may be examined, being ready always cheerfully to submit to the judgment of the Session, Presbytery or Synod, under penalty, in case of refusal, of being by that very fact suspended from our office.

Furthermore, if at any time the Session, Presbytery or Synod, may deem it proper to require of us a further explanation of our sentiments respecting any particular doctrine of any of the afore mentioned standards, we do hereby promise to be always willing and ready to comply with such requisition, under the penalty above mentioned, reserving for ourselves however the right of appeal in case we should believe ourselves aggrieved by the sentence of the Session or the Presbytery, and until a decision is made upon such an appeal, we will acquiesce in the determination and judgment already passed.

Guidelines to the Form of Subscription

Synod 1977 (Acts 1977, Art. 76.6) decided that the following should be appended to the Form of Subscription. Previously Synod 1971 (Acts 1971, Art. 45) had declared that subscription by office-bearers is understood in the following way:

1. That the person making subscription subscribes to **all** the doctrines set forth in the confessions, as being doctrines which are the teaching of the Word of God;
2. That the subscriber, so subscribes to all these doctrines, be they understood in the eyes of men as being **major or minor** doctrines of the Christian Faith, without any reservation on his part and that he confesses these doctrines to be his own understanding of the teaching of the Word of God, desires to maintain such, and rejects all other teachings which would contradict the same;
3. That the subscriber **does not** by his subscription declare that the statements of these doctrines are formulated in the best manner, or with the use of the best words, or that the Confessional standards of our denomination cover **all** the teaching of the Scriptures on the matters confessed, or that every teaching of Scripture is dealt with by the Confessional Standards, or that the Confessional Standards of our denomination refute all the heresies that now exist (Report 17, 2, Acts 1969, p. 79 slightly amended);
4. That only the doctrines intentionally conveyed binding and not such allusions, or incidental remarks, or propositions which can be derived from the Confessions are binding. Nevertheless no one is free ultimately to decide for himself or for the Church what is and what is not a doctrine contained in the Standards. If such a question shall arise the Form of Subscription itself specifies quite clearly that it is the decision of the court of the Church that shall be sought, reached and acquiesced in, in every case.