

Resignation from Church Office Ralph A. Pontier

Every minister in our churches is asked at his ordination or installation, “Do you believe that in the call of the congregation you are called by God himself to this holy ministry?” And every elder and deacon is asked, “Do you, both elders and deacons, feel in your hearts that you are lawfully called of God’s church, and consequently of God Himself, to these you respective holy offices?” All office-bearers confess that they are called of God to their office and that the call of God came to them through the church. No one puts himself into office on his own authority or on his own initiative. In the same way, no one may remove himself from office on his own initiative or by his own authority. Only God may release an office-bearer from office and (except in the case of death) God does so through the church. To forsake one’s office without the permission of the church is to forsake God’s call and, like Jonah who ran from God’s call, it is to commit a grievous sin.

Reformed church polity does not recognize resignation from church office. There is no provision for it in the Church Order. When a minister wishes to retire, or to leave his office to enter secular employment, he may do so “only for weighty reasons, upon approval of his supervising council and with the concurring advice of classis” CO Art. 9. A minister who wants to accept a new call must ask permission to be released from his present call. He may not accept a new call without the consent of his current council, CO Art. 7.

Likewise elders and deacons may not leave their office without the consent of their supervising consistory. Any persistent attempt to do so may be judged as “faithless desertion from office” a sin that makes one liable to being suspended or deposed from office, CO Art. 62.

If an elder or deacon wishes to leave his office before his term is completed, he must ask the consistory to be released from office. If his reasons are weighty and honorable (such as a debilitating illness or a job transfer to a distant place) the consistory may consent to grant release from office, in essence changing the length of his term according to CO Art. 13. But if the request is not for weighty and honorable reasons, the consistory must urge the man to continue in office. If he persists in refusing to serve, the consistory should proceed to suspension from office which requires the concurring advice of two neighboring consistories, C.O. Art. 61. A consistory should never accept or acquiesce in a resignation from office. The general discipline of members (C.O. Art. 55-56) may not be initiated against an office-bearer until after he has been suspended or deposed from office.

If a minister, elder or deacon commits a gross public sin which is of such a nature that he cannot continue in office, and if the office-bearer submits a resignation when the sin becomes known, the consistory should take no action on the resignation (just receive it for information) but instead proceed to suspension and deposition from office. If the consistory accepts a resignation under such circumstances, the former office bearer might pursue legal means to prevent suspension and deposition, claiming that the church has no right to depose him from an office he no longer holds since they have already accepted his resignation from that office.

A minister may not be honorably released from his office without the concurring advice of classis since the concurring advice of classis was also required for his entrance into office. But if a consistory grants honorable release to an elder or deacon prior to the end of his term, the concurring advice of classis is not required since the classis was not involved in the elder or deacon's ordination. However, the suspension and deposition of an elder or deacon does require concurring advice, to insure objectivity and impartiality in a matter that is very difficult for a consistory to deal with on its own.