



PASTORAL

SEARCH

HANDBOOK

REVISED 2024

The *Pastoral Search Handbook* was created through the cooperation of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) regional synods and the RCA's Office of Ministry Services as a general resource for classis supervisors, consistories, and search teams.



RCA OFFICE OF MINISTRY SERVICES

4500 60th Street SE

Grand Rapids, MI 49512

ministryservices@rca.org

www.rca.org/ministryservices

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INTRODUCTION

Near the end of the monthly consistory meeting, Pastor Johnson, the minister of Faith Reformed Church, makes an announcement: “As you know, I have been considering a call to be pastor of the Reformed Church in Overtown. I have carefully considered this possibility, and I believe the Lord is leading me to accept that call. It was a difficult decision, but I believe it’s the right one at this time.”

Pastor Johnson goes on to describe his new opportunity in ministry, to reflect over the past seven years at Faith Reformed, and to advise the consistory that he is inviting the classis to send a person to moderate a meeting at which a request for dissolution of the pastoral relationship will be considered.

That consistory conversation signals **both** an end and a beginning. It signals the **end of a pastoral relationship**. Both the congregation and the pastor may experience a great range of feelings and reactions, including sorrow, joy, anger, frustration, loneliness, and shock. The time of termination can be a traumatic experience in the life of a congregation.

The announcement also signals a **beginning**. It signals the beginning of a period when a congregation will be without installed pastoral leadership. It signals the beginning of the process of looking for a new pastor to meet the needs of the church in the next chapter of its life. It signals a time when the church will have the opportunity to evaluate its ministry and the direction it is going.

Every pastor, church member, denominational staff person, and researcher agrees that this period when a church is without a pastor is a crucial time in the life of a congregation. Decisions are made that move the church to find the person to be chosen for the church’s ministry. It is very important to find the right person. Since each church has unique needs and since each pastor has special gifts for ministry, it is essential that the church and candidates be involved in a process of prayerful and intentional discernment.

One of the difficulties is that often neither churches nor classis supervisors have much experience in a pastoral search process. Normally, fewer than one-third of the people on a search team have ever looked for a pastor before. This presents a tremendous opportunity for both search teams and classis-appointed supervisors, both of whom do not function in that capacity very often, to learn a discernment process that will be helpful and effective in their search.

At the heart of this discernment process is a deep and abiding dependence on God’s call. Pastors and congregations are ultimately not involved in “selling” themselves in an ecclesiastical market, but rather in discovering what God intends for them.

The call to a particular congregation is much like an invitation to unite a pastor and congregation as companions in ministry. They commit to work together in faith and work together with grace. As one would expect, discerning God's call is often not an easy assignment.

The *Pastoral Search Handbook* identifies effective ways to search for a pastor and is a helpful resource for classis supervisors, consistories, and search teams.

The *Pastoral Search Handbook* is organized according to eight stages identified by the former Alban Institute's resource, *Journey in Search of a Pastor*: termination, early decisions, direction finding, self-study, search, decision making, installation, and pastoral start-up.

The *Pastoral Search Handbook* is intended for general use as a reference for search teams. Classis and regional synod requirements must be met throughout the search process. The classis supervisor has the responsibility of informing the consistory and the search team of those requirements during the process, though the involvement of the supervisor may vary from classis to classis.

The RCA's Board of Benefits Services has many resources related to the salary and benefit provisions for RCA pastors, as mandated by the *Book of Church Order*. Of particular importance is the annual insurance and retirement benefits guide, available at www.rca.org/airb. Visit www.rca.org/benefits/employers for more information, or contact retirement@rca.org.

STEPS IN THE PASTORAL SEARCH TIMELINE

The process of finding a new pastor takes an *average* of 12 to 18 months. Use this timeline as a general guide for next steps for your search team and congregation. **Remember, prayer should take place throughout the entirety of the search and call process!**

- ☐ Alert classis of pastor's departure
- ☐ Connect with classis supervisor
- ☐ Identify and contract interim pastor
- ☐ Conduct exit interview with previous pastor
- ☐ Establish search team and schedule meetings
- ☐ Pray with search team, consistory, and classis supervisor
- ☐ Complete congregational feedback
- ☐ Review pastor's position description; determine if you will hire a full-time minister, part-time minister, or co-pastors
- ☐ Update or create new church profile
- ☐ Compile additional materials for information packet
- ☐ Establish steps in application process
- ☐ Write position description, including contact information for next steps
- ☐ Seek approval from consistory and classis supervisor on church profile, information packet, and position description
- ☐ Post position description to job boards, including www.rca.org/employment
- ☐ Email church profile and information packet to the Office of Ministry Services at ministryservices@rca.org
- ☐ Seek potential candidates for this position using church networks (church members, classis leaders, denominational leaders, RCA online directory, and Office of Ministry Services)
- ☐ Begin preparations for new pastor's welcome and orientation

The following steps may last for months while you continue receiving and discussing minister profiles and interviewing potential candidates. The search team should be praying throughout this season for God's leading.

- ☐ Pray and review candidate profiles
- ☐ Reach out to "front burner" candidates to determine interest
- ☐ Inform candidates who are not on the short list that you are moving forward with other candidates
- ☐ Schedule phone or video interviews
- ☐ Interview candidates

- ☐ Call references for top candidates
- ☐ Review audio or video of recent messages preached by top candidates
- ☐ Schedule in-person interviews
- ☐ Observe top candidate leading worship
- ☐ Recommend finalist's name to consistory
- ☐ Negotiate compensation with recommended candidate
- ☐ Invite finalist to candidate weekend
- ☐ Gather congregation for advisory vote to extend a call
- ☐ Have consistory and classis supervisor draft and sign official written call
- ☐ Have classis sign call form and send to candidate
- ☐ Receive candidate's response within two to four weeks
- ☐ Make arrangements for candidate to move to area
- ☐ Plan installation service and celebrations for new pastor and search team

CLOSURE

Conclusion of a minister's relationship with a church

The Reformed Church in America has carefully outlined the steps necessary in terminating a pastoral relationship. The *Book of Church Order* (BCO) states:

When the termination of an installed minister's relationship to a church is in view, a minister of the classis having jurisdiction shall be invited by the church to be present at a meeting of the consistory for the purpose of superintending the application for such action. The supervising minister shall attest such application and shall deliver it to the classis with a written report. (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 8 [2023 edition, p. 56])

Some classes designate a specific person to superintend all applications for termination. Consistories should check with the classis stated clerk for any classis requirements. It is the church that extends the invitation to a minister of classis to be present at a consistory meeting; in most circumstances, the consistory will have notified the classis of the upcoming termination.

Normally, this is a smooth process. Consistories usually concur with their pastor's decision. The classis representative at this meeting makes certain there is agreement about all matters of salary, payment of benefits, vacation, and termination date. The supervising minister submits a written report to the classis. Termination must be approved by a two-thirds vote. Many classes have empowered their executive committees to act in this matter of termination of pastoral relationship because termination does not usually take place near the date of a meeting of classis.

When a classis approves termination of a pastoral relationship, it also sets the effective date of termination and approves all agreements relating to salary, benefits, and vacation.

Occasionally, the termination of a pastor's relationship with a church is not amicable. The BCO carefully outlines responsibilities of the superintending minister in the event the consistory and minister do not agree on the application for termination (BCO Chapter 1, Part II, Article 15, Section 8).

The classis should be committed to the task of helping a church conclude a pastoral relationship and be willing to invest energy and time in the process. The result will be a stronger church, a stronger classis, and a stronger denomination.

Appendix 2 offers a sample covenant of separation for the congregation and departing pastor.

Classis supervisor's role with the search team

The classis shall appoint a minister as supervisor of all proceedings of the consistory of a church without an installed minister. If the minister to be appointed as supervisor is a member of another classis, then the classis shall consult with the minister's classis of membership prior to making such appointment. The classis shall determine the appropriate responsibilities for the supervisor. (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 7, Section 3 [2023 edition, p. 36])

The classis has the sole authority to appoint the supervisor of an open congregation. While the classis can take into consideration requests by a congregation for a specific supervisor, the classis must appoint a minister who, from the classis's point of view, has the gifts and abilities to be the supervisor of a church. A church doesn't need someone they "like"; they need someone who has the gifts to help them through this crucial period.

The appointment of the supervisor should take place immediately upon the approval of the application for termination. It is important that the supervisor participate in consistory meetings immediately, and, if possible, before the departing pastor has left.

While the *BCO* specifies that a supervisor shall attend all meetings of a consistory, it does not specify other meetings of the church where the supervisor's participation is also essential.

Because the search process is so important in the life of the congregation, it is important for the supervisor to be present at search team meetings.

The classis supervisor is usually a pastor with full-time responsibilities with another congregation. The consistory of that church should be informed of the additional services their pastor is rendering and be asked to consent to this temporary arrangement. The supervisor will incur expenses in performing these extra services. Reimbursement should be made either by the classis or by the church receiving the benefit of this arrangement.

