

A Glossary of the *Book of Church Order of the Reformed Church in America*

This glossary is designed to assist in the interpretation of the Reformed Church in America (“RCA”) Book of Church Order and is not constitutional in nature other than in its quotations. Quotation marks indicate a direct quote from the Book of Church Order, 2019 edition. References following each definition refer to sections of the Book of Church Order. This glossary was revised and approved for use by the Commission on Church Order in January 2020.

accusation. An allegation of an offense that has not been formally submitted as a charge. “A charge is a written accusation of an offense filed with the clerk of the responsible judicatory specifying the name of the accused, the nature of the alleged offense, and the time, place, and attendant circumstances of the alleged offense.” “The only matters to be considered as offenses subject to accusation are those which can be shown to be such from the Holy Scriptures, or from the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.” (2.I.2.4)

adherents. “All who participate in the life, work, and worship of the church, but are not members.” (Preamble)

admonition. The act of urging, warning, or correcting a person, officer, or a lower assembly requiring a person, officer, or lower assembly to account for his, her, or its action; a form of discipline that is “pastoral in nature” and is “exercised by an assembly in the ordinary course of its proceedings” or by a judicatory after considering a charge. Admonition is the mildest form of discipline. Admonishment by an assembly may be complained against; admonishment by a judicatory may be appealed. *verb admonish* (2.I.1.2)

advisory committee. A group of delegates that meets during General Synod to conduct the business of the General Synod as assigned by the General Synod Council and to advise the General Synod regarding the matters assigned to the committee. (3.I.8)

affiliate. The act of joining or creating a relationship with a church, assembly, or denomination. (1.II.10; 1.II.14)

agencies. Those boards and institutions that have enabling documents or constitutions which have been approved by the General Synod. (3.I.7)

appeal. “The transfer to a higher judicatory of a complaint, a charge, or an appeal on which judgment has been rendered in a lower judicatory.” “An appeal may also be a transfer of a charge against a General Synod professor on whom a judgment has been rendered.” (2.III.1.1,2)

assembly. An administrative or legislative body consisting of the offices of the church that meets to carry out the work of the church. The four assemblies in the RCA are the consistory, the classis, the regional synod, and the General Synod. (Preamble)

assistant minister. An ordained minister serving a congregation under contract and providing assistance for its installed minister. “The assistant minister may be commissioned by the classis

as a minister under contract, but shall not be *ipso facto* a member of the church or the consistory.” (1.I.2.8; see also generally 1.II.7.9)

Associates in Ministry. Persons who are certified and supervised by a classis after meeting the criteria approved by General Synod for their ministry. (1.II.6.5; 1.II.18)

associate minister. An ordained minister serving a local church under a call as an installed minister along with a senior minister. Associate ministers are *ipso facto* members of the congregation, consistory, and board of elders. The associate minister may be elected as one of the vice-presidents of the consistory. (1.I.2.5; 1.I.3.2)

baptized members. “Members who have received Christian baptism, who may or may not participate at the Lord’s Table, and who have not been received by the board of elders as confessing members.” (Preamble)

board. A group of persons given specific responsibilities by the constitution or an assembly. The consistory is divided into a board of elders and a board of deacons. Assemblies may appoint other boards to serve the mission of the church. (Preamble)

Book of Church Order (BCO). A book that contains the *Government and the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures* of the RCA along with the Bylaws and Special Rules of Order of the General Synod. An appendix contains the formularies. (Preamble)

bounds. The boundaries for the ministry of the local church, the classis, or the regional synod. (1.I.5.2; 1.II.1; 1.II.19.1)

bylaws. The basic rules that provide structure for an assembly or organization; the bylaws of the General Synod are found in Chapter 3 of the *BCO*. The rules of order of any church assembly must be consistent with the *Government* of the Reformed Church in America. (1.I.4.1)

