

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.”

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

As noted in the 2019 and 2021 reports to General Synod, the PFOB has been discussing potential changes both to the nature of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (CFM) and to the process by which it is granted to qualified candidates. Problems that have arisen with the current nature and process of the CFM 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 that the nature of theological education today often includes 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 or reduce funding to the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA), or at least have the MFCA operate using its reserves, created new issues and opportunities to examine how the CFM 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 three years and thought through a variety of proposals. The board submitted an informal proposal for feedback from the church in its report to the 2021 General Synod. Based upon that feedback, along with further discussions, PFOB now submits the following recommendations:

TE 22-1

To rename the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry the Certificate of Readiness for Examination by adopting the following amendments to the *Book of Church Order* for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7

Sec. 7. The classis may appoint a candidate enrolled in the Certificate of ~~Fitness for Ministry~~Readiness for Examination process to a church without an installed minister or minister under contract, to furnish the service for which the candidate is qualified. Before the appointment is made, the candidate must secure the approval of the

General Synod agent supervising the candidate's Certificate of ~~Fitness for Ministry~~Readiness for Examination process.

Sec. 8. A consistory or governing body shall not enter into a contract with a minister, a licensed candidate, or a candidate for the Certificate of ~~Fitness for Ministry~~Readiness for Examination except by approval of the classis. Between sessions of classis the approval may be given by the president and the clerk of classis.

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11

Sec. 3. Immediately following the enrollment of a candidate for ministry, the classis, through its stated clerk, shall petition the General Synod on behalf of the candidate for a Certificate of ~~Fitness for Ministry~~Readiness for Examination....

Sec. 7. After the candidate has been granted a Certificate of ~~Fitness for Ministry~~Readiness for Examination, the classis shall examine the candidate for licensure and ordination...

Chapter 1, Part II, Article 12

Sec. 3. Alternate Means to Satisfying Requirements

A candidate for ministry who is a student enrolled in a Master of Divinity degree program at a theological seminary and who, because of age, lack of necessary academic preparation, or other sufficient reason, finds it too difficult to meet the full requirements for the Certificate of ~~Fitness for Ministry~~Readiness for Examination, shall make application to the classis.

- a. If the classis finds the reason sufficient, it shall petition the appropriate agent of the General Synod (the board of trustees of an RCA seminary or the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency) on behalf of the applicant for approval of an alternate means to meet any part of the requirements for the Certificate of ~~Fitness for Ministry~~Readiness for Examination.**
- b. The agent of the General Synod shall consider carefully the reasons submitted by the classis as to why the applicant is unable to meet the full requirements for a Certificate of ~~Fitness for Ministry~~Readiness for Examination. If the agent finds the reason sufficient, it shall provide a means for the applicant to compensate for the inability to meet the requirement. If the application is rejected, the agent shall state its reasons. If the agent finds that the compensatory steps have been satisfactorily completed, it shall judge that the requirement has been fulfilled.**

Sec. 4. The Approved Alternate Route

A candidate for ministry who has not received the degree of Master of Divinity or a degree that is its equivalent from a seminary that is accredited by the Association of Theological Schools or by a theological accrediting agency of comparable standards as determined by the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency may qualify for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry Readiness for Examination provided the following conditions are met: ...

- c. The classis shall petition for a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry Readiness for Examination on behalf of the candidate to the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency. If that agency rejects the petition, it shall clearly state its reasons. The classis may reapply.
- d. Upon admission, the classis and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency shall together develop a program that will allow the candidate to satisfy the requirements for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry Readiness for Examination.
- e. When the candidate has completed the program, the candidate shall be examined for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry Readiness for Examination by the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency. The method of assessment shall be culturally and linguistically appropriate.
- f. When the candidate passes the examination, the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency may award the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry Readiness for Examination.

Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 8

Sec. 3. The General Synod professor shall be a Minister of Word and Sacrament in good standing, sound in the faith, possessed of a recognized ability to teach, have the confidence of the churches, and shall have made recognized contributions to the church and to scholarship. When a Reformed Church minister who exhibits these qualifications exercises a substantial and continuing role, under the authority of one of the seminaries or the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency board, both in preparing RCA candidates for ordination and in the process of recommending the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry Readiness for Examination, the board of trustees of an RCA seminary or the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency board may nominate that minister to the General Synod as candidate for the office of General Synod professor. A General Synod professor shall be elected by the General Synod by a majority vote of the members present.

