

Report of the All-Synod Advisory Committees Summarizing Team

The commissioned pastor designation began with a group of RCA pastors around 1998. A plan for starting new churches was envisioned where exponential growth would take place. The number one bottleneck to seeing hundreds of new churches started was that the RCA had been dependent on seminary-trained pastors and teachers to lead churches for almost 375 years. Yet there was a lack of approved seminary-trained pastors and teachers to lead church planting efforts. A new type of position was needed to give proven, effective leaders a chance to serve in the RCA who may not have access to the traditional pathway to the ordination of the minister of Word and sacrament.

The commissioned pastor model intended to draw from Jesus' apprenticing model in the New Testament, a Rabbinical tradition of competency-based, in-ministry formation, and the Pauline model of raising leaders from within. The result was "commissioned pastors." These local, talented, theologically trained servants with missiological skills from their own context would serve in specific areas to advance the growth of the church.

The commissioned pastor process of leadership development empowers local churches, classes, and ministers of Word and sacrament to be proactive and effective in this crucial skill of multiplying leaders for the church's mission. The role of commissioned pastor was created to serve and equip the local church for ministry. The Commission on Church Order offers a series of changes to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* to more fully integrate the commissioned pastor into polity as a servant of the local church who is both an elder and a member of the classis (workbook, pp. 225-232).

R 17-21 seeks to recognize the commissioned pastor through the office of elder. This reflects the desire throughout the church to remove the restrictions that prevent commissioned pastors from serving as delegates to the broader assemblies.

The Advisory Group Process

The 2017 all-synod advisory committees met to discuss R 17-21. Eighteen committees, including the moderator committee, met for a two-and-a-half-hour prayerful process. First, moderators met to run through their own process to prepare for facilitating the other 17 committees. Next, they guided the remaining 17 groups, consisting of General Synod delegates, through the process.

Each meeting opened with introductions, including their name, synod role, where they are from, and their relationship, if any, to a commissioned pastor. Time was then spent discerning together the guiding principles and core values the group deemed helpful to the process, such as listening well to each other, being fully present, and trusting the process. Since the work being done depended on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, each group spent time in prayer, following the wisdom of Philippians 2:1-11.

After prayer, each advisory committee was subdivided into four smaller groups and tasked with evaluating reports from the Commission on Church Order, the Commission on Theology, and R 17-21. Each group then presented the main points as well as the pros and cons they discerned from the reports and recommendations. Each delegate was then asked to weigh items of importance from the feedback offered during the discussion. Each group also looked for common themes and patterns that emerged.

Based on this information, delegates returned to their smaller groups to draft an advice statement they felt accurately reflected the shared wisdom of the committee. Selected delegates then worked to coalesce the four statements into one final group statement, while the rest of the delegates bathed the entire process in prayer.

The advisory committee moderators selected a summary team from its members who consolidated all 18 statements into this final report.

Affirmations (Pros)

The all-synod advisory committees named a number of affirmations of R 17-21, which included the following:

1. R 17-21 clarifies the role of the commissioned pastor in the BCO, allowing for their inclusion at broader assemblies in the RCA. In so doing, it acknowledges and validates the place of commissioned pastors in the life of the church. These changes provide a way for the commissioned pastor to have a voice in decisions, directions, and missions discerned by and for the church.
2. It should also be noted that much of the conversation was spent affirming the work, service, and impact of commissioned pastors in the life of the church. It appears that the all-synod advisory committees feel that commissioned pastors are one way of affirming the priesthood of all believers by raising up, training, mentoring, and supervising leaders from within local congregations for ministry.
3. The all-synod advisory committees affirmed commissioned pastors as one way to increase diversity and provide access to training not otherwise available to people.

Concerns (Cons)

The all-synod advisory committees named a number of concerns of R 17-21, which included the following:

1. Affirming R 17-21 may decrease the representation of elders who are not commissioned pastors at broader assemblies, skewing the ideal concept of equal balance between elder and minister representation.
2. Furthermore, it may inhibit the presence at broader assemblies of persons in professions that make them less able to set aside time for participation at those levels.
3. R 17-21 confines commissioned pastors to a church ministry without providing language to embrace commissioned pastors who serve in more broadly defined ministries outside of the traditional church model.

Note: There were also a number of concerns and observations raised about the ministry of commissioned pastors that were not germane to a yes or no vote on R 17-21. These concerns and observations will be addressed with additional comments and recommendations at the end of this report.

