Report of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board

The 2018 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) acted “to constitute the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board ... to coordinate, evaluate, innovate, strategically anticipate, and collaboratively shape theological education that will form pastoral leadership for the RCA that is rooted in the Reformed faith and tradition while engaging in the present and emerging future” (MGS 2018, RF 18-1, p. 86). As part of that same action, the 2018 General Synod described one of the purposes of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) as “serv[ing] the RCA by coordinating the three theological agents of the RCA as they work collaboratively, actively anticipating the needs of the church in an ever-changing world and collaborating to form the pastoral leadership that the world and the church needs” (p. 86).

The Future of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency

As noted in the 2019 report to General Synod, the PFOB has been discussing potential changes both to the nature of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry and to the process by which it is granted to qualified candidates. This discussion stemmed from a request of at least one of the agents to remove this responsibility from their purview. Problems that have arisen include, but are not limited to, what defines a candidate as “fit,” inconsistencies among the three agents in granting the certificate, and the reality that, given the nature of theological education today with more online learning, a feeling from some that the educational institutions might not be in the best position to determine fitness.

Additionally, the decision by the General Synod Council (GSC) to defund the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA), or at least have the agency operate using its reserves, created new issues and opportunities to examine how the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry was granted to candidates from Western Theological Seminary (WTS), New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NTBS), non-RCA seminaries, and those in the Approved Alternate Route (AAR) process. The PFOB was tasked by the GSC with proposing a path forward.

The PFOB met extensively over the past year and thought through a variety of proposals. We submit this informal proposal for feedback from the church and plan to bring a formal recommendation, pending changes based upon dialogue with the broader church, to the 2022 General Synod. The following is a summary of our current proposal.

Proposal

To re-form the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency with the following purposes:

1. To grant the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to all candidates pursuing ordination to the office of minister of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America from both RCA and non-RCA seminaries.

2. To grant the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry to all candidates pursuing ordination to the office of minister of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America through the Approved Alternate Route.
Process

Candidates from any seminary would petition classes, through their consistories, for entrance into the ordination process. All candidates who are approved by their classes will have their applications sent to and accepted by the MFCA. All candidates will then be given a psychological evaluation. The results of that evaluation may, with permission, be sent to a representative of the seminary and/or classis.

a. Candidates Attending an RCA Seminary

Candidates attending and receiving their MDiv degrees (RCA focus) from either NBTS or WTS and whose psychological evaluations are deemed acceptable by the certification committee of the MFCA will be granted the CFM by the MFCA board.

b. Candidates Attending a non-RCA Seminary

Candidates attending and receiving their MDiv degrees from a non-RCA seminary will be forwarded to the certification committee of the MFCA for the duration of the 24-month process. Upon acceptance, in addition to the psychological evaluation, each candidate will be given a proposed course of study needed to assure that the Standards for Theological Education are met. These courses (RCA Standards, Polity, History, Mission, Worship, as well as Greek and Hebrew) will be offered by NBTS and WTS. Candidates must take their assigned courses at an RCA seminary, which can be taken for either audit or credit as the candidates desire. The MFCA will no longer offer courses.

All candidates in this process will go through a mid-certification review. Coursework, psychological evaluations, and an interview will all be reviewed. After this review, candidates will be invited to a) continue in the process toward receiving their Certificate of Fitness for Ministry after their requirements are met, b) return for a final interview if there are any major points of concern that need to be addressed, or c) be removed from the process.

Candidates who receive their MDiv (or academic equivalent) and are recommended by the MFCA Certification Committee will be granted the Certification of Fitness for Ministry by the MFCA board.

Assessment for Theological Education

In order to fulfill its mandate to assist the GSC in setting the budget and division of the Assessment for Theological Education, the PFOB has made the following recommendations to the GSC (see the GSC finance report for the final assessment proposal). These recommendations are based on the understanding that Western Theological Seminary is proposing bylaws changes to this General Synod that, if approved, would mean that Western would no longer get a share of the RCA Theological Education assessment.

Scenario 1 (WTS bylaw changes are approved and assessments are no longer allocated to WTS)

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) recommends a General Synod assessment for theological education of $4.00 per member.
The PFOB is recommending that the 2022 theological education assessment be allocated in the following manner:

- $20,000 to cover the cost of the meeting of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents.
- The remainder will be split:
  - 80 percent of the funds are to be split evenly among the two agents for theological education (MFCA and NBTS).
  - 20 percent distributed per capita of students within each agency (MFCA and NBTS) who are formally in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.

Scenario 2 (WTS bylaw changes are NOT approved)

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) recommends a General Synod assessment for theological education of $6.12 per-member.

The PFOB is recommending that the 2022 theological education assessment be allocated in the following manner:

- $20,000 to cover the cost of the meeting of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents.
- The remainder will be split:
  - 80 percent of the funds are to be split evenly among the three agents for theological education (WTS, MFCA, and NBTS).
  - 20 percent distributed per capita of students within each agency (WTS, MFCA, and NBTS) who are formally in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.

Classis Best Practices

As part of its charge to engage classes regarding best practices for caring for candidates under care, the PFOB will continue to maintain and promote the website www.candidate-care.org. Bart Strong will continue to oversee this website. It continues to be used by many classes to better care for and examine candidates for minister of Word and sacrament.

The PFOB is grateful for the opportunity to continue to serve the church in this area of leadership preparation and care.