

Do Not Adopt Proposed Changes to Church Order Articles 5 and 13

I. Background

The Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders, as adopted by Synod 2023, contains a number of important assertions about the proper use of authority and influence within the church. As such, it is a helpful resource for councils, classes, and ministry leaders across the denomination as they consider how to model Christlike conduct in carrying out the work of the church. The Code of Conduct recognizes that instances of abuse and manipulation of power undermine the credibility of the gospel and the testimony of the transforming power of Christ's work within us.

However, the proposed addition of the Code of Conduct to the requirements of Church Order Article 5 does not adequately consider the nature of the relationship between conduct and doctrine in the life of a church's leaders and may, in fact, obscure the relationship in an unhelpful way by placing the Code of Conduct alongside the Covenant for Officebearers. The Covenant for Officebearers has two purposes: it states the beliefs that unite us as a denomination, and it holds officebearers to compliance with those standards in (among other things) their serving and living.

The Code of Conduct, by contrast, has as its only function to call church leaders (including but not limited to officebearers) to certain standards of behavior in serving and living. But the placement of the Code of Conduct in Article 5 would suggest that our unity as a denomination rests not in our testimony about God but in our conduct as church leaders. While it is true that doctrine and life go hand-in-hand, the adoption of a second document creates the impression of two distinct poles (doctrine and life) and creates greater opportunity to emphasize one pole over the other. This is a subtle but important shift, and one whose theological premises bear more attention, especially in light of Synod 2023's reminder that the Code of Conduct "is subservient to Scripture and our confessions and must be interpreted and utilized accordingly" (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 992). And there is no evidence that such placement would actually help prevent instances of abuse that result from the sins of church leaders.

In addition, because the Code of Conduct is intended as a guideline for *all* ministry leaders (not just officebearers), the proposed additions to Articles 5 and 13 of the Church Order actually work against the purposes for which the code has been adopted. The provisions of Articles 5 and 13 apply only to officebearers, which creates the impression that the code is primarily about the work done by the council—when in fact the code's greatest impact will likely be in the practical, everyday ministry realities carried out by unordained staff and volunteers. This is an important oversight which, when combined with the theological implications of placing the Code of

Conduct alongside the Covenant for Officebearers, suggests that synod should seek a different placement if the code is indeed to be referenced in Church Order.

Further, the proposed Church Order Article 5-b is vague in its requirement that officebearers “shall uphold the standards of behavior summarized in the CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders” (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 993). Since Church Order itself does not propose a mechanism for implementing the Code of Conduct, it seems better to utilize it as a specific listing of the kinds of ungodly conduct which constitute “abuse of office” or deviation from the way of living called for in the Scriptures and the confessions, matters already covered clearly in Article 83, and to reference the Code of Conduct in supplemental material rather than in the Church Order itself. The CRC has intentionally kept its Church Order general and to avoid multiplying documents and policies to cover increasing numbers of specific situations. And while detailed examples can be helpful in naming the kinds of behaviors expected of church leaders, subscription to the Covenant for Officebearers, with its simple commitment to “[conform] . . . our living” to the Scriptures and confessional standards of the Christian Reformed Church, actually provides a more flexible tool for addressing abuses of power or sinful behavior in officebearers than do the specifics of the Code of Conduct.

II. Overture

For these reasons, Classis Atlantic Northeast overtures synod not to adopt the proposed amendments to Church Order Articles 5 and 13. We note as well the irony of trying to use a kind of power structure to create a culture of godly love and authority within the church. But recognizing that sometimes we need imperfect structures to help us move toward a goal of Christlikeness, if indeed the church believes that responsible implementation of the Code of Conduct requires its inclusion in the Church Order, we suggest the following changes to the Church Order Supplement instead (indicated by underlined text):

Supplement, Article 5

Guidelines and Regulations re Conduct of Officebearers

The Covenant for Officebearers speaks of “conforming . . . our living” to the Scriptures and the confessional standards of the CRCNA. Synod reminds the churches that Christian doctrine and Christian living are intertwined realities, and declares that our Covenant for Officebearers calls all signatories to nurture a culture of dignity and respect by providing Christlike leadership through their behavior as well as their teaching. The model CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders provides a helpful summary of the standards of behavior which can be expected of all officebearers.

Supplement, Article 35-a

The council is responsible for preparing the annual budget . . . for its approval.

The council is also encouraged to clearly identify expectations for Christlike behavior by officebearers, staff, and volunteers by seeking to uphold the standards of behavior summarized in the model CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders.

Supplement, Article 83

One of the key dynamics in considering abuse of office is the imbalance and misuse of power. The power inherent in the role of officebearer represents a sacred trust and must not be misused. Officebearers should conduct themselves with integrity and godly conduct, in line with the expectations set forth in the model CRCNA Code of Conduct for Ministry Leaders and other policies adopted by synod.

Grounds:

1. Placing the Code of Conduct, which deals only with behavior, alongside the Covenant for Officebearers (which deals with both doctrine and conduct) in the context of Church Order Article 5, introduces an unnecessary division between doctrine and life into the work of the church and undermines the statement of synod that the Code of Conduct be utilized in a way that is subservient to Scripture and the confessions (cf. *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 992).
2. This overture's proposed Supplements to Articles 5 and 83 make clear that the behavior of church leaders reflects our doctrinal commitments, and these proposed supplements strengthen the function of the Covenant for Officebearers as a robust call to Christian discipleship for those in ordained leadership.
3. Adding a reference to the Code of Conduct in the Supplement to Article 35-a provides an opportunity for the CRCNA to address the subject of ministry by unordained staff and volunteers, which is a major focus of the implementation process requested by synod (*Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 993).
4. Including references to the Code of Conduct in the Supplements to the Church Order demonstrates the priority given by the church to address concerns about abuse of power while recognizing that no list of behavioral standards can exhaustively name or prevent the sinful behaviors by which ministry leaders may compromise our collective witness to Christ (cf. *Canons of Dort*, Fifth Main Point, Art. 4-5).

Classis Atlantic Northeast
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Note: This overture was adopted by Classis Atlantic Northeast in October 2023 but was inadvertently omitted from submission prior to the March 15 deadline.