The classis supervisor should make arrangements to meet as soon as possible with the consistory and its departing pastor. Important decisions need to be made promptly. The sooner an initial meeting occurs, the more likely it becomes that the consistory, supervisor, and departing pastor will have time to discuss issues thoroughly and make informed decisions.

Exit interview

A few representatives of the pastoral search team (for more information on forming a search team, see page 12) and the consistory should arrange an exit interview with the departing pastor before he or she leaves. A departing pastor's insights include important information the search team needs to begin the search process. Part of the exit interview process could include asking the pastor how you can help him or her "finish well." Supporting the pastor as he or she

hands over projects, programs, and congregational relationships will be key in making a smooth transition. Information from the exit interview should be shared with the entire search team in written form. Search team members should keep in mind that while it is important information, it should not become the sole determinant of the church's future ministry.

The Office of Ministry Services has developed suggested questions for an exit interview. They are included in Appendix 1. Obviously, if the pastor has already left, an exit interview is not possible. Detachment must be respected.

Saying farewell

The consistory will want to find appropriate ways for the congregation as a whole to say farewell to its departing pastor. Many individuals will express their feelings to the pastor on their own. The congregation will want to say farewell in some formal way; a reception is certainly an appropriate way to permit the church to express its thanks and say farewell.

Dealing with grief

Both the congregation and search team members will need to deal with their feelings about their pastor's departure. Search team members will receive help from the supervisor, because dealing with grief is often overlooked, yet it is essential if a church is to move into the search process with a healthy mindset.

Classis supervisors and regional synod staff carry much of the responsibility for helping churches through the grief process. One method for dealing with grief is to give all church members an opportunity to gather in small groups to identify specific instances when the former pastor was helpful. People can be invited to tell their favorite stories about the former pastor.

People will experience a variety of feelings. The search team must find ways to permit its members to talk about those feelings in nonjudgmental ways. Some will be angry with the former pastor for leaving; some will be happy; some won't care; some will grieve. All feelings need to be honored and expressed. In dealing with the feelings and emotions people have about the pastor's departure, the important thing is to respect each person's feelings, whether members of the search team agree with that person or not.

EARLY DECISIONS

Formation of a search team

The consistory is responsible for providing pastoral leadership for a congregation. The *BCO* explains it this way:

The consistory shall provide a minister, or ministers, for the church. It has the authority to call persons to the ministry of the church if the charter of the church has not made other provisions. (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 3 [2023 edition, p. 14])

Normally, the consistory delegates the responsibility for the search process to a pastoral search team. This team should be representative of the congregation; people who represent various groups and points of view concerning the church's ministry should be included. Consideration should be given to people who are spiritually mature, widely respected and trusted by the congregation, and who work well with others.

How many people should be on the search team? A rule of thumb is large enough to be representative and small enough to be effective. Too few people on the search team means it will not be representative. Too many people means it will not be able to function effectively. A search team of nine to fifteen people is usually sufficient, depending on the size of the congregation. An odd number can be helpful to avoid a split vote. The search team should be representative of the congregation's gender and generational diversity, as well as considering racial and ethnic diversity, appropriate to the context. It is normally not helpful to have immediate family members (e.g., husband and wife, parent and child) appointed to the search team, since this tends to limit the representative nature of the search team.

The search team will need a chairperson. This choice is very important. This person can either be appointed by the consistory or selected by the search team. In any event, he or she must be someone with the gifts and skills to chair the team. Helpful skills include being highly organized, a clear communicator, and capable of facilitating a group. This person must be able to plan the agenda, run meetings, state consensus, encourage team members, and follow up quickly on group decisions. The chairperson also needs to be impartial and respected by other team members.

This search team will also need someone to serve as secretary to the group. Again, the team or consistory needs to identify the gifts and skills needed before it selects someone.

The classis supervisor and consistory should formally communicate with each appointee to the search team. Appendix 4 shows a sample letter.

Pastoral leadership in the interim

When a minister leaves, the consistory is responsible for meeting the pastoral needs of the congregation. Some consistories themselves take on responsibility for the pastoral needs of church members, such as calling, hospital, and nursing home visits. These churches usually employ supply pastors to conduct the weekly worship services.

Other churches contract with a minister to provide more extensive pastoral leadership during the search for a new pastor. These ministers are sometimes called interim or transitional pastors. They perform pastoral responsibilities as contracted with the consistory. In some instances, this means leading worship and making hospital visits. In other instances, the interim pastor assumes full responsibility for the pastoral duties of the church.

Before interviewing potential interim ministers, the consistory should outline responsibilities for the interim and agree to a remuneration range and hiring procedures. The contract should be for a specific period of time. Appendix 3 shows a sample contract. Search teams should use extra caution whenever the church's interim minister wishes to be considered as a candidate for the open pastoral position; an agreement that allows the interim pastor to apply for the open position should be included in the contract, if applicable. The search team should make sure to honor each step in the search process, and an extra measure of discernment will be needed.

Interim pastors are helpful for a number of reasons. Having the same pastor each Sunday gives the congregation a strong sense of continuity. No one has to wonder, "Who's going to be there this week?" In instances where a long, successful pastorate is concluding, the interim can provide space between the departing pastor and the new pastor. In instances where there is conflict, an interim pastor can help a congregation move through the conflict toward the future.

When seeking a qualified interim pastor, you can ask your classis for contacts.

DIRECTION FINDING

Understanding the search process

Very early in the process, both the pastoral search team and the consistory need to meet to review how the search for a new pastor—or pastors—will take place. The classis supervisor, classis, and regional synod staff can be most helpful in providing the necessary information.

This joint meeting should be scheduled as early as is feasibly possible. People will have many questions about the process, and good information needs to be shared in helpful and informative ways.

Who's responsible for what?

The consistory and search team need to be very clear about the process and the authority each group has. Together, the two groups should spend time answering these questions:

- Does the consistory have expectations about the length of the search process, or is the search team free to take as long as it needs?
- Will the consistory approve the church profile prepared by the search team?
- What will be the order of steps in the application process?
- How much authority is the consistory giving the search team?
- What salary range is the church able to provide? (Check check with your classis or regional synod for minimum salary guidelines and calculate required benefits.)
- Is the church able to pay a minister enough to hire a full-time minister, or is a part-time minister a better fit? If part-time, be clear about what the priorities are for this position.
- Does the search team have authority to negotiate salary, benefits, etc.? Note that some benefits are standard and required and are not subject to negotiation; this applies to both ministers under call and ministers under contract. Some salary negotiation should be expected, and the search committee should be equipped to be able to do that within a set range.
- How and when will the search team report to the consistory?
- Does the consistory expect the search team to present a slate of candidates or one candidate?
- What kind of budget does the search team have to cover team expenses and expenses in interviewing candidates?

These and other questions must be answered so that responsibilities are clear. Questions of

responsibility not answered at the beginning of the process often cause frustration and misunderstanding later among members of the search team and consistory. An orderly, careful start to the search will give all church members confidence and will bring integrity to the search process.

The search team needs a budget to cover the costs for candidates' travel and overnight accommodations and for the preparation of church information packets, etc. You may think housing the candidates (and their spouses) in a church member's home would be more hospitable and economical, but please be aware that doing so puts a strain on the minister candidate and their spouse during a very intense interview process. Providing hotel accommodations is a critical way to give them space to rest and process the experience. Think of the money as an investment in the future ministry of the church.

Decisions

Connecting with your classis and communicating with the classis along the way is critical to this decision-making stage. It is a classis decision to approve a call or contract, and the classis will ensure that a candidate is in good standing and eligible for pursuit.

Many decisions during the search process require a vote. It needs to be clear at the beginning how those decisions will be made and what kind of vote is required. Some areas where agreements need to be reached include:

- How many search team members need to be present at a meeting for a quorum?
- How many search team members need to vote favorably to approve the church profile?
- How many consistory members need to vote favorably on the church profile?
- Does the consistory need to approve the church profile before sending it to the Office of Ministry Services and/or to candidates?
- When examining a candidate's profile, how many search team members need to say yes in order for the search team to grant an interview?
- Who will be responsible for keeping candidates informed of whether they are still being considered, or if the church has moved forward with other candidates?
- After an interview, how many search team members need to say yes in order to hear the candidate preach at a neutral location?
- How many search team members need to say yes in order to recommend one candidate to the consistory?
- How many consistory members need to vote yes in order to invite a candidate to preach at the church?
- How and when will the will of the congregation be determined?
- How will the consistory make a final decision to prepare the call?

Each question should be discussed in detail so that agreement can be reached. Agreements vary from one congregation to another. Appendix 5 shares the decisions one church's search team and consistory made about some of the above issues.