Sec. 7. A General Synod professor shall continue in office so long as he or she continues to exercise a substantial role, under the authority of one of the seminaries or the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency board, both in preparing RCA candidates for ordination and in the process of granting the Certificate of fitness for ministry Readiness for Examination, or until death, resignation, dismissal from service by the seminary or the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency, declaration by the General Synod as professor emeritus, or removal from office by the General Synod.

Sec. 8. When a General Synod professor resigns the office elected to by the General Synod or no longer exercises a substantial role, under the authority of one of the seminaries or the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency board, both in preparing candidates for ordination and in the process of granting the Certificate of fitness for ministry Readiness for Examination, the professor shall either be removed from the office by a declarative act of the synod, or be declared professor emeritus by the synod. The appropriate classis shall be notified of this action.

*Note: there are a few more references to the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry in the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* that are not covered by TE 22-1; the name change in those sections will be covered as part of the new CRE process that is proposed via the amendments to the *BCO* proposed in TE 22-2.

Rationale

This change is helpful in more clearly defining the roles both of the theological agent as well as the classis in a candidate's ordination process. Currently, the theological agents have granted CFMs with no definition of what constitutes "fitness." This has led to confusion and, at times, disagreement among the agents and the church as to the scope of the CFM. Additionally, this has led to inconsistencies among the three agents as to what constitutes fitness and, subsequently, who is eligible to receive a CFM. This change clarifies the role of the agent and will bring more consistency among the agents. In granting the Certificate of Readiness for Examination (CRE), the theological agent will attest that a candidate has been instructed/formed and is entitled to examination for licensure and ordination by the classis. As will be noted in PFOB's subsequent recommendation, readiness for examination will be based upon *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Sections 6 and 7 [2021 edition, pp. 47-48).

Furthermore, the PFOB, following the *BCO*, affirms the primary role of the classis in determining eligibility for ordination in the RCA. Given the rise of distance learning, seminaries are less aware of or involved in the daily lives of many candidates. The PFOB believes that the classis is better prepared to examine and engage candidates in their calls and fitness for ordination in the RCA. Of course, the theological agents will continue to work with classes should questions from a classis arise or if the agent becomes aware of concerns, but the classis will be responsible for ordination.

TE 22-2

To establish the following process for a candidate to receive a Certificate of Readiness for Examination by adopting the following

changes to the *Book of Church Order*, Chapter 1, Part II, for recommendation to the classes for approval (additions are underlined; deletions are stricken):

Article 12. Certificates of Fitness for Ministry Readiness for Examination

Sec. 1. Candidates at Reformed Church Seminaries

A candidate for ministry who has received the degree of Master of Divinity from a seminary of the Reformed Church in America, upon the successful completion of the prescribed course of theological studies, is found to be qualified and is adjudged to be a fit candidate for ministry of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America, shall receive from the General Synod through the board of trustees of an RCA seminary a Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, which is entitlement to an examination for licensure and ordination, with the courses that satisfy the requirements for ministry of Word and sacrament as defined in Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Sections 6 and 7, as documented on the candidate's transcript from one of the two historic seminaries of the Reformed Church in America, is entitled to an examination for licensure and ordination by a classis.

Sec. 2. Candidates at Other Seminaries

- a. A candidate for ministry who has received the degree of Master of Divinity or an academically equivalent degree from a seminary not ~~officially~~ historically related to the Reformed Church in America upon the successful completion of the prescribed course of theological studies, ~~is found to be qualified, and is adjudged to be a fit candidate for ministry of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America, and~~ who satisfies the requirements for ministry of Word and Sacrament as defined by Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Sections 6 and 7, shall receive from the General Synod through the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency a Certificate of ~~Fitness for Ministry Readiness for Examination~~, which is entitlement to an examination for licensure and ordination.
- b. The General Synod through the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency shall require the applicant to furnish, at the conclusion of seminary studies, the following: a Master of Divinity degree or its equivalent from a seminary accredited by the Association of Theological Schools or a theological accrediting agency of comparable standards as determined by the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency; a transcript of the applicant's academic record at this

seminary; and evidence of confessing membership in a Reformed church of the classis making petition.