call. An invitation by a consistory to a candidate to serve as an installed minister of the local church. The instrument of the call to a minister shall be signed by the members of the consistory and approved by the classis. Ministers serving under a call are installed and are *ipso facto* members of the congregation and consistory. (1.I.2.3-7; Appendix, Formulary No. 5)

candidate. A person under consideration for ordination to one of the offices of the church, or a person who is being considered for a call or contract by a consistory. (1.I.2.14c1; 1.I.5.2g; 1.II.2.8; 1.II.7.7-8)

candidate for ministry. A confessing member of the Reformed Church in America who has been received under the care of a classis and enrolled by the classis. The classis exercises a general supervision over all candidates for ministry subject to its jurisdiction and examines them for licensure and ordination. (1.II.2.7-8, 1.II.11)

certificate. A document that attests to the fact of an action. The Appendix of the *BCO* contains certificates for the transfer of ministers, church members, and churches. A Certificate of Fitness

for Ministry must be granted to a candidate before the candidate may be examined for licensure and ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacrament. (1.I.5.2b,e,g; 1.II.7.7-8; Appendix)

certification. The process of granting authority to exercise an office or role within the church; a statement that attests to the accuracy of a vote of a congregation or assembly. *verb* **certify** (Preamble; 1.II.10; 1.II.11.3; 1.II.12; 1.II.14)

chaplain. A specialized minister that serves in an organization other than the local church such as a hospital, the military, or a prison. (1.I.1.4c, 1.IV.3.6)

charge. “A written accusation of an offense filed with the clerk of the responsible judicatory specifying the name of the accused, the nature of the alleged offense, and the time, place, and attendant circumstances of the alleged offense.” “A charge may be brought by an individual who is subject to the jurisdiction of the responsible judicatory” or by “a committee designated by the responsible judicatory.” (2.I.4; Appendix, Formulary No. 12)

citation. A notice signed by the president and clerk, requesting the accused person or consistory to appear before the judicatory at a specified time and place. Citations are also issued to persons who are requested to appear as witnesses for or against the accused. (2.I.5.1, 2.I.5.5, Appendix, Formulary No. 13 and No. 14)

classis. “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 supervises its ministers, commissioned pastors, candidates for ministry, and congregations. (1.II)

collegiate church. “Two or more congregations served and governed by a single consistory, constituting one church organization.” (1.I.1)

commission. *noun* A standing committee that is given specific responsibilities and reports directly to an assembly. The General Synod has a number of commissions. (3.I.5)

commission. *verb* To authorize or give approval to a form of ministry. It is appropriate to commission those who carry out a ministry of the church for which an installation is neither suitable nor required. (1.II.2.9; 1.II.15.4)

commissioned pastor. “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.” (1.II.17)

communion. A group of churches (denomination) or the whole church of Jesus Christ as in the phrase: “the living communion of the one people of God with the one Christ who is their Head.” Holy Communion is also used as a synonym for the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. (Preamble)

complaint. “A written statement alleging that an action or a decision of an assembly or its officer has violated or failed to comply with the Constitution of the Reformed Church in

America or other laws and regulations of the church.” A complaint may be filed by confessing members against their consistory or board of elders, by members of an assembly against their assembly, or by an assembly against its supervising assembly. (See 2.II generally; 2.II.2.11)

confessing members. “Members who have received Christian baptism and have been received by the board of elders through profession of faith, reaffirmation of faith, or presentation of a satisfactory certificate of transfer of membership from another Christian church, and who make faithful use of the means of grace, especially the hearing of the Word and the use of the Lord’s Supper.” (Preamble)

congregation. “A body of baptized Christians meeting regularly in a particular place of worship.” (1.I.1)

congregational meeting. A meeting of the confessing members of a church. It shall be called for the purpose of electing of elders and deacons and voting on a plan of union or federation. One may be called at other times when the consistory seeks the input of the congregation. (1.I.2.14; 1.I.2.3)

consistorial report. An annual statistical report and an assessment of the spiritual state of an organized church made by a consistory to a classis, which forwards it to the synods. (1.I.2.19)

consistory. “The governing body of a local church. Its members are the installed minister/s of that church serving under a call, the elders and deacons currently installed in office, and commissioned pastors authorized by the classis.” (1.I.1.1)