Advice

The advice of the all-synod advisory committees is to vote yes on R 17-21.

Reasons:

1. A clear majority advised yes. Twelve committees advised to vote yes, five committees advised to vote no and one committee abstained. Based on the clear majority of the advice statements, the synod is advising itself to vote “yes.”
2. The discussion during the all-synod advisory committee sessions overwhelmingly gave appreciation for the ministry of commissioned pastors and supported their representation at the broader assemblies.

Additional Recommendations

Furthermore, a number of strong observations and concerns were raised during the all-synod advisory committee discussions. The most significant observations and concerns included:

There remains a title disparity between “commissioned pastor” and “ordained elder.” There is significant confusion around the function and authority of commissioned pastors.

The training and implementation processes for commissioned pastors vary significantly throughout classes. Therefore, the advisory committees have indicated that it is difficult to trust that commissioned pastors are adequately trained and assessed in such a way as to preserve a high standard for ministry leadership. Additionally, without a standardized training path, the theological identity and polity practices of churches led by commissioned pastors may become diluted.

There are currently no protections provided for commissioned pastors regarding salary and benefits. This may put commissioned pastors at risk of not being provided with adequate compensation.

For these reasons, the all-synod advisory committee moderator summarizing team offers the following recommendations:

R 17-62

To instruct the Commission on Church Order, in consultation with the Commission on Theology, to investigate the tensions around the title of commissioned pastor, and, if appropriate, to present a new designation in place of “commissioned pastor” for presentation to General Synod 2018.

R 17-63

To request that the stated clerks discuss and share their best practices of commissioned pastor training and compensation at their next stated clerks meeting.

R 17-64

To direct the general secretary to coordinate a video project that gathers the stories of commissioned pastors in ministry, using a model that requires no increase in assessments, and to present this video to the broader assemblies no later than General Synod 2019.

APPENDIX

General Synod 2017 All-Synod Advisory Committee Advice Statements

Advisory Committee #1

After reading R 17-21, we feel the intention is good and values the ministry and role of commissioned pastors. However, there are sections that seem limiting to the intent and expression of commissioned pastors for the RCA's ministry and mission.

Advisory committee #1 advises a no vote as it has been presented.

A yes vote could happen with appropriate edits to the recommendation that provide more consistency to the role of a commissioned pastor within a classis (church, congregation, specialized minister, etc.) and with the various judicatories.

Reasons:

1. If considered a "minister" as a permanent member of classis, that should not change through our judicatories but should be consistent.
2. A commissioned pastor as an elder at regional and General Synods potentially reduces and/or could eliminate true elders.
3. The proposed wording does not allow for specialized ministry positions within a classis (i.e., chaplains, classis ministers, camp directors, etc.). The language limits it to "church or congregation."

Note: Possibly explore a fifth office of commissioned pastors.

Advisory Committee #2

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-21, we recommend voting yes in affirmation of the recommendation.

Our reasons for this advice are:

1. It recognizes the role and value of commissioned pastors in the ministry of the local church, classis, and greater assemblies of the RCA.
2. It reflects the language and intent of the *BCO* regarding commissioned pastors as both elders and their functional roles as pastors in a variety of ministry contexts.

Additionally, we include these cautions and concerns along with our endorsement of R 17-21:

- We recognize the need to create a uniform training process across the denomination to ensure all classes are giving adequate training to commissioned pastors in training.
- We highly value the voice of the laity at all denominational levels and do not want to see their voices diminished at the higher assemblies as a result of these changes.

Advisory Committee #3

Group #3 abstained from advising yes or no.

Reasons:

1. We, advisory committee #3, believe R 17-21 moves in the right direction in clarity and role definition for commissioned pastors.
2. We have a lingering concern that the 50/50 elder/minister of Word and sacrament participation at General Synod is deliberate and important, and the commissioned pastors attending as elders may dilute that balance, reducing the elder voice.
3. We're not sure how to fix this but would like some attention to unintended consequences.

Advisory Committee #4

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-21, advisory committee #4 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-21.

Our reasons for this advice are:

1. It normalizes and clarifies the role of commissioned pastors.
2. It validates the work commissioned pastors are called to do.
3. It establishes oversight, accountability, and support to commissioned pastors.
4. It gives commissioned pastors a voice within local churches, classes, and synods.

Advisory Committee #5

Advisory committee #5 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-21.