Sharing information

While the specifics of the search team's minutes should be kept confidential, everyone in the congregation will be interested in and concerned about the progress of the search for a new minister. The pastoral search team must find effective ways of communicating this information to the congregation. If information is not shared or if the process takes longer than people expect, they will wonder what's wrong.

During this process, too, it is imperative that the classis is informed of the team's decisions and intentions.

Here are some ways the search team can keep everyone informed while keeping information such as candidate names confidential:

- Share your steps for the pastoral search process with the congregation through bulletin announcements, newsletters, or simple email updates.
- Report search team activities at consistory meetings.
- Make announcements about search team progress during worship and request prayer over the search process.
- Place information, progress reports, and announcements in the church newsletter.
- Post current information about the search on bulletin boards and the church website.
- Hold informal meetings, perhaps during fellowship hour on Sunday mornings, to update church members and respond to questions.

Everyone in the church will be interested in what's happening. Keep them informed. The new pastor will be their pastor, too!

Search team meetings

Regular search team meetings should be scheduled for a period of one year. Most pastoral search processes take at least a year, though some are accomplished sooner, and others take much longer. If meeting dates are set, time for this important process is protected in the busy schedules of the search team members and the supervisor.

Special meetings will occur throughout the search process. Potential candidates may not be able to be present at the regularly scheduled search team meetings. Search team members and the supervisor will need to keep their schedules somewhat flexible in order to accommodate interviews and to hear candidates preach at neutral locations.

CONGREGATIONAL FEEDBACK

Taking stock of the church

The congregational feedback of the pastoral search process takes time, but it is one of the most important steps in searching for a new pastor. The search team will need to complete this survey to discover the full nature of the church's current ministry and to begin planning for future ministry.

The search team must keep the congregation informed about progress; assessing feedback takes time, and members of the church who are not part of the search team may become impatient. It is helpful to remind the congregation that during this time of congregational feedback, no pastor is being considered as a candidate for the church.

Taking the time for the survey and feedback provides a good opportunity for a congregation to take a look at itself, to learn what it has become, what its gifts are, who its people are and what their gifts are, what the community is like and what changes are expected, and, most importantly, what the church will be doing next in ministry. Appendix 7 is a congregational feedback survey.

When the survey is completed, the church and search team will be able to draw some conclusions about the type of pastoral leadership the church needs. Ministers have different skills. A good congregational feedback survey will help a search team understand the specific gifts and talents it needs in the church's next pastor(s).

There are several approaches to this feedback. Classis supervisors, synod executives, classis committees, and denominational staff are prepared to assist. The method of feedback and survey should be designed by the search team and the supervisor. The time of congregational feedback provides an opportunity to involve many people in the process—not just the search team. Various groups (consistory, staff, lay leaders, etc.) should be interviewed for their input. Congregational dinners provide an excellent setting for the search team to get input from church members. The search team could conduct a survey of the entire congregation with a carefully prepared questionnaire.

Following the survey, the search team should write a summary that describes what the survey has revealed and includes some goal statements for the congregation. The team should also share this document with potential candidates for the church. They will want to know the results of the congregational feedback and the goals the church has for the future.

Church profile

When the survey and summary are completed, the search team should incorporate the findings into its church profile. The Office of Ministry Services provides a template church profile form that can be accessed at www.rca.org/ministryservices. Search teams may choose to design their own church profile, including pictures and other unique elements.

When creating the church profile, many churches won't post salary information, or they'll be vague ("commensurate with experience"). However, it is really important to either name a dollar amount range, or to at least say something like "compensation will be paid at the classis minimum, or 2 percent above the classis minimum", or something to that effect. Far too often, a candidate and the church will get pretty far down the road with each other, only to realize that they are in completely different ballparks when it comes to salary, and that can be hurtful or frustrating. This is the place to set some realistic information. Appendix 6 is the U.S. salary and benefits guide from the RCA's Board of Benefits Services.

After the consistory approves the profile, the search team should send a copy to the regional synod and to the Office of Ministry Services (ministryservices@rca.org). Though the Office of Ministry Services does not match candidates with vacant churches, it will post your position on the RCA's employment opportunity webpage. You should also capitalize on the networks around your church to generate interest, including reaching out to your classis, former ministers, and others who know your church well. Request that they send you two or three names of pastors who might make excellent candidates.

SEARCH

Information packet

The search team can help potential candidates get a better sense of both the church and the community by assembling an information packet. Share this with candidates your team is interested in interviewing. You may include things like:

- Completed church profile
- Summary statement from the congregational feedback survey
- Church's website
- History of the church
- Church bulletin, newsletter, or email updates
- Videos that highlight aspects of congregational life and ministry
- Set of church bylaws
- Information about local school systems
- Community information (shopping, entertainment, etc.)
- Photos of the church, church activities, and community

Posting on job boards and social media

Once the church's profile and information packet are complete and the search team has sent the profile to the Office of Ministry Services, the team is ready to advertise the position on job boards and the church's social media profiles. A good place to start is the RCA's employment opportunities webpage at www.rca.org/employment. There, search teams can post a short description of the open position and what they are looking for in a new minister. The post should include directions for how interested candidates can acquire the church profile or information packet, whether that be from the Office of Ministry Services or from the search team, as well as instructions for how to apply or get more information. The Office of Ministry Services can offer suggestions to search teams for distributing the job posting to RCA seminaries and denominational partners. Social media accounts are one way that potential candidates can learn about your open position, so it is a good idea to post about your job opening on your church's social media profiles. Remember to always include links to your church's website and social media profiles in the church profile and job posts, as many candidates will be interested in learning more about your church from those sources.

Letter of introduction

The search team may also prepare a letter of introduction to send to candidates you wish to interview. The letter should introduce the congregation to the candidate, indicate that the team would like to consider that applicant, among others, as a potential candidate for the ministry, and suggest a date by which the candidate should respond. Indicate that if a response is not received by the date suggested, the chairperson will contact the candidate by telephone. Appendix 8 shows a sample letter for prospective candidates.

Reviewing candidate profiles

Before the candidates' profiles arrive, the search team will need to determine how it will review them and respond to the applicants. Consider sending a short message to all applicants letting them know you've received their profile as well as providing a time by which they can expect an update from the search team. It is most helpful if each search team member has a copy of each candidate's profile. Search team members should ask themselves, "Do the skills and interests of this candidate seem to match the profile we prepared for our congregation?" Team members should openly discuss each profile the team receives. At the end of the discussion, a decision must be made: Do we send a letter of introduction to this pastor or not?

Since the questions on the church profile and the candidate's profile are not identical, the team should exercise care as it reaches conclusions. At this early stage in the search process, it is not helpful to compare candidates with each other. A search team is looking for people who generally meet the needs of the church as identified in the church profile, not the best pastor among a group of pastors. It can be helpful to sort profiles into three categories: "front-burner" candidates that the search team will definitely pursue; "back-burner" candidates, which the team may pursue later; and candidates that are "off the burner" and will not be considered further.

Profiles are confidential and must not be distributed beyond the search team. If copies have been made, they should be collected and shredded at the end of the search process.

It's important to keep new profiles coming in from qualified candidates. Many search teams fail to do this when they become invested in a candidate or two. Often, those candidates are not ultimately the right match for the church, and the search team must start over. If a team continues to receive new profiles, members can continue the search process uninterrupted, saving valuable time.

However, once a search team has narrowed down the options to two or three candidates, it is okay to notify new applicants that you will communicate with them after you have completed the current cycle of interviews. It is difficult to coordinate a site visit with one candidate while engaging in a first interview with another.

When the search team identifies candidates it wishes to consider, it should send them a letter

of introduction and the information packet. Give a specific date for response so that the process may proceed in an orderly way. The team should explore references given by a candidate. A guide to checking references by phone is in Appendix 9.

The search team should send a note of thanks to applicants they have chosen not to interview, informing them of the decision. This allows candidates to move forward with their search for a new church home without wondering if they are still being considered.

Interviewing candidates

When a candidate responds favorably to the church's letter of introduction, the search team arranges an interview. This interview can take place over video call or in person. This interview will involve only members of the search team and the candidate. **The candidate should not preach at a worship service**, because it will not be helpful at such an early stage. This is explained further in the next section, "A few notes on evaluating candidates."

The interview needs to be carefully arranged. If it will take place over video call, team members should arrive early to test whether the connection is working. Teams should avoid scheduling interviews back to back in case one interview goes long. If interviews must be scheduled on the same day, leave 60 to 90 minutes between interviews for the search team to reflect and process. If the candidate will interview in person, consider whether you will provide a tour of the church facilities or if you will leave that for a formal candidate visit.

The entire search team should be present for the interview. Throughout the interview, search team members must keep in mind that they are comparing the candidate with the requirements for ministerial leadership identified in the church profile. Suggestions for conducting an interview with a prospective minister are in Appendix 10. The search team may want to prepare by practicing the interview process with the classis supervisor.

