

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” (*Minutes of General Synod 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 Certification Agency

As noted in its 2019, 2021, and 2022 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.

The PFOB, therefore, brought a proposal to the 2022 General Synod to change the scope and nature of the CFM. This proposal consisted of changes to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* that would both rename the CFM as the Certificate of Readiness for Examination (CRE) and also implement that change, defining the roles of the classis and the theological agents in the ordination process more clearly. The proposed changes were approved by the 2022 General Synod and sent to the classes for approval. If they receive approval from at least two thirds of classes, those amendments will be before this General Synod for a final declarative vote. The recommendations adopted by the 2022 General Synod can be found in TE 22-1 and TE 22-2 on pages 253-264 of the *Minutes of General Synod 2022*.

The PFOB’s meetings this year have included extended discussions about implementation of the above-mentioned *BCO* amendments, if approved by the classes and ratified by this General Synod. This includes:

- *Course offerings* – Since the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA) will no longer be able to offer courses needed for students enrolled in non-RCA seminaries, both Western Theological Seminary (WTS) and New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) are preparing to offer needed courses for MFCA students. If the *BCO* changes relating to the CRE are approved,

beginning this fall, the MFCA will be directing students to WTS and NBTS for classes.

- *Communication between agents* – If the *BCO* changes relating to the CRE are approved, transcripts would be the formal communication from the MFCA, NBTS, or WTS to the classes. Each institution has appointed liaisons to whom classes and candidates may reach out for questions (for NBTS, this is James Brumm and Faye Taylor; for WTS, Tim Basselin; for the MFCA, Dave Schutt).
- *Communication to students currently under care* – This is critically important for all students, but especially for the MFCA students because this will be a significant shift for them.
- *Communication to clerks* – The classis clerk is a key figure in helping transition this major change. The PFOB is working to connect with the clerks to facilitate mutual communication.
- *Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) requirements* – The three agents are currently working on how to handle the CPE requirement for the MFCA candidates.

Implementation of the above is dependent upon classes' approval of the *BCO* changes in TE 22-1 and TE 22-2 and a subsequent declarative vote by this General Synod. The PFOB also spent some time deliberating about next steps if the changes are not approved.

Theological Education Funding

The PFOB submitted a recommendation to the General Synod Council (GSC) regarding the amount of the theological education assessment.

In the past, the theological education assessment was distributed to each agent based on the number of students that the MFCA, WTS, and NBTS had that were formally enrolled in the CFM process. Several major factors impacted our discussion this year.

- The CFM may transform into the CRE (Certificate of Readiness for Examination)
- WTS received approval from the General Synod last year to change its status from being an RCA seminary to being an independent but officially related institution.
- Both WTS and NBTS are taking over responsibilities for forming students previously handled by the MFCA.
- The MFCA has decreased staff, decreased finances, and decreased enrollment.
- General Synod finances are being moved from a per communicant member basis to a covenant shares model based on income.

The PFOB felt that now was a good time to rethink the distribution of the theological education assessment. The PFOB discussed the distribution extensively at our January 24-25 meeting. Micah McCreary, the president of NBTS; Felix Theonugraha, the president of WTS; and Dave Schutt, the interim director of the MFCA, were

present. It was a challenging discussion, but in the end, it was unanimously agreed that the assessment should be divided equally between the three agents.

In 2023, the theological education assessment is projected to collect revenue of \$437,000, which the PFOB designated as follows:

- \$20,000 for collaborative work (PFOB and the General Synod professorate)
- The remaining amount was divided among the three theological agents:
 - \$134,000 to the MFCA
 - \$157,000 to WTS
 - \$126,000 to NBTS

The division among the theological agents was based on the following formula as determined by the PFOB: 80 percent of the amount was split evenly, and the remaining 20 percent was distributed based on the number of students at each agency that are formally in the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry process.

Recognizing the RCA's reduced income, the PFOB is requesting \$415,000 for 2024 (reducing the overall amount to be collected from the theological education assessment by \$22,000, a 5 percent decrease over the estimated theological assessment revenue for 2023). The PFOB will distribute the \$415,000 as follows:

- \$15,000 for collaborative work (PFOB, the General Synod professors, and collaborative efforts among the respective agents)
- The remaining amount will be distributed equally among the three theological agents, one third to each agent

The PFOB affirms that all three agents play critical roles in developing leaders for the RCA and furthering the vision of the restructuring team: "the central outcome that we believe God is calling the RCA to produce is 'making disciples who grow disciples'" (from the restructuring team's February 2023 update published on the RCA website).