Constitution. The governing documents of the Reformed Church in America consisting of the Doctrinal Standards, the Liturgy with the Directory for Worship, the Government of the Reformed Church in America, the Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures, the Preamble, and the Formularies. (Preamble)

constitutional inquiry. A series of questions addressed annually to the classis members and elders of each church. “The answers shall be entered in the minutes of classis for the information of the synods.” (1.II.7.1)

contract. A binding agreement that forms a working relationship between a minister, a commissioned pastor, a licensed candidate, or a student and a congregation without the use of a call or installation service. All contracts must be approved by the classis and reviewed annually by the classis. (1.I.2.8; 1.II.7.1n; 1.II.7.4-9)

corresponding delegate. A delegate to an assembly of the church that has the privilege of the floor, but no vote. (1.IV.1; 3.I.9)

deacon. A confessing member of the local church who has been inducted into that office by ordination. Installed deacons exercise a legislative function in a consistory and constitute a board of deacons with specified duties and authority, particularly the ministry of mercy, service, and outreach. (1.I.1.7-8)

delegate. *noun* One who serves as a representative to a greater assembly in the church. (1.II.3; 1.III.3; 1.IV.3; 3.I.1) An accredited delegate is one who has been officially appointed to represent the sending assembly.

delegate. *verb* To entrust authority to another. “The local churches together delegate authority to classes and synods, and having done so, they also bind themselves to be subject together to these larger bodies in all matters in which the common interests of the many churches are objects of concern.” (Preamble)

demission. An action of the classis that declares that a minister has voluntarily relinquished the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament. *verb demit* (1.II.15.13a & 14)

deposition. The act of removing a person from one of the offices of the church; a form of discipline that is judicial in nature and requires the formal presentation of charges to a judicatory, a determination of the truth of the charge, and a judgment of the advisability of removal from office. *verb depose* (1.I.1.3; 1.II.2.9; 2.I.1.2)

discipline. “The exercise of the authority which the Lord Jesus Christ has given to the church to promote its purity, to benefit the offender, and to vindicate the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ.” (2.I.1)

Disciplinary and Judicial Procedures. Part of the Reformed Church in America Constitution that establishes the rules for discipline and the process of filing a complaint or an appeal. (Preamble; Chapter 2)

dismission. The transfer of a member to another church, the transfer of a licensed candidate or a minister to another classis, or the transfer of a professor from a classis to the General Synod through the use of a certificate of dismissal or transfer. *verb dismiss* (1.I.2.18; 1.II.13.6; 1.II.19.2; Appendix, Formulary Nos. 9, 10, & 11)

dissolution. The termination of a pastoral relationship between an installed minister or a commissioned pastor and a church, the membership of a church in the denomination, or the corporate entity of a church. *verb dissolve* (1.II.2.10; 1.II.10.2; Appendix, Formulary No. 8)

Doctrinal Standards. The confessional statements of the RCA; namely, Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism with its Compendium, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Belhar Confession. (Preamble)

elder. A confessing member of the local church who has been ordained into that office. Installed elders exercise a legislative function in a consistory and constitute a board of elders with judicial authority and other specified duties, particularly the ministry of oversight and care of the church. (1.I.1.5-6)

excommunication. The act of refusing a person admittance to the Lord’s table and hence the privileges of church membership; a form of discipline that is judicial in nature and requires the

formal presentation of charges to the proper judicatory, a determination of the truth of the charge, and a judgment that the person not participate in the Lord's Supper. It requires concurrence from the classis. *verb excommunicate* (2.I.1.2.)