At the end of the interview, the candidate and the search team should agree on a date by which each party will be informed of a decision. A post-interview evaluation is included as Appendix 11. The team will want to know if the candidate is interested in pursuing the possibility of becoming the pastor of the church. The candidate will want to know if the church is interested in further conversations.

Decisions should not be reached at the end of the interview; a phone call from the search team chairperson to the candidate within 24 hours of the interview is better. The candidate needs time to reflect on the interview, and the search team needs time to discuss whether it wants to proceed.

If the search team does not wish to consider a particular candidate further, it will be helpful to him or her if the chairperson lets the candidate know that the team has decided to move forward

with other candidates. The chairperson can also provide feedback on what went well in the interview, making the candidate aware of evident personal strengths as the candidate moves forward in the job search.

A few notes on evaluating candidates

In the past, one of the first steps in a pastoral search was to observe a candidate leading worship. Experience has shown that this is not the most helpful first step. There are several reasons. First, when several pastors preach at the church, the members of the congregation begin to choose sides for “their candidate.” Not everyone likes the same candidate, and this leads to conflict.

Second, the search team needs to find the pastor who has the gifts and skills to lead the church in the years ahead. The interview permits the team to explore all areas of a candidate’s gifts, and the candidate’s gifts can be compared with the needs highlighted by the congregational feedback survey and church profile. If the search team hears a candidate preach first, the team’s decision to continue consideration will be based on preaching and worship ability alone, when the church profile may indicate that administration, education, counseling, and other areas are also very important in the life of the church. It is unfortunate when a person is disqualified for being less gifted in leading worship, even though he or she may have strong skill sets in areas that align with the church’s needs.

Third, the search team must have adequate time to reflect on a candidate’s ability. Hearing someone lead worship tends to push the process along too quickly.

Hearing a candidate preach

That being said, judging a candidate only on an interview can be as inappropriate as judging only on worship leadership. Before the team makes a decision at this stage, it may be helpful for the search team to observe the candidate leading worship, because the ability to lead worship and proclaim the Word is important. If both the search team and the candidate want to continue talking, it is then appropriate to arrange to hear the candidate preach and lead worship. This can be accomplished in several ways.

The search team can arrange to bring the candidate to lead worship at a neutral location. When a candidate lives a long way from the church, this is probably the most efficient way to accomplish this portion of the search. The supervisor can arrange for another church in the area, preferably an RCA congregation, to be used as a neutral location. Search team members alone should hear the candidate at the neutral location. It’s still too early for other church members to hear the candidate lead worship. If additional interview time is desired, arrangements can be made for this to take place after worship.

The search team can also visit the candidate's current church. This provides the added benefit of seeing how a candidate interacts with his or her current church members. Such a visit should be arranged with the candidate. When visiting, the search team should not attempt to interview the pastor at the church. If the search team wishes to have interview time with the pastor, this should be arranged prior to the visit and at a location chosen by the pastor.

If the potential candidate lives a great distance from the search team's church, a recording or video of a worship service led by the person under consideration may be helpful. This is only an intermediate step and can be used to confirm a decision to hear the candidate at a neutral location.

Following the worship service, the search team should take time to evaluate the candidate's skills (see Appendix 12).

Agreement again needs to be reached between the search team and the candidate so that each will know when the other will be advised of continuing interest and when decisions will be reached.

Any candidate who is no longer being considered should be notified immediately.

Considering seminary students

If a church wishes to consider seminarians for its ministerial position, contact:

- New Brunswick Theological Seminary
 - 35 Seminary Place, New Brunswick, NJ 08901
 - 732-247-5241
 - www.nbts.edu/alumni/career-services
- Western Theological Seminary
 - 101 East 13th Street, Holland, MI 49423
 - 616-392-8555
 - www.westernsem.edu/about/employment
- Ministerial Formation Certification Agency
 - 8303 Alondra Blvd. Suite C, Paramount, CA 90723
 - 562-408-2520
 - mfca@rca.org

When calling or writing seminaries or theological agencies, churches should ask that their messages be forwarded to the person responsible for placement.

Procedures for calling a seminarian

The following steps have been adopted as approved procedure for negotiating a provisional call with a seminary student. The consistory follows the same procedure in negotiating with a seminary student as with any prospective minister, with the following exceptions:

1. No provisional call shall be extended before February 1 of the senior year; no agreement, either verbal or written, shall be considered binding on either the student or the church prior to the issuance of a provisional call.
2. A provisional call, when authorized by the consistory and approved by the ministerial relations committee, shall be presented in writing to the student. In addition to the usual requirements, it shall state that when the student has completed seminary work and satisfactorily passed the licensure examination, the consistory will present to classis for approval an official call. The letter may also request the student to reply in writing giving a response to the provisional call.
3. Such a provisional call, when duly given and accepted, shall be considered binding upon consistory and student. However, it shall be borne in mind by other parties that ultimate fulfillment of the provisional call will depend upon the classis, whose prerogative it is to conduct the examinations for licensure and ordination, and also upon the classis approving the call.
4. All negotiations between the consistory and the student shall be with the knowledge of the ministerial relations committee of the classis and the classis supervisor.
5. A student may preach in a vacant pulpit on assignment by the seminary as a supply preacher.
6. The consistory may request a second visit of a student whom they wish to consider as a prospective minister.
7. The pulpit committee of a church is at liberty to confer with the seminary concerning students under consideration for a provisional call.
8. The consistory shall not seek an agreement from the student to assume partial responsibility for service in the church prior to the approval of the official call by the classis. However, a limited number of preaching engagements may be arranged for the student through the seminary professor in charge of preaching assignments.

Other considerations

The relationship between a first call pastor and a congregation can be very fruitful. First call pastors bring a combination of practical experience from various internships and creativity about ministry. As a congregation that has extended a call to a seminarian, there are some steps that you can take to ensure this new pastor has a chance to thrive. Give a lot of grace, and walk with the pastor as he or she learns to run meetings, conduct funerals, and manage other staff. Finishing school can mean that the new pastor is facing student debt for the first time, along with other complications unique to the pastorate, such as the clergy tax. Connect the pastor with a financial advisor to give needed support in this area. The denominational office may have first call resources such as support groups, mentors, retirement and financial support, and more.

DECISION MAKING

Once the search team has interviewed candidates and heard them preach, it moves into the decision-making step of the search process. The search team will decide on one candidate to recommend to the consistory. Or, if a co-pastor model is deemed best, the search team will present the candidates and the necessary details for shared pastorship (e.g., budget, time, responsibilities of each pastor).

It's hard to describe exactly how the decision process takes place. The search team will need to give careful consideration to all candidates who seem to meet the church's requirements. The purpose of careful consideration is to determine which candidate best meets the requirements of the church. At the same time, the process does not need to be unnecessarily drawn out. Any search team member can assist in the process by simply asking, "Can we make a decision, or do we need more information?"

If the search team has more than one candidate it believes can provide effective ministerial leadership, it must compare candidates with each other to determine which one to recommend.

Throughout the decision-making phase, the search team should pray for wisdom and discernment.

Recommending a candidate to the consistory

When the search team has reached a decision, it should recommend that candidate—or candidates, when hiring part-time or co-pastors—to the consistory.

The search team's presentation to the consistory should explain the choice of the search team and build the case for the candidate. The search team should describe how the recommended candidate meets the needs of the church.

The consistory is ultimately responsible for the compensation offered to the pastor(s). At this point of recommendation, it is appropriate for a subcommittee with representatives of the consistory and the search team to contact the candidate to communicate the proposed compensation. This gives the consistory and the candidate(s) time to have a meaningful interaction about the proposal and clarify any differences in expectations.

If, after a time of prayer, the consistory concurs with the choice of the search team, the consistory invites the candidate to the church to lead worship. The consistory may want to arrange for a brief interview with the candidate following the search team's presentation. This is primarily for the consistory to become more familiar with the candidate before their arrival for a formal visit. The candidate is then presented to the congregation as its choice for the church's pastorate. If the consistory does not affirm the search team's choice, the search team chair should inform the candidate of the decision.

At this point, if the consistory rejects the search team's proposed candidate, it would be wise to invite the classis supervisor to facilitate a discussion between the search team and the consistory. Arriving at a final candidate and recommending that individual to the consistory is a huge step for a search team. Therefore, there may be feelings of frustration or confusion if the proposed candidate is rejected by the consistory. The classis supervisor should provide both the search team and the consistory the opportunity to reflect on the search process so far, allowing both parties to identify what needs or values were missed originally, resulting in the rejection of the proposed candidate. By the end of that conversation, the search team and the consistory should have a clear vision for how to move forward into the next phase of the search together. That phase could mean reconstituting the search team, redrafting the profile, or trying different avenues of advertising the position to potential candidates.

Candidate's visit

Careful preparation must be made for the Sunday on which the candidate will lead worship. The search team and consistory will need to pay careful attention to travel, housing, and scheduling for the entire time of the candidate's visit. If the candidate is married or has children, the spouse and children are often invited for this visit.