As requested by the GSC's finance department, the PFOB's request to the GSC was for a flat dollar amount. The finance department has figured that dollar amount into the overall covenant share percentage that the General Synod will approve (see the report of the Office of Finance, pp. 46-58).

Commissioned Pastor Education in the RCA

A key component in the central outcome of disciple making that the restructuring team is focusing on is commissioned pastors. This growing and evolving stream of pastoral leadership is part of the charge of the PFOB; significant time was spent addressing the potentials for growth and the challenges in supporting the many commissioned pastors in the RCA. The PFOB's January meeting included input from PFOB member and commissioned pastor Carol Mutch (who also serves on the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team [CPAT]), Jim Lankheet (educator and trainer of

commissioned pastors), and Heather Dood (a commissioned pastor serving as pastor of Grace Reformed Church in Wyoming, Michigan).

Commissioned Pastor Education

In the RCA, commissioned pastors are supervised, educated, and commissioned at the classis level. Therefore, it is no surprise that there are several different strands of commissioned pastor education and development within the RCA. There are also numerous trainers and training resources (CPAT, Corum Deo, etc.), within the RCA. An increasing number of Hispanic pastors from the Global South or who have recently moved to the U.S. are also being trained as commissioned pastors in the RCA. In the Global South, seminary and an MDiv degree is not standard pastor training in the way that it historically has been in North America or in Europe. Diverse cultures raise up leaders in different ways.

In light of these factors, the PFOB is considering (and inviting comment and input on) the following items:

- How can we make information on different training resources and methods readily available to various commissioned pastor trainers and classes? A revitalized website or webpages for commissioned pastors could be one option.
- Is there a way to bring some form of uniformity or core competencies to the commissioned pastor training process, recognizing that the classis is the assembly that holds authority and responsibility over commissioned pastor training, not the General Synod or the PFOB?
- Is there a way to create a more seamless process for commissioned pastors who wish to continue their education by getting an MDiv? An example would be taking into account and providing credit for previous learning and experience. This could include the Approved Alternate Route (AAR) process.

Marginalization of Commissioned Pastors

During our discussion concerning commissioned pastors, one theme became clear—while commissioned pastors are in many cases given the same responsibilities as ministers of Word and sacrament (depending on the role in which they are serving), they are often treated as second-class pastors within the denomination. This became clear not only during our PFOB meeting, but it was also related to us as an ongoing concern from the Commissioned Pastor Advisory Team. Commissioned pastors will be a significant part of the RCA's future and growth; it seems wise to find a way to empower, support, and develop commissioned pastors within our denomination.

The PFOB is currently discussing the following items, and we invite comment and input from the denomination:

- According to the *BCO*, commissioned pastors hold the office of elder. This limits their participation in our various assemblies. At this juncture in the life of the RCA and the restructuring process, we need the voices of commissioned

pastors at all of our various tables and discussions. Is it time to revisit this designation as elder?

- Can we bring a set of core educational and training competencies to commissioned pastor formation in order to strengthen this discipleship-making process? If a uniform core can be established, could we consider making the commissioned pastor credential transferable between classes? This would facilitate church planting and overall growth in the RCA.

The PFOB has set up two sub-teams to consider the above questions. One sub-team will meet to discuss questions of office and the *BCO* definition of a commissioned pastor. The second sub-team will convene to discuss denominational coordination and certification.

Final Thoughts

Future agenda items for the PFOB include:

- Review of the eight standards for ministry in light of the vision and focus discerned by the restructuring team
- How to incentivize continuing education for pastors in order to facilitate a revitalized leadership cadre
- MFCA funding: we are currently in deficit spending and need to address this issue

The PFOB is grateful for the hard work of the MFCA interim executive director Dave Schutt and his staff. We are also deeply appreciative of the investment of time and effort of Dr. Micah McCreary (NBTS) and Dr. Felix Theonugraha (WTS). The leaders of all three of our agents are deeply invested in the work of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board. We also appreciate the hard work of the General Synod Council staff, including our general secretary, as they resource and support this work,

Trying to anticipate the future is difficult in times of change and flux, and trying to form leaders for a future that is not yet clear is daunting. However, change also brings an opportunity for new vision and direction to emerge. The 2018 General Synod formed the PFOB 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). We see the stirrings of the Spirit around discipleship and discipleship making and know that pastoral formation will be crucial. We hope to assist the General Synod, GSC, GSC staff, and the RCA as a whole as we move together into the mission God has planned for the RCA.

Respectfully submitted,
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