federated church. A union of "one or more non-Reformed churches" forming "one religious corporation, with each of the original churches retaining its own religious corporation." (1.I.8)

formulary. A certificate or form that is used in the administration of the church. The formularies are found in the Appendix of the *Book of Church Order* and are constitutional in nature. (Appendix)

full communion. "Full table and pulpit fellowship and the recognition of each other's ministries, in keeping with the authority and responsibilities of the classes and the consistories." (1.I.2.4, quotation from MGS 1997, p. 185).

general superintendence. The responsibility for cognizance and supervision exercised by a greater assembly. The classis exercises a "general superintendence over its enrolled ministers, its commissioned pastors, and over the interests and concerns of the congregations within its bounds"; the regional synod exercises a "general superintendence over the interests and concerns of the classes within its bounds"; and the General Synod exercises a "general superintendence over the interests and concerns of the whole church." "Reformed governance understands that the greater assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the lesser assemblies without infringing upon the responsibilities of the lesser." (Preamble, 1.II.2.2, 1.III.2.1, 1.IV.2.1)

General Synod. The highest assembly and judicatory of the Reformed Church in America. It consists of minister delegates and elder delegates from each classis along with delegate from each of the regional synods; two General Synod professor of theology delegates from each of the theological seminaries of the Reformed Church; a number of furloughing missionary and chaplain delegates; and corresponding delegates provided for in the Bylaws of the General Synod. (1.IV)

General Synod Council. The Executive Committee of the General Synod that administers the affairs of the Reformed Church in America between the sessions of the General Synod. It implements decisions, policies, and programs of the General Synod through proper channels and agencies. The Council also serves as the Committee of Reference at meetings of the General Synod and acts as the Board of Trustees of the General Synod as may be required by law. (1.IV.7.1, 3.I.3)]

governing body. The body of an organizing church "that functions similarly to both a consistory and a board of elders." In most cases it refers to a classis-appointed governing body, with a few exceptions.

great consistory. "All confessing members of that church who have served it, or are serving it, as elders and deacons on its consistory. The great consistory may be convened by the consistory

when matters of special importance relating to the welfare of the church demand consideration. Members of the great consistory have only an advisory voice.” (1.I.1.9)

inactive member. A person who “has not made faithful use of the means of grace, especially the hearing of the Word and the use of the Lord’s Supper,” and has been “removed by the board of elders from the confessing membership list.” (1.I.5.2d; Preamble)

inactive minister. A minister who has been declared inactive by the classis because the minister has not functioned in that office for a period of six months or more. (1.II.2.9, 1.II.15.13b)

install. To establish a person in a position or place of ministry over which the installing body has authority. Elders, deacons, ministers who have a call to serve a local church, and professors of theology are installed. *noun* **installation** (e.g., 1.I.2.3)

judicatory. A governmental unit that exercises power to act in matters of discipline within the church. “The board of elders, the classis, the regional synod, and the General Synod exercise judicial as well as legislative powers.” An assembly becomes a judicatory when it enters into judicial proceedings. – **judicial** *adjective* (Preamble)

judicial procedures. The process of considering a complaint or appeal by a judicial business committee and its judicatory. (2.II and 2.III)

license. The permission to engage in ministry after a period of training. A classis may authorize a student to preach or authorize a candidate to receive a call to ministry. (1.II.11.8; Formulary No. 2)

licensed candidate. A candidate for the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament who has been examined and approved by the classis, has received the Certificate of Licensure (Formulary No. 2), and who is eligible to receive a call or other invitation to a form of ministry. (1.II.13)

Liturgy. Part of the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America containing orders for use in worship services. “The order of worship on the Lord’s Day shall be in accordance with the Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America, or with the principles set forth in the *Directory for Worship...*” The orders for administration of the sacraments, ordination, and installation to the offices of the church shall be used. (Preamble, 1.I.2.11a)

local church. “A congregation properly organized, which is served and governed by a regularly constituted consistory.” (1.I.1.1c)

member. Any confessing member, baptized member, or inactive member of a local church, any minister or commissioned pastor enrolled in a classis, or any voting delegate of an assembly or a judicatory. (Preamble)