Search team members will need to provide information to include in the church bulletin. In addition, the candidate will need information concerning how the church's liturgy is conducted.

The search team and consistory should arrange for a reception following the worship service so that all members of the church have an opportunity to meet the candidate and vice versa. Since the candidate is being presented as the recommended choice of the search team and the consistory, it is appropriate to advocate for the candidate with the congregation. One way of doing this is to schedule a number of smaller receptions throughout the afternoon of the candidate's visit.

At each of these gatherings, following a brief time of getting acquainted, the search team chairperson or consistory vice president should give the candidate an opportunity to address the group. The candidate's remarks could be introduced this way: "The search team is especially pleased with Pastor Garcia's perception of how the church can minister with senior adults. We thought we would ask Pastor Garcia to say a few words so you too can understand his point of view."

In this way, more people will have an opportunity to get to know the candidate and understand why the search team is recommending this person. During this visit, the consistory may also interview the candidate, working with the search team to ensure questions are not duplicated from previous interviews.

The search team may also want to arrange a tour of the area, including a walk-through of the parsonage (if applicable) and neighborhood or area around the church.

Seeking the will of the congregation

Though the decision of whom to call ultimately rests with the consistory, the *BCO* explains that “the consistory shall endeavor to learn the mind of the congregation with respect to any person who may be called to the ministry of the church. The judgment of the congregation in such matters shall be considered to be of significant weight, but not binding” (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 3 [2023 edition, p. 14]).

The mind of the congregation is normally sought at a congregational meeting either on the evening of the candidate’s visit or shortly thereafter (no later than the following Sunday). It should not be done while the candidate is touring the parsonage. Already early in the direction-finding process, the consistory will have determined how to seek the mind of the congregation. Normally a vote is taken. A simple majority is not a mandate; it can indicate too much division. At least a two-thirds yes vote of those at a congregational meeting should be required. Some churches may require a higher favorable percentage.

The congregation’s vote is advisory to the consistory. Even after a favorable response from the congregation, the consistory may determine not to issue a call.

If the consistory decides to extend a call to the candidate, the search team chair and the vice president of consistory should have a telephone or video conference call with the candidate after the meeting to communicate the results.

Negotiation

Final negotiations of the call process are the responsibility of the consistory. While details such as benefits, salary, and work responsibilities will have been discussed prior to these final negotiations, it is the responsibility of the consistory to prepare the details of the call. These details should be addressed during the candidate’s visit or sooner. Often a subcommittee consisting of consistory members handles this conversation.

The call

The call is prepared by the consistory with assistance from the classis supervisor. Call forms are available through classis clerks and can be found in appendices of the *BCO*. The call should include some details of position responsibilities when these are not included in the standard form of the call. The call should also identify salary and benefits for the minister. It is the responsibility of the classis supervisor to inform the consistory of classis salary guidelines. The consistory will want to give careful consideration to all matters of employee remuneration and benefits. The call must be signed by the members of the consistory.

The call is presented to the classis by the classis supervisor. Then the *BCO* explains the next steps:

If the call is approved by classis and accepted by the person called, the latter's name shall be published in the church on three successive Sundays so that opportunity may be afforded for raising lawful objections. (For organizing churches, the classis may waive the three successive Sundays requirement.) If no such objections are raised, the classis or its committee shall install the minister according to the office for installation in the Liturgy. (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 3 [2023 edition, p. 14])

No arrangements to move a minister or seminary student shall be made by either party, the church, or the candidate until the call has been approved by the classis and received by the minister or student.

Starting date

The final negotiations should clarify when the minister will be available to start work. Adequate time should be permitted to complete previous obligations and to relocate.

If the church owns a parsonage, it is important to reach an agreement regarding housing improvements with the minister. If the minister has a family, the church should involve them in this process. One of the first ways a congregation can show support and love to a new minister is by making necessary repairs and updates to the parsonage.

INSTALLATION

The installation service is the time for making every effort to impress. It is the beginning of a new chapter in the life of a congregation and a pastor. It's a time for celebration! Every effort should be made to create a meaningful and celebrative installation service, including getting your church members to attend (even though they may not be used to attending a worship service outside of Sunday morning, or attending two worship services in the same day). Their presence and support are important for a pastoral installation.

The classis

The church and classis should negotiate a date and time for the installation service that allows maximum attendance of church members and classis delegates. Because the classis establishes the pastoral relationship, it conducts the service.

Some classes have developed guidelines for planning the worship service. It is not unusual for a committee composed of the new minister, classis representatives, and church members to meet in advance to plan the service.

Reception

The installation celebration includes a reception. Members of the church and classis are invited to participate in this informal time of welcome. The reception provides an informal and appropriate conclusion to installation.

Classis supervisor dismissal

When the pastor is installed, the classis supervisor is relieved of responsibilities. This has been an important relationship in the life of the congregation. The supervisor has been with the consistory, the search team, and the congregation through the entire search process. The church should find an appropriate way to express its appreciation to the supervisor for help given during the search process.

PASTORAL START-UP

The church has a new minister. The installation service is complete. The supervisor is gone. It seems like the process is completed. But, in reality, the pastor and the congregation are just beginning a new phase of the process: the pastoral start-up. Both church and pastor often overlook the importance of the pastoral start-up phase.

Adjusting to a new pastor

When the installation is over, the real work begins. The pastor starts to minister with the congregation. The congregation waits to see what's going to happen with this pastor.

Before long, a few irritants may arise. The pastor isn't doing certain things the way people expected; the people of the congregation aren't doing some of the tasks the pastor thought they were going to do.

Some adjustment of expectations is bound to take place in any relationship. But when irritants arise between a pastor and a church, it's important to handle them as soon as possible. Ideally, the classis will appoint a mentor to walk with the new pastor and church for at least the first year. Work responsibilities for all parties should be carefully listed, and evaluation should be built in.

Helping the family transition

Not every pastor has a spouse or a family living with them, but for those that do, moving can be a difficult experience for both the pastor and the pastor's family. A congregation has been left behind, friends are now a long distance away, and schools and shopping centers are unfamiliar. While dealing with the loss and change, new friendships are budding, and new church relationships are forming.

The church's members need to be particularly alert to the feelings of the pastor's family during this start-up time. The pastor's spouse can be especially susceptible to loneliness. Understanding, care, and love from members of the congregation help make this transition easier.

One practice to encourage is for the congregation to express a gesture of hospitality to the new pastor and family. This could be inviting them over for a meal or a snack. It could mean meeting in a public place or attending a civic event together. The goal of these meetings are to begin to develop relational connections, not to gain leverage for a favorite church initiative.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The pastoral search process is over. You have a new pastor. As your congregation transitions into the next season, trust that God has provided the right person for this time in your church's life and ministry. Leave room for the Holy Spirit to lead as you move in a new direction under different leadership. Allow your pastor to share new ideas, and support him or her as you explore together what is best for the congregation. Above all, continue to pray for your pastor and your congregation.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: SUGGESTED EXIT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following questions are among those that may be explored in a termination interview with a pastor.

1. As our pastor, what do you see as the most significant strengths of our congregation?
What are our weaknesses?
2. In what ways do you believe the church has been particularly effective in mission during the past two years?
3. What do you think would be the best mission strategy for the congregation in the five-year period ahead?
4. What were the three major priorities in time and effort during the past two years of your ministry?
5. To what degree do you believe our congregation supported you in your choice of these priorities?
6. To what degree do you believe the consistory shared your understanding of your task?
How did they differ?
7. In what ways did the consistory review your performance? Was there any systematic review? What was helpful? What wasn't?
8. What was the length of a normal work week? In what areas did you spend time? How much?
9. How adequate was the salary you received? Did increases keep pace with cost of living?
How did your salary reflect the value placed on your efforts?
10. Did the auto allowance actually meet your costs?
11. If you were to stay for three more years, what changes would you want to see take place?
12. Do you have any recommendations regarding the parsonage or housing arrangements?
13. What conditions, if any, do you feel blocked your sense of personal and professional fulfillment during your ministry here?

APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE COVENANT OF SEPARATION

This covenant of separation will guide the future relationship between (The Reverend Name) and (Church Name). It is designed to enable a healthy process of separation following the dissolution of the pastoral relationship on (Date). It is important that members and friends of (Church Name) understand and accept the terms of this covenant so that relationships with new ministerial staff may develop positively. This covenant is mutually affirmed by the (The Reverend Name) and the consistory of (Church Name) Church.