- c. ~~The General Synod through the board of trustees of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency shall determine that the candidate meets minimum competencies as determined by the standards established by the General Synod and designated as indispensable for the proper exercise of the ministerial office of the church. If a candidate comes under the jurisdiction of a new agent of the General Synod, the classis in which the candidate is enrolled shall apply to the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency on behalf of the candidate. If the candidate has completed less than half the process toward reception of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry, the relevant agents of the General Synod shall effect the transfer. If the candidate has completed half the process or more, the original agent shall award the Certificate. If the applicant has previously been asked to terminate studies, has withdrawn under duress, or has been denied the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry at a Reformed Church in America seminary or the MFCA, further supervision and/or examination of the applicant shall only be carried out by or with the consent of the seminary or agent within whose program the candidate had previously been enrolled.~~ If a candidate desires to come under the jurisdiction of a new agent of the General Synod during the process, or if the applicant has previously been asked to terminate studies, has withdrawn under duress, or has been denied the Certificate of Readiness for Examination at an official seminary of the RCA or the MFCA, the classis in which the candidate is enrolled shall notify both parties on behalf of the candidate. Further supervision and/or examination of the applicant shall only be carried out by or with the consent of the seminary or agent within whose program the candidate had previously been enrolled.

Rationale for Section 1: Candidates at Reformed Church Seminaries

This demonstrates the trust that we have in the seminaries that have been historically related to the RCA while, at the same time, ensuring the primary role of the classis in the ordination process. Candidates who receive masters of divinity (MDiv) from these institutions will be judged to have been formed in the Reformed tradition and deemed ready for examination for licensure and ordination by classes. The MDiv itself will serve as the Certificate of Readiness for Examination.

It should be noted that it is possible to receive an MDiv from either NBTS or WTS without fulfilling *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Sections 6 and 7. Therefore, each seminary will assign a liaison between a candidate and the candidate's respective classis. This liaison will work with each candidate to ensure that courses necessary to fulfill the *BCO* requirements are taken. Additionally, transcripts, upon the candidate's request, will be provided to the appropriate members of a classis for their review to determine whether all of the appropriate requirements

are met. Once the classis approves the course of study that fulfills the *BCO* requirements, the candidate will be ready for examination and licensure upon receiving the MDiv from the agent.

Rationale for Section 2: Candidates at Other Seminaries

In this scenario, very little change will occur for candidates from non-RCA seminaries. Candidates under supervision of a classis will continue to take courses required for fulfilling *BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Sections 6 and 7 as determined by the MFCA board. One change is that the MFCA will no longer be offering courses. Candidates will be directed to the appropriate courses at NBTS and/or WTS for fulfilling their respective requirements. Both seminaries are offering opportunities to fulfill these courses for no credit at reduced costs, so candidates should not feel an extra burden.

Candidates will still be interviewed by the Reformed Candidates' Supervision and Care Committee (RCSC) of the MFCA, who will oversee each candidate's course of studies and recommend or not recommend a candidate for a Certificate of Readiness for Examination to the MFCA Board. The final decision regarding granting or not granting the certificate will still be made by the MFCA Board.

The elimination of the MFCA teaching courses as well as the use of more technology should reduce the cost of the MFCA to the denomination while still providing the necessary framework and process for guiding our candidates from other seminaries to their Certificate of Readiness for Examination.

The Nature and Scope of the MFCA Moving Forward

In addition to the above discussions regarding the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry/Certificate of Readiness for Examination, the PFOB has been involved with the MFCA Board on the nature, scope, and funding of the MFCA moving forward.

The MFCA has articulated that it will be able to handle this transition as well as function in its new capacity. The MFCA is close to being able to make that transition from its own courses to courses offered through the seminaries now. The MFCA will offer its faculty to the seminaries as adjuncts if needed. Given the current nature of the RCA, the MFCA expects to see a decrease in enrollments in the near term. The PFOB also made informal recommendations to the MFCA Board as well as to the GSC through the general secretary regarding appropriate staffing that will be needed going forward.

The PFOB is thankful to Dave Schutt and the rest of the MFCA faculty and staff, as well as the faculty and staff at our seminaries, who continue to prepare our candidates for ordination in the RCA during these turbulent times, which have caused a great deal of anxiety among our candidates. We are committed to helping each candidate complete his or her process toward ordination.

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:

Scenario 1 (a portion of the theological education assessment is no longer allocated to WTS; applies if BOTH of the following conditions are true: Western's bylaws and articles of incorporation changes are approved AND Western is not subsequently designated as an agent of the General Synod):

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) recommends a General Synod assessment for theological education of \$4.00 per member, 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 as follows:
 - 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 continues to receive a portion of the theological education assessment; applies if EITHER of the following conditions are true: Western's bylaws changes are not approved OR Western's bylaws changes are approved and it is also subsequently designated an agent of the General Synod):

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

We are grateful for the opportunity to continue to serve the church in this area of leadership preparation and care.

Respectfully submitted,
Chad Pierce (moderator) on behalf of the PFOB