minister. *noun* The commonly used term for Minister of Word and Sacrament, one of the ordained offices of the Reformed Church in America. (Preamble, 1.I.1.3)

minister. *verb* To act as a servant in the name of Christ. “The purpose of the Reformed Church in America, together with all other churches of Christ, is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and by all Christian good works.” Ministry is shared by all Christians. (Preamble)

minister under contract. A minister serving a local church under a contract. The term may describe a person serving a church without an installed minister on a temporary basis, a specialized transition minister, or an assistant minister. All contracts must be approved and reviewed annually by the classis. (1.II.7.4-6; 1.II.7.9; 1.I.2.8)

missionary. A person commissioned by the General Synod to serve the mission of the church in a foreign country or a new field of service. A missionary may serve as a delegate to the General Synod. (1.I.1.4c; 1.II.15.1d; 1.IV.3.5)

moderator. A person who is appointed to serve as the presiding officer of one of the boards, commissions, councils, or advisory committees of the church. Moderators are given the responsibility of reporting to the General Synod. (3.II.2.6)

multiple parish. “A group of local churches sharing the services of one or more installed ministers.” (1.I.1.1e)

offense. Misconduct subject to the discipline of the church. Offenses are “those which can be shown to be such from the Holy Scriptures, or from the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America.” (2.I.2)

office. An ordained ministry that represents Christ to the church and the world. “Three offices are employed in the governmental functions of the Reformed Church, namely, the Minister of Word and Sacrament. . . , the elder, and the deacon. A fourth office, that of the General Synod professor, is a teacher of the church with particular responsibilities for the preparation and certification of candidates for the ministry.” (Preamble)

officer. One who bears or holds an ordained office within the church; also, one who is elected or appointed to hold a particular office or role within an assembly, such as the clerk, president, presiding officer, etc. (Preamble; 1.I.3; 1.II.5; 1.III.5; 1.IV.5)

ordain. The action of an assembly to invest persons with authority to serve in one of the offices of the church. A consistory supervises and participates in the ordination of elders and deacons, and a classis ordains Ministers of Word and Sacrament. A person is ordained only once for each office. *noun* **ordination** (1.I.2.15-16; 1.II.2.9)

order. A way to express the unity of the church and to achieve cooperation and harmony in the body of Christ in conformity with Scripture, as it seeks to fulfill its mission *or* as used by God in the fulfillment of God’s intentions in the world. “The Reformed Church in America is organized and governed according to the presbyterial order.” (Preamble)

organizing church. A congregation that has a classis-appointed governing body and has not yet been organized as a local church. (1.I.1.1b)

overture. A request sent from a lower assembly to a higher assembly of the church. “The General Synod may receive overtures from a classis or a regional synod. It shall not receive overtures which deal with matters under adjudication or which make either direct or implied charges against persons.” When General Synod meets, overtures are considered by advisory committees and their advice comes to the floor, not the overture itself. If the synod votes in favor of the advisory committee’s advice to deny, the overture will not receive any further consideration unless a delegate makes a motion to adopt the overture. (3.II.2.7)

parity. A principle of the equality among and within the offices of the church based upon the belief that the entire ministerial or pastoral office is summed up in Jesus Christ himself. (Preamble)

pastor. One of the ecclesiastical designations of a minister or commissioned pastor that defines the pastoral nature of his or her ministry. (1.I.1.4)

polity. The specific form of government that is adopted by a church that provides a framework for organization. (1.IV.2.11)

preaching elder. An ordained elder in the Reformed Church in America approved and commissioned by the classis to preach in a particular congregation. (1.II.16)

prerogative. The spiritual authority granted to an assembly by the RCA Constitution. “Reformed governance understands that the greater assemblies care for the ministry that extends beyond the purview of the lesser assemblies without infringing upon the responsibilities of the lesser.” (Preamble, 1.I.2.1; 1.II.2.1; 1.III.2.5; 1.III.7.2)