As of (Date), the (The Reverend Name) has relinquished all pastoral and professional duties as minister of this congregation and will no longer function as part of the staff of (Church Name). The (The Reverend Name) will accept no new pastoral obligations without the prior permission of the elders. [If there are future obligations that will be fulfilled, such as weddings or funeral commitments, these are noted in the next sentence, otherwise the sentence is omitted.] The consistory permits the (The Reverend Name) to complete the following future obligations in this congregation: (Itemize list with names and/or dates). The congregation of (Church Name) recognizes and accepts the completion of (The Reverend Name)'s ministry here. As this congregation desires to live into its future, it releases (The Reverend Name) to move to a new form of ministry. To assist in this transition, the members of (Church Name) will refrain from requesting forms of pastoral services, including baptisms, weddings, funerals, and worship leadership from (The Reverend Name), lest the development of new relationships by either minister or people be hindered. Exceptions to this covenant may only be granted by the Board of Elders of the church.

(The Reverend Name) recognizes and accepts the completion of (his/her) ministry with this congregation. As (she/he) desires to support the future ministerial and congregational leadership of (Church Name), (The Reverend Name) will not provide any further pastoral service unless the elders shall so request; nor engage in conversations which offer opinions, advice, or criticism about the church's life and work or the performance of interim and subsequently installed minister/s.

This covenant is offered to the people of (Church Name) and (The Reverend Name) to strengthen their future mission and ministries. It grows out of deep gratitude for the special relationship that develops between minister and congregation.

Minister (Signature & Date)

Vice-President of Consistory (Signature & Date)

Classis

APPENDIX 3: SAMPLE CONTRACT FOR SPECIALIZED INTERIM MINISTRY

The details of this contract may vary; please consult with your classis or regional synod.

A covenant for specialized interim ministry between

[Name of congregation]

The Regional Synod of [region name], Reformed Church in America

and

[Interim pastor's name]

We believe that congregations can be creative and vital during the period between permanent pastors.

We covenant to work together to assist persons and the corporate membership to discover and fulfill tasks of mission and ministry in their lives, their community, and the world.

We believe that congregations have specific and varied needs during the period between permanent pastors.

We covenant to work together to discover those needs, to enable individuals to recognize and resolve their feelings, to learn how to cope with differences and conflicts, and to satisfactorily resolve any unfinished agenda that may block effective corporate and mutual ministries and mission.

We believe that congregations and individuals are dependent upon God's grace for reconciliation and renewal of spirit.

We covenant together to be intentionally open to the Holy Spirit as our congregation seeks renewal and as we together search for direction and clarity of through an intentional interim ministry.

Covenant principles of mutuality

The specialized interim pastor

- Will not be considered a candidate for the position to be filled.
- Will normally serve as interim pastor until the congregation has a permanent pastor.
- Will provide normal pastoral and administrative leadership during the interim period.
- Will provide special leadership for helping the congregation to deal with grief and conflict matters and to set goals.

The consistory

- Will give direction during the interim period and support for the interim pastor.
- Will be expected to work together to resolve unfinished agendas and to establish goals for ministries and mission.
- Will not pursue the search process until it has determined, in consultation with the interim pastor and the supervisor, if the congregation is ready by virtue of having completed essential tasks.

The classis or regional synod

- Will provide a supervisor to work with the consistory and the specialized interim pastor during the interim period.
- Will provide a variety of consultative services to be used as requested by the consistory or the interim pastor.
- Will provide appropriate resources for use by the congregation and the interim pastor.
- Will provide continuing consultative help to the congregation when the search process is begun.

Period of service

- Will be from _____, 20____, through _____, 20____.
- Will include vacation time of _____.
- Will be extendable upon mutual agreement.

Remuneration

- Will be \$_____ annually.
- Annual housing allowance of \$_____.
- Car allowance of \$_____.
- Telephone expenses, except for personal calls.
- Entire contribution required of the church for the pastor to RCA retirement plan, RCA major medical, dental, long-term disability, and group life insurance premiums.

Covenant partners

Vice president of consistory

Specialized interim minister

Clerk of consistory

Supervisor

Date of covenant

APPENDIX 4: SAMPLE LETTER TO SEARCH TEAM MEMBER

Second Reformed Church
987 Center Avenue
Rochester, NY 14605

Mr. Howard Davis
123 Main Street
Rochester, NY 14605

October 1, 2023

Dear Howard,

We are pleased that you have accepted the responsibility of serving on the pastoral search team of Second Reformed Church. As a member of the team, you will have a unique opportunity to identify goals for our congregation and to help select a pastor to lead us in the next season of life and ministry.

The first meeting of the pastoral search team will be held at 7:30 p.m. on October 13 in the fellowship hall. Our task for the evening will be to become familiar with the process of seeking a new pastor. Our classis supervisor, Jana Anderson, will present a detailed overview of this process.

This will be a joint meeting with the consistory. A complete list of committee members is enclosed for your information.

Warm regards,

John Morris
Vice president of consistory

Donna Li
Search team chairperson

APPENDIX 5: ONE SEARCH TEAM AND CONSISTORY'S PASTORAL SEARCH GUIDELINES

Guidelines for a search team of 13 members:

1. Search team quorum: nine members
2. Approval of church profile
 - a. Search team: nine members
 - b. Consistory: majority of those present
3. Approval for search team to consider candidate for interview: seven members
4. After interview, approval for decision to hear candidate preach at other location: eight members
5. Approval for search team to recommend one candidate to consistory: nine members
6. Approval for consistory's decision to concur with search team: majority of those present
7. To determine the will of the congregation requires the approval of two-thirds of those active members attending a meeting to be held the night of the candidate's visit or as soon as possible after that night.
8. If the will of the congregation is favorable, the consistory will proceed to prepare a call for classis approval.



AT A GLANCE

Your Benefits

The congregation of an RCA minister is responsible for funding the following benefits. If the administrator or treasurer is unsure about how to enroll the minister in benefits, please contact the Board of Benefits Services at retirement@rca.org.



Housing Allowance

Whether you own your home or live in a parsonage, you'll be able to designate a portion of your salary as housing allowance, which will be exempt from Federal Income Tax.



Medical Insurance

You will be provided medical insurance through the Reformed Benefits Association (RBA) or another insurance provider who meets or exceeds the minimum coverage provided in the RBA plans.



Life Insurance

You are enrolled in the group life insurance plan. This is a \$175,000 term life insurance policy. Or, you are enrolled in the group life insurance plan with the Reformed Benefits Association (RBA).



Long-Term Disability Insurance

You are provided a benefit of two-thirds of your monthly earnings to a maximum of \$5,000 if you become disabled.



Retirement Plan

Your employer will contribute 11 percent of your salary or \$8,236 (whichever is greater) into your 403(b) retirement plan annually.



Salary and Benefits Guide

for Ministers of Word and Sacrament
in the United States

This guide provides information to RCA ministers in the United States about housing, benefits, and retirement savings.

Updated December 2023

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Housing allowances and parsonages

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) explains housing allowances and parsonages for ministers serving in the United States:

A minister's housing allowance (sometimes called a parsonage allowance or a rental allowance) is excludable from gross income for income tax purposes but not for self-employment (SECA) tax purposes. If you receive as part of your salary (for services as a minister) an amount officially designated (in advance of payment) as a housing allowance, you can exclude from gross income the **lesser** of the following amounts:

- the amount officially designated (in advance of payment) as a housing allowance;

- the amount actually used to provide or rent a home; or
- the fair market rental value of the home (including furnishings, utilities, garage, etc.).

The payments officially designated as a housing allowance must be used in the year received. Include any amount of the allowance that you can't exclude as wages on line 7 of Form 1040 in your U.S. Individual Income Tax Return.

If your congregation provides a parsonage or other housing for your services as a minister, you do not need to include the fair rental value of the property as income for the purposes of reporting for Federal Income Tax, but you must include the fair market rental value of the housing in net earnings for self-employment tax purposes. For planning purposes, this means that in 2023 you'll pay 15.3 percent of the fair rental value of your parsonage in SECA taxes.

For more information on a minister's housing allowance, refer to Publication 517, *Social Security and Other Information for Members of the Clergy and Religious Workers*, or this article on the RCA website: <https://www.rca.org/benefits/financial-health/housing-allowance-made-easy-sort-of>.

For information on earnings for clergy and reporting of self-employment tax, refer to Tax Topic 417, *Earnings for Clergy* ([irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov)).

Participating in Social Security

Although certain people are eligible to opt out of Social Security, the RCA's 1996 General Synod directed the General Secretary to inform newly ordained ministers that it is their responsibility to fully participate in the Social Security system (*MGS 1996*, R-8, p. 305).

The report from General Synod explains that the Reformed tradition views government as a necessary means by which order is preserved. According to John Calvin, paying taxes is one way that citizens exercise their duty to the government and thus to one another. It's simply a modern reality that the care of widows, orphans, and the elderly depends on established government programs.

Because of this, a Reformed minister will find it difficult to give the IRS an account of his or her specific religious considerations for opting out of Social Security. If the IRS challenged a minister's opt-out decision, no one in the official denominational structure would support that position. Additionally, RCA long-term disability and retirement savings rates are determined assuming full participation in the Social Security system.