Reasons:

1. It further defines the commissioned pastor's role—clarity of the training oversight of this position is long overdue. This will help with greater acceptance and implementation of more commissioned pastors.
2. Allows for participation in the higher bodies (regional/classes/GS).
3. Allows use of commissioned pastors when there are not enough ordained clergy in particular regions.
4. Additional training ensures consistency of understanding and execution of the role.
5. This will help with growth and revitalize the church.
6. To be more of an influence on the emerging (potential) leaders of the church.

Advisory Committee #6

Advisory committee #6 came up with the following advice statement:

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of its commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-21, we find the participation of commissioned pastors and increased accountability at both classis and synod levels to be a joyful clarification for this important and unique ministry.

Advisory committee #6 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-21.

Reasons:

1. We value participation by commissioned pastors at classis and synod levels.
2. We value diversity of voices.
3. We value clarity of roles that is provided in the *BCO* changes, which helps us to do things decently and in good order.
4. We value accountability and oversight at the classis level.

We would recommend that classes consider:

- Setting a recommended rate of compensation for the commissioned pastor as a way to honor the covenant relationship between the commissioned pastor and the congregation.

Advisory Committee #7

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-21, advisory committee #7 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-21.

Our reasons for this advice are:

1. The recommendation gives greater clarity to the role of commissioned pastor.
2. It provides consistency throughout the *BCO*.

Furthermore, recognizing additional clarification is needed concerning the role of commissioned pastors, advisory committee #7 recommends the GSC bring to General Synod 2018 the following, but not limited to: educational requirements, duties and responsibilities, and compensation for further clarification.

Advisory Committee #8

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-21, we find that the two concerns regarding office and function have been brought together very well. Advisory committee #8 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-21:

Reasons:

1. It clarifies the role of a commissioned pastor by recognizing its office of elder as well as its function as pastor.

2. It does not transfer any fundamental power to the church or its offices and the offices have parity.
3. This takes the priesthood of all believers seriously while allowing for congregations to have pastoral leadership where vacant, thereby allowing the church to grow through the gifts of the commissioned pastor.
4. The commissioned pastor is counted in classis quorum as a pastor.

Addendum (caution):

- There is need to clarify what the training and assessment of commissioned pastors is from classis to classis, so there is not such a wide variance.

Advisory Committee #9

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-21, and despite the ongoing confusion regarding the definition of the role of commissioned pastor, advisory committee #9 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-21.

Reasons:

1. We affirm the effort to provide a voice for commissioned pastors at higher judicatories, thereby creating the potential of greater diversity at the judicatories.
2. We affirm the effort to acknowledge covenantal theology between judicatories as it pertains to commissioned pastors.
3. We like the balance that at classis level they are recognized for their ministry but at higher levels of assembly for their office as elders.
4. This provides checks and balances between the commissioned pastor, the church, and the classis.
5. This is a consistent expression of Reformed polity.

Concerns:

- We are concerned about the higher level of confusion about commissioned pastors, their role, and lack of defined training.
- We are also concerned about skewing representation at judicatories.

In light of our concerns, we urge an initiation of the formation of a standard education and curriculum for commissioned pastors across the denomination.

Advisory Committee #10

Advisory committee #10 advises General Synod to vote no on R 17-21.

Reasons:

1. If the definition of a classis quorum would be changed, care is needed to clarify who has voting rights so that a church would not exceed standard voting representation. (In example, a church sending ministers, elders, and several different commissioned pastors.)

2. Lay elders would lose representation at higher assemblies if commissioned pastors took the place of lay elders at regional and General Synod.
3. We urge the General Synod Council to find a pathway, employing proper commissions, to create standards for constituting the grounds for commissioned positions and the approval of a commissioned pastor. Our institutions for theological education shall be leveraged in the teaching and training of commissioned pastors as standards are formed.

Advisory Committee #11

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-21, advisory committee #11 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-21.

Reasons:

1. Clarity about the role of commissioned pastors at synods. They have a function, not an office.
2. Gives them a voice and an identity.

Advisory Committee #12

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission of Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-21, our committee has developed a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the role of commissioned pastor. We are grateful for the increase in clarity concerning the role of commissioned pastor in conjunction with the office of elder.

Accordingly, advisory committee #12 advises the General Synod to vote yes on R 17-21. Our reasons for this advice are:

1. an increase in clarity as the roles relate to, and/or conjoin with each other;
2. and that commissioned pastors be given a voice in higher bodies.

However, our committee would raise two concerns and recommend:

- that a standard of curricula be established across classes, in order to ensure commissioned pastors are fully equipped for their ministry;
- that measures are taken to ensure that elders are not deprived of a voice in synods, should a commissioned pastor be assigned to fill the position of elder delegate.

