

Report of the Pastoral Formation Oversight Board

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) was formed by the General Synod to provide guidance to the General Synod concerning formation, oversight, and certification processes of commissioned pastors and ministers of Word and sacrament. All three Reformed Church in America (RCA) theological agents (New Brunswick Theological Seminary, Western Theological Seminary, the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency) are represented on PFOB as well as General Synod professors and pastors and elders from across the denomination. A board membership list can be found in the online directory at my.rca.org.

Unifying Practices for Pastoral Formation and Oversight

Since the formation of PFOB, it has struggled to effect uniformity of pastoral formation and oversight in the RCA without authority to compel changes except via proposals to change provisions in the *Book of Church Order*. This challenge increased in recent years as the General Synod has affirmed through its various actions that each classis has primary authority for ordination of ministers of Word and sacrament and commissioned pastors.

PFOB has come to an overarching principle that will guide our work moving forward and foster uniformity *with* classis oversight. We see a parallel in the situation faced by the United States in regard to the regulation of selling securities. Each state had the authority to regulate as it saw fit, which led to a significant lack of uniformity in laws and regulations between states. The solution was the Uniform Securities Act of 1956, which proposed a model that each state could choose to adopt, in total or in part. Most states chose to adopt the model, often with some minor modifications that fit their context. In a similar manner, PFOB hopes to propose a model for pastoral formation and oversight that can be adopted by each classis, which would foster more uniform practices for pastoral formation and oversight across the RCA, while retaining classis authority to contextualize the model as needed.

PFOB has just started this work, and it will eventually be brought to the General Synod for approval. We have started brainstorming about an RCA Office of Licensure and Ordination. This could include the following:

- A single office or person who would assist classes and candidates to review educational background/trajectory to ensure they will meet the RCA requirements.
- Create and/or review best practices for licensure and ordination and for receiving ministers from other denominations, as well as for commissioned pastors. PFOB hopes to make it easy for each classis to access a staff person.
- Classes do a majority of their work through volunteers, and often the student supervision piece is also done through volunteers. The work of facilitating a “uniform model” includes resourcing the classis pastors and elders who do this work, not just setting a model standard.

PFOB has formed a working group of Eddy Alemán (general secretary), Chad Pierce (General Synod professor), Rick Clark (bilingual elder), Israel Camacho (commissioned pastor), and Dave Schutt (MFCA interim director) to develop this proposal. More personnel will be added to this team.

Other PFOB Work

There are other related issues to which PFOB has continued to turn its attention.

The MFCA has experienced significant changes over the last several years. The director position is now part time. The agency no longer offers RCA-specific courses but instead directs candidates to courses offered through New Brunswick Theological Seminary or Western Theological Seminary. In light of the many changes that have occurred within the MFCA, PFOB will be reviewing the MFCA's structure and plans to bring a report to General Synod 2026.

Connected to the MFCA is the Approved Alternate Route (AAR) for candidates who have ministry and life experiences, other degrees, or other denominational credentials that could be combined with additional seminary training in order to qualify for ordination as a minister of Word and sacrament within the RCA. PFOB and the MFCA recognize that the AAR process has been perceived as cumbersome, with heavy requirements. The MFCA is intent on streamlining their process and becoming much more user friendly, along with increasing cultural agility. Of special note is the intent to add bilingual personnel to the AAR team.

The AAR process is likely to experience more traffic in the years ahead. Two recent situations reviewed by PFOB point toward this potential increase.

The Classis of North Grand Rapids inquired as to the process needed for Calvin Theological Seminary students to come into the RCA. The RCA does not have a formula of agreement in place with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). The response of the PFOB and the MFCA was to assure the Classis of North Grand Rapids that the AAR would be an appropriate avenue for these students, and that the MFCA pledges to make the AAR a streamlined process.

A second situation involved the Classis of Central Plains and the Classis of the Americas. Several pastors who were ordained outside of the United States desired to become RCA pastors. Central Plains started a process that continued over several years. Due to language difficulties and some miscommunication, the process dragged on. This came to the attention of the Global Council for Hispanic Ministries, which advocated that the Classis of the Americas could assist in this process since the language barrier would be removed. Central Plains ultimately approved, recognizing that the pastors would be returned to the Classis of Central Plains. The candidates were extensively tutored, examined, and received as ordained ministers in the Classis of the Americas, then transferred to the emerging International Classis of Texas. The learning for PFOB was that in many countries outside the United States and Europe, the MDiv is not offered. It was also noted that, while the MDiv is the gold

standard for pastoral training in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, it is a relatively recent degree offering (60 years or so). This is an issue for further study.

PFOB also received a letter from Holland Classis that raised an important question regarding the 24-month requirement for a candidate to be under care before they can be ordained. Who has the authority to waive this requirement? PFOB further wondered if there needs to be a minimum amount of time for receiving ministers from other denominations. This question requires further consideration.

Following these conversations, PFOB has committed to studying the issue of ordination credential requirements and the processes for receiving ministers into the RCA with equity. Therefore, PFOB strongly supports RF 24-5, presented to this General Synod by the restructuring team (see pp. 131-133 in this workbook).

Theological Education Assessment

PFOB reviewed funding recommendations for the upcoming year and has recommended the following to the General Synod Council (GSC), which will be included as part of the GSC's overall covenant shares percentage to this General Synod.

The Pastoral Formation Oversight Board (PFOB) recommends a General Synod assessment for theological education of \$415,000, allocated in the following manner:

- \$15,000 to cover the costs of meeting of the PFOB, the General Synod professors, and the collaborative efforts among the respective agents.
- The remainder will be split evenly between the three theological agents.

Commissioned Pastor Process

The commissioned pastor training process is an ongoing point of discussion by PFOB. Commissioning of commissioned pastors is a classis-based process. The education and training of commissioned pastors, while it can include some seminary coursework, is also classis-based. Sometimes the classis will engage an agency to train on behalf of the classis. PFOB surveyed RCA classes and learned that the training programs for commissioned pastors vary widely in content, philosophy, and pedagogy. Trying to bring some semblance of consistency to these varied geographies and programs has been daunting. After much study, PFOB has made the following recommendations to classes to help them train and educate commissioned pastor candidates and to help bring some uniformity to the various processes:

1. A letter from the general secretary has gone out to classis clerks and all churches with resources available for commissioned pastor training and education. This letter will also be posted on the RCA website.
2. PFOB's recommendation is that classes strongly encourage commissioned pastor candidates to take courses on polity, standards, and theology at NBTS or WTS.

- a. Alternate institutions recommended to meet other commissioned pastor competency requirements include:
 - i. Albany School of Ministry
 - ii. Coram Deo
 - iii. Evangelical Reformed College, Ontario (also offers classes in Portuguese)
 - b. Courses are available in Spanish through:
 - i. Western Theological Seminary
 - ii. Universidad Reformada Global
3. Dave Schutt, interim director of the MFCA, will be available to share further information during the classis clerks' meeting immediately prior to this General Synod.

While distributing these resources does not conclude PFOB's work on commissioned pastor training, it is a good start. We encourage each classis to participate and give input.

PFOB would like to thank outgoing members Kristen Johnson, Cora Taitt, and Kimberly Van Es for their faithful and insightful service as part of our board.

Respectfully submitted,
Dan Gillett
Moderator