Medical insurance and other benefits

What benefits are provided for ministers? The call to a minister of Word and sacrament (Formulary No. 5 in the *Book of Church Order*) defines the benefits to be provided to an RCA minister as follows:

- Contributions to the RCA 403(b) retirement plan, set at 11 percent of salary, or the EBPH minimum, whichever is greater.
- Group life insurance

- Long-term disability
- Medical insurance

The following is an excerpt of the call form, highlighting benefits promised to ministers of Word and sacrament:

We promise you in the name of this church all proper attention, love, and obedience in the Lord. We promise and oblige ourselves to encourage you in the discharge of the duties of your important office, and to free you from worldly avocation while you are dispensing spiritual blessings to us, to pay you the sum of \$_____ in _____ payments yearly and every year, and to consider annually whether such payments are adequate, as long as you continue to be the minister of the church, together with (here insert particulars which refer to a parsonage or residence, or other emoluments). As long as you continue to be the minister of this church, we also promise to pay the stipulated contributions to the Reformed Church retirement plan and provide benefits including group life insurance, long-term disability insurance, and medical insurance for you and your immediate family—which means those dependents eligible for family medical insurance according to the insurance plan documents of the Reformed Benefits Association. Such insurance coverages shall meet or exceed the minimum standards stipulated by the Board of Benefits Services.

If you and your immediate family elect medical coverage through your spouse's employer-sponsored group plan, we promise to compensate you for any medical premium costs incurred by your immediate family, up to the premium cost of the Reformed Benefits Association plan meeting the minimum standards stipulated for the year compensated.

RCA retirement plan

How do I plan for retirement?

The sources of retirement income for RCA ministers in the U.S. are:

- *Employer contributions.* The employer of a full-time minister must contribute 11 percent of the total salary to the 403(b) retirement plan or the EBPH minimum, whichever is greater. In 2024, the EBPH minimum is \$8,236 annually. The employer of a part-time minister must contribute 11 percent of the total salary to the 403(b) retirement plan.
- *Government-provided income.* This comes from Social Security, providing you qualify based on your employment history. Payments are made for the life of the participant in a fixed amount, sometimes adjusted for inflation.
- *Self-provided income.* This includes your personal savings and retirement savings above and beyond the 11 percent employer contribution. Financial advisors recommend that you save 15 percent of your salary, so it is important to enroll in an employee contribution. Try to begin saving immediately, even if it is only 1 percent of your salary. With each salary increase, increase your personal saving by 1 or 2 percent.

Several retirement calculators are available online through your Fidelity NetBenefits account (www.netbenefits.com) that can help you determine the amount you need annually to be prepared for retirement. Access Full View in your Fidelity NetBenefits account to see if you're on track for retirement savings.

Fidelity Investments

Fidelity is the custodian of the RCA retirement plans. The Board of Benefits Services of the RCA (BOBS) is the administrator of the plans. Enroll as soon as possible and begin to invest your own funds in the plan. For enrollment information, visit this site: <https://www.rca.org/benefits/retirement/403b>.

The most widely used funds in the plan, Fidelity Freedom Funds, are called target date funds. They are age targeted and decrease investment risk as your retirement date approaches. Fidelity also offers several mutual funds.

It is very important to only accept the level of risk you can afford and are comfortable with. Fidelity's website (www.netbenefits.com) and phone center (800-343-0860) are excellent resources.

Helpful resources

- *Book of Church Order:* www.rca.org/bco
- The Board of Benefits Services: www.rca.org/benefits; retirement@rca.org
- Fidelity Investments: www.netbenefits.com
- Webinars and policy guidelines: www.ecfa.org
- IRS Publication 517: covers Social Security and other tax information for clergy
- RCA finance office: finance@rca.org
- *Ministers' Taxes Made Easy:* www.rca.org/benefits/financial-health/clergy-taxes
- BOBS Retirement Contribution Calculator: <https://www.rca.org/benefits/retirement/contribution-limits>



APPENDIX 7: CONGREGATIONAL FEEDBACK SURVEY

As we look forward to hiring a new pastor, your feedback will assist the search team in understanding the views of the congregation.

Choose up to six of the following ministry activities that you consider to be most important as you look to the immediate future of our congregation. (Number them 1-6 in order of importance.)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Church administration | <input type="checkbox"/> Small groups |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pastoral calling | <input type="checkbox"/> Ministry to families |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Children's ministry | <input type="checkbox"/> Staff administration |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Youth ministry | <input type="checkbox"/> Spiritual leadership |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Adult education | <input type="checkbox"/> One-on-one evangelism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Preaching | <input type="checkbox"/> Membership growth |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Community involvement | <input type="checkbox"/> Conducting worship |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pastoral counseling | |

Please provide input on the importance of the following characteristics that you feel are important for the new pastor to possess:

Administrative Skills:	Less					More
Delegation of responsibilities	1	2	3	4	5	
Motivation of people	1	2	3	4	5	
Has and shares visions and goals	1	2	3	4	5	
Personnel management skills	1	2	3	4	5	
Overall program leadership skills	1	2	3	4	5	
Interpersonal skills	1	2	3	4	5	
Organizational skills	1	2	3	4	5	
Role in stewardship	1	2	3	4	5	
Financial awareness and leadership	1	2	3	4	5	
Overall administrative experience	1	2	3	4	5	

Pastoral Care:	Less				More
Comfortable to talk with	1	2	3	4	5
Available during important times	1	2	3	4	5
Involvement during church activities	1	2	3	4	5
Counseling/pastoring	1	2	3	4	5
Visitation	1	2	3	4	5
Care of elderly	1	2	3	4	5
Active with children	1	2	3	4	5
Knows his/her own limits	1	2	3	4	5
Care of self	1	2	3	4	5
Ideas and enthusiasm for growth	1	2	3	4	5
Christian education	1	2	3	4	5
Overall pastoral care	1	2	3	4	5

Sunday Worship:	Less				More
Use of innovative services	1	2	3	4	5
Concern for different views	1	2	3	4	5
Sensitivity to political and social issues	1	2	3	4	5
Congregational participation	1	2	3	4	5
Children's participation	1	2	3	4	5
Prayers for people, world, community	1	2	3	4	5
Unity of theme in service	1	2	3	4	5
Overall Sunday worship	1	2	3	4	5

What are specific ministry gifts that are especially important for our next pastor to possess (for example, gifts such as counseling, teaching, delegating, vision setting, etc.)?

Which ministries are the most important in our congregation?

Which ministries should we start (or restart) so the search team can consider pastoral candidates that have experience in these areas?

Which groups of people or organizations should we work with to support?

How can our church be a more integral part of our community (looking for specific ideas)?

How do you feel about the amount of information you've received to date on the status of the search process? (Circle one)

Not enough

Adequate

Too much

How would you like future updates provided: (check all that apply)

- ☐ During Sunday worship announcements
- ☐ In the bulletin
- ☐ In the newsletter
- ☐ Information sessions during fellowship time
- ☐ Email
- ☐ Other _____

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions that you would like to share with the search team?

APPENDIX 8: SAMPLE LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE CANDIDATE

Second Reformed Church
987 Center Avenue
Rochester, NY 14605

Laura Smith
456 Maple Lane
Orange City, Iowa 51041

September 4, 2023

Dear Laura,

Thank you for submitting your profile as a potential candidate for our church. Upon review of the profile, our search team would like to consider you as one of several potential candidates for the position of pastor at Second Reformed Church.

I have enclosed an informational packet about the church and our community that we hope will be helpful as you consider our request. If you have questions about the information provided, please feel free to contact me.

To keep our process moving forward in a timely manner, please respond to this inquiry by December 1. If I have not heard from you by that date, I will contact you by phone to learn of your response.

Sincerely yours,

Donna Li
Search committee chairperson

APPENDIX 9: CANDIDATE REFERENCE CHECKLIST

Use this checklist as you check a candidate's references by phone.

1. Explain your reason for calling, share who suggested him or her as a reference, and ask for help in making a good choice.
2. You may wish to use some or all of the following questions. As you listen to the answers, check the items that apply.

- a. How well do you know [the candidate]?

☐ Knows candidate's work well
☐ Knows something of candidate's work
☐ Knows personally, but not much about work

In what relationship?

☐ Member of candidate's congregation (present/past)
☐ Member of candidate's consistory
☐ Colleague in ministry
☐ Friend of candidate
☐ Seminary professor
☐ Denominational or regional synod staff
☐ Other: _____

- b. In what areas of ministry does the candidate work best?

☐ Preaches and leads worship well
☐ Pastors and counsels well
☐ Has strong organizational and administrative skills
☐ Gets people to work together well
☐ Casts compelling vision
☐ Works well with young people
☐ Teaches effectively
☐ Other: _____

- c. How well does [the candidate] work in the other areas of ministry I've mentioned?