presbyterial. A form of church government that places authority in a series of representative assemblies of those elected and ordained to offices within the church. (Preamble)

professor, General Synod. A Minister of Word and Sacrament who is “a teacher of the church with particular responsibilities for the preparation and certification of candidates for the ministry.” General Synod professors are elected and installed into that office by the General Synod and are amenable in matters of doctrine solely to the General Synod. The office of “General Synod professor” is sometimes called the “fourth office.” (Preamble, 1.IV.8)

quorum. The minimum number of members required to be present at a meeting before the body can transact business. All regular meetings of the assemblies and boards of the RCA require the presence of a majority of each of the offices regularly convened in order for the transaction of business. A special session of classis requires a minimum of three ministers and three elder delegates to transact the business stated in the notice of the special session. (1.I.4.2; 1.I.5.1; 1.I.6.3; 1.II.4; 1.III.4.3; 1.IV.4.3)

rebuke. A reprimand or censure of a member, officer, or a lower assembly; a “form of discipline that is pastoral in nature and may be exercised by an assembly in the ordinary course of its proceedings” or by a judicatory after considering a charge *or* weighing the gravity of an offense. A rebuke by an assembly may be complained against; a rebuke by a judicatory may be appealed. (2.I.1.2)

regional synod. “An assembly and judicatory consisting of ministers and elders delegated by each of the classes within the bounds determined for it by the General Synod.” “The regional synod shall exercise a general superintendence over the interests and concerns of the classes within its bounds.” (1.III.1-2)

restoration. Bringing back the privileges of membership or office after a period of discipline upon repentance and renewal of vows expressed before the judicatory which suspended, deposed, or excommunicated the member or officer. (2.I.6)

session. A complete unit of proceedings of an assembly which may consist of one or more connected meetings. (1.I.1.1; 1.II.4.1; 1.III.4.1; 1.IV.4.1) In the section on Union Churches (1.I.7), this term is used to describe the Presbyterian equivalent of the consistory.

specialized transition minister. A minister who has completed specialized training and has been endorsed as qualified by the General Synod or its designated agent. This minister may be appointed by the classis to serve a church without an installed minister or senior minister for a designated period. The task of a specialized transition minister (STM) is to assist the local church in clarifying a vision for future ministry while maintaining pastoral ministry during the pastoral search process. (1.II.7.6)

supersede. The action of classis in its assembly to dissolve a consistory and any ministerial relationship “when, in its judgment, there are conditions in that church which make it unable to fulfill the functions of a local church as these are defined by the classis” and set forth in the *BCO*. Following supersession, the classis may reconstitute the consistory. (1.II.9)

supervision. The oversight and guidance of a local church or its members, a candidate for ministry, a board or agency, or an assembly of the church provided by the agency, board, or assembly given that responsibility. (1.I.2.13; 1.II.8.3)

supervisor. A minister appointed by the classis to oversee “all proceedings of the consistory of a church without an installed minister.” (1.II.7.3)

suspend. *verb* To set aside a privilege or action for a period of time. The action of suspension from membership or office is judicial in nature and requires the formal presentation of charges to a judicatory. (2.I.1.2)

suspension. *noun* The act of removing a person temporarily from one of the offices of the church or from the privileges of membership in the church; a form of discipline that is judicial in nature and requires the formal presentation of charges to a judicatory, the determination of the truth of the charge, and a judgment that temporary removal from office is appropriate. (2.I.3)

two-thirds majority. Several decisions listed in the *BCO* require a two-thirds vote of a classis or congregation for approval. Unless this requirement mentions the “entire membership” or “those present,” a two-thirds vote means at least two-thirds of the votes cast by persons entitled to vote, excluding blanks or abstentions. (RONR, 11th ed., pp. 401-402)

union church. *noun* A union of two or more churches of reformed bodies, that have organized according to the Plan of Union set forth in the *BCO*. (1.I.7)

The definitions above may change over time as the Book of Church Order is revised. Please submit any suggestions for corrections or additions to the Commission on Church Order.

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