Advisory Committee #13

Advisory Committee #13 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-21.

After study and discussion of R 17-21, this advisory committee affirms the language of the suggested changes from the commissions.

Reasons:

1. It brings clarity to the extent and role of the commissioned pastor, consistory, and classis, and higher assemblies.

Advisory Committee #14

After studying the reports, advisory committee #14 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-21.

Reasons:

1. The recommendation serves to allow commissioned pastors to attend the broader assemblies as elder delegates, giving them an opportunity to have a voice in the conversation.

However, there are several areas of concern which should be addressed.

- We believe it should be noted that commissioned pastors being sent as elder delegates creates and sustains confusion of the office of minister and elder in both form and function of commissioned pastors. There is currently a widespread confusion throughout the denomination about the role of a commissioned pastor, which has seemingly evolved since its inception.
- This confusion also surrounds the question of the authority, practice, and educational standards of commissioned pastors within the RCA.
- In addition, allowing commissioned pastors to attend broader assemblies as elder delegates may risk potential loss of “lay elder” participation and presence.
- Finally, we feel this confusion will always remain because a commissioned pastor has the title of “pastor” and not “elder.”

Advisory Committee #15

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-21, we affirm and celebrate the report from the COT.

However, advisory committee #15 advises the General Synod to vote no on R 17-21, but refer this recommendation back to the CCO.

Our reasons for this are:

1. Preserve balance of voice between ministers of Word and sacrament, delegated elder delegates, and commissioned pastors.
2. Find a way to divide the motion/recommendation according to the articles or bodies (i.e., GS, regional synod, classis, consistory)
3. Concerns around maintaining RCA identity.
4. And to clarify the role of commissioned pastors on consistories.

Advisory Committee #16

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-21, advisory committee #16 wants to affirm the work of the commissions in creating the avenue for the important voice and gifts of the commissioned pastors to be represented in our assemblies.

However, we recommend a no vote on R 17-21.

Reasons:

1. Functionally, in the life of the church, a commissioned pastor acts more like a minister of Word and sacrament than an elder. Yet the proposed amendment situates the commissioned pastor in the role of elder within the broader assemblies.
2. If General Synod approves the recommendation from the diaconal task force, the number of elder delegates in assemblies could be reduced, further limiting the voice of “regular” elder delegates.
3. The 2015 report of the Commission on History states that, “The commissioned pastor designation was not intended to be an entry point into ministry, but was intended to enhance and resource people who were already in ministry, with the goal of helping these people to eventually enter seminary and work toward the possibility of the ministry of Word and sacrament” (*MGS 2015*, p. 202). Therefore, while the commissioned pastors should have roles within consistories and classes for the specific ministries to which they are commissioned, provisions should not be made for representation within the broader assemblies.

Advisory Committee #17

After studying the 2017 reports of the Commission on Church Order and the Commission on Theology on the topic of commissioned pastors, and after reading the content of R 17-21, advisory committee #17 advises General Synod to vote yes on R 17-21.

Advisory committee #17 reasons:

1. The commission has done a good and thorough job addressing a difficult problem.
2. Very well considered and fills gap that needed to be filled.
3. It affirms the importance of commissioned pastors.
4. It clarifies the role of commissioned pastors.
5. The committee has done a faithful work in crafting the reports.

Advisory Committee #18

Advisory committee #18 (the moderator group) affirms commissioned pastors’ gifts and the contributions to the ministries; however, we cannot support the language of proposal R 17-21. The advisory committee of moderators advises General Synod to vote no on R 17-21.

Our reasons for this advice are the following:

1. There is an inconsistency of the title of the elder and the function of a pastor.

2. There is tension between original intent versus the current reality of commissioned pastors.

We recognize, however, that commissioned pastors fill a vital role in the church and should be represented at our assemblies. We recognize the commissioned pastor process allows for an increased diversity (racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, etc.) of individuals who, by pursuing commissioned pastor ministry, are allowed a path to leadership that they might not otherwise pursue.

Therefore, we urge the General Synod Council, Commission on Theology, and Commission on Church Order to attend to the following:

- To standardize the process denomination wide for classes to prepare and recognize commissioned pastors.
- To bring clarity around the role and expected compensation guidelines for commissioned pastors.
- To bring consideration for the designation of commissioned pastor of Word and sacrament (much similar to specialized ministers of Word and sacrament).