☐ Does everything well
☐ Not very effective at: _____

- d. Name one or two areas that you would like to see [the candidate] develop or improve.

- e. What does [the candidate] tend to emphasize in ministry?
 - f. Describe an ideal congregation or ministry for [the candidate].
 - g. Is there anything else you think we should know about him or her?
3. Reflect on the conversation after you hang up.
- a. How much weight do you give this person's assessment?
 - ☐ a lot
 - ☐ some
 - ☐ not much
 - b. What was the level of enthusiasm in support of this candidate?
 - ☐ high
 - ☐ moderate
 - ☐ low
 - c. Did anything in the conversation surprise you, make you wonder, or arouse some reason for caution in you?
 - ☐ yes
 - ☐ noIf yes, what?
 - d. Are there any qualities or qualifications your congregation requires in a minister that were mentioned with reservations or not at all? (Note: You may want to double-check these items with other references.)

APPENDIX 10: CONDUCTING AN INTERVIEW

Before an interview takes place, search team members should ask themselves what they wish to know once the interview is completed. Although a list of possible questions is given below, different concerns are important with different congregations. If the team decides something is important, a question should be worked out beforehand that will help the candidate reveal views on that subject. That question may then be added to those provided in the structured interview.

Interviews are often ineffective for one of the following reasons: search team members do too much of the talking; they are too quick to make judgments based on limited data; the way questions are asked “telegraphs” which response will be considered most (or least) favorably; the interview gets bogged down in trivial questions and leaves more important matters unexplored.

To avoid these pitfalls, the team should commit itself to permitting the candidate to do 85 percent of the talking. Follow-up questions that ask for more information should simply request the candidate to “say a little more about that” if an answer is not yet clear, or take their lead from something the candidate has already said that can help achieve this objective.

Hasty conclusions can be avoided if follow-up questions avoid signaling what it is hoped the candidate did or did not mean. A technique for doing this is to rephrase the candidate’s answer and ask if this is what was meant or simply to encourage more detail with a friendly, “Tell us more.”

The best way to make sure the interview delivers as much relevant data as possible is to structure it by including a list of questions that must be asked before the interview is over. It is not necessary to go through these in exactly the order given nor to interrupt the natural flow of the conversation if it leads in other directions (which may turn out to be useful), but the chairperson should be responsible for seeing that the complete list of predetermined questions has been covered with each candidate. Only in this way can the search team make a fair comparison of the views of several candidates.

Four important areas to explore:

1. What pastoral responsibilities the candidate does best and enjoys most.
2. What the candidate considers most important in the ministry and wants to do most.
3. What kind of person the candidate is; his or her particular strengths and possible weaknesses.
4. The knowledge, experience, and conviction the candidate brings to the ministry.

If team members can leave an interview with a sense that they have some clear ideas about the candidate in each of these areas, they probably are equipped to make comparisons. As at other points in the pastoral search, one of the best questions for search team members to ask themselves after an interview is over is, “Would this minister fit here?” It may not be possible to

explain why you respond one way or another. Human judgments are highly complex, but when they are based on sufficient data, it is best to trust overall impressions or feelings, particularly if experience has taught you that they are usually right.

Finally, be alert to responses that surprise you. Surprises are almost always significant and should be discussed.

To set a warm tone for the interview, it is appropriate for each search team member to briefly introduce themselves with two or three biographical items. The length of time they have been with the church or what excites them most about their church is a nice contextual comment. If you are using a virtual format, it is important that everyone has their names correctly present. “Home Computer” is not a hospital name. If a group video is being used, large name tags in front of each person are helpful.

You will have more than one interview with the candidates you are most focused on. Think through questions for the initial interview that are at an appropriate level for introduction. You can ask deeper questions on subsequent interviews. Six to ten questions will comfortably fill a 45- to 60-minute initial interview. Having each team member prepared to ask one or two of the identified questions helps everyone to be involved.

Use these questions as a guide, but remember that each question needs to be related to the position and that the same questions are asked of each applicant. Also, do not ask questions to draw out the applicant’s race, marital status, age, sex, national origin, citizenship, or disability.* Even friendly, well-meaning questions, such as a candidate’s plan to have children or not, are inappropriate to ask.

1. Please tell us about the ministry you are in right now.
2. As you look back, what has happened that you feel best about?
3. What in your present situation is disappointing to you?
4. If you were to stay there another five years, what would you like to see happen?
5. From what you have learned about our church, is there anything that seems particularly challenging?
6. How would you describe your methods of leadership?
7. What in the ministry do you consider to be your specialty?
8. How did you come to choose the ministry as a vocation?
9. As you look back over your life, where do you see yourself making critical choices?
10. How have your own faith and your theological views changed since you entered college?
Since you entered the ministry?
11. What are your views on [any theological or social issues important to the congregation]?
12. Describe the process you go through when you are preparing a sermon.

13. What is your preferred practice with regard to making pastoral visits? What is your objective? What do you do? What makes you decide to visit?
14. What emphasis do you place on pastoral counseling? Please describe your training and experience in this area.
15. What issues do you see as the most important ones facing our denomination now?
16. How do you understand the role of the minister in church administration?
17. What approaches to a congregation's financial stewardship do you prefer?
18. If you were to become the pastor of this church, what are some of the things you would try to do during your first year?
19. How do you maintain your own spiritual, emotional, and physical health?

*For additional information on formulating questions that are safe to ask, please visit the U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission (www.eeoc.gov/laws/practices).

Note: If you are interviewing a seminarian, encourage them to answer these questions in terms of their internship or most recent ministry context. Be sure to add questions your search team decides are particularly important.

Initial response to interview:

- ☐ Fully meets my requirements; I have no reservations.
- ☐ Generally meets my requirements; I have minor reservations.
- ☐ Generally meets my requirements; I have moderate reservations.
- ☐ Generally okay, but I have one or more major reservations.
- ☐ Fails to meet my requirements.

Principal strengths:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Possible weaknesses:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

APPENDIX 11: POST-INTERVIEW EVALUATION

Immediately following the interview, search team members should evaluate the candidate using a form like this one.

Name of candidate: _____ Date of interview: _____

Name of evaluator: _____

Administrative skills	Strong					Weak
Delegation of responsibilities	1	2	3	4	5	
Motivation of people	1	2	3	4	5	
Has and shares visions and goals	1	2	3	4	5	
Personnel management skills	1	2	3	4	5	
Overall program leadership skills	1	2	3	4	5	
Interpersonal skills	1	2	3	4	5	
Organizational skills	1	2	3	4	5	
Role in stewardship	1	2	3	4	5	
Financial awareness and leadership	1	2	3	4	5	
Overall administrative experience	1	2	3	4	5	

Pastoral care	Strong					Weak
Comfortable to talk with	1	2	3	4	5	
Available during important times	1	2	3	4	5	
Involvement during church activities	1	2	3	4	5	
Counseling and pastoral skills	1	2	3	4	5	
Visitation	1	2	3	4	5	
Care of elderly	1	2	3	4	5	
Active with children	1	2	3	4	5	
Knows his or her own limits	1	2	3	4	5	
Care of self	1	2	3	4	5	
Ideas and enthusiasm for growth	1	2	3	4	5	
Christian education	1	2	3	4	5	
Overall pastoral care	1	2	3	4	5	

Sunday worship	Strong				Weak
Use of innovative services	1	2	3	4	5
Concern for different views	1	2	3	4	5
Sensitivity to political and social issues	1	2	3	4	5
Congregational participation	1	2	3	4	5
Children's participation	1	2	3	4	5
Prayers for people, world, community	1	2	3	4	5
Unity of theme in service	1	2	3	4	5
Overall Sunday worship	1	2	3	4	5

Your level of enthusiasm for this candidate: **High Good Acceptable Low**

- Your greatest concern about this candidate: _____
- The thing you like most about this candidate: _____
- Candidate's personality traits: _____

APPENDIX 12: WORSHIP LEADERSHIP EVALUATION

Use this form to evaluate a candidate's worship leading and preaching capabilities.

Sermon delivery

Sleepy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Energetic	9	10
Tense and tight	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Relaxed and free	9	10
Uninspiring	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Compelling	9	10

Prayers

Unfeeling and cold	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Sensitive to real needs	9	10
Perfunctory or trite	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Deeply aware of people's lives	9	10
Chatty or rambling	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Sense of dignity or order	9	10
Brought no sense of God's presence	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Brought a sense of God's	9	10

Music choices

Did not fit the service	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Helped integrate the service	9	10
Interfered with my worship	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Enlivened my worship	9	10

Service as a whole

Interfered with my worship	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Enlivened my worship	9	10
----------------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----------------------	---	----

When I visualize this minister in our church, it seems this person

Would never do	1	2	3	Might be okay	4	5	6	7	8	Is just right	9	10
----------------	---	---	---	---------------	---	---	---	---	---	---------------	---	----

NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

