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# Re-Forming the Making of Ministers

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**James I. Cook**

At nine o'clock in the morning of November 21, 1994, ten members of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) met in Cerritos, California, to begin work on an assignment voted by the 1994 General Synod: "To propose standards for the preparation of professional ministry in the Reformed Church in America and the means to achieve these standards" (*Minutes of General Synod*, 1994: 228). Thus began the life of a group bearing a designation of record-breaking length: The Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the Reformed Church in America.

General Synod mandated a task force of eight members made up of two RCA laypersons, two RCA pastors, one General Synod professor of theology from New Brunswick Theological Seminary, one General Synod professor of theology from Western Theological Seminary, one Theological Education Agency representative, and one RCA specialized minister with clinical pastoral education certification. The eight appointees were Barbara Liggett, Frederick Wezeman, Vern Hoffs, Stanley Perea, Norman Kansfield, James Cook (chair), Cornelis Kors, and Robert Anderson.

The roots of the task force reached back to 1992 when the General Synod dissolved the Board of Theological Education, but kept for itself the responsibility of overseeing "the standards for the preparation for the professional ministry." The synod then lodged this oversight with the General Synod Council, and specifically with that council's Ministry and Personnel Services Committee (MAPS). This responsibility soon confronted the MAPS with a fundamentally constitutional problem: The *Book of Church Order (BCO)* contains no such standards to oversee. No level of competency is indicated, and the classes are provided with no guidance to assure them that they are examining and ordaining for service to the whole church rather than within their bounds alone. This problem and its accompanying issues led the MAPS to recommend the creation of a task force to assist both it and the MAPS office in the following tasks: (1) an analysis of the church's needs, (2) the development of a process to provide the denomination with effective means to recruit and educate candidates for ministry, and (3) an equitable and realistic means for evaluating and certifying their readiness for ministry.

Of the ten who gathered on November 21, seven were task force members. The other three represented General Synod officers and staff. Over the course

of its life, the task force also had the benefit of regular participation by two members of the denominational staff (Wesley Granberg-Michaelson and Alvin Poppen) and of three resource persons (Barbara Alexander, Ella Campbell, and Dennis Voskuil). General Synod officers, Harold Korver, Anthony Vis, and Charles Van Engen, attended task force meetings in turn.

Initially, the task force members had no clear sense of the sheer magnitude of their assignment. Only after hours of lively discussion and debate were they able to reach a clear two-part self-understanding of its task: (1) the development of standards by which the extent and quality of preparation of ministers of Word and Sacrament can be measured, and, (2) the development of a process by which the goals of such standards can be achieved and through which any candidate for the office of minister of Word and Sacrament shall move. Between 1994 and 1997 the task force was to meet eleven more times, but from my perspective in the chair, the first meeting set the intellectual and emotional pattern for all those to come: a stimulating, freewheeling struggle for some firm handles on the task (and for some clear consensus on them) that resulted in general frustration—only to be relieved by enough breakthroughs in the meeting's closing hours to enable us to approach the next gathering with some genuine hope of success.

### **Five Overarching Concerns**

Out of this struggle there gradually emerged five overarching concerns: (1) the mandate to establish standards for ministry formation; (2) a larger role for the church in the formation of its ministry; (3) a home for theological education which would have a major responsibility for oversight of the candidates; (4) appropriate flexibility in the preparation of ministers; and (5) some definition of the role to be played by each level of the RCA in the formation of ministers. The lengthy report of the task force to the General Synod of 1996 sought to address each of these concerns.

#### *The Mandate to Establish Standards*

After several attempts to articulate the specific standards, the task force was persuaded that that assignment could not be discharged properly until it had given explicit expression to the theological character of Reformed ministry. In the fall of 1995, therefore, the task force turned its attention to this challenge. The result was a document entitled "A Theological Charter for the office of minister of Word and Sacrament." Divided into two parts, this document set out the theological reasons why persons who would serve as ministers of Word and Sacrament within the RCA should (1) possess a firm sense of God's call together with a specific set of qualities; and (2) why such persons should demonstrate gifts and competencies for the basic tasks for ministry. In the light of that theological consensus, the task force returned to the articulation of the standards

themselves. These, then, were grouped into the categories of personal qualities (eleven in all) and professional competencies (twenty-four in all).

### *A Larger Role for the Church in Ministry Formation*

At the heart of this concern was a desire both to move the church toward full partnership with the seminaries in the preparation of ministers, and to bridge a perceived gap between the seminaries and the church. The latter issue was addressed in the task force proposal to create a care committee for each candidate. The membership of this committee would represent each of the major stakeholders in the candidate's formation: seminary faculty, classis, and "the teaching church." The latter referred to congregations which would participate in a denominational program intended to provide all candidates with a parish-based, in-ministry experience as part of their preparation process. The church's expanded role was to reach its climax in a proposed residency program. This radical requirement was to open up a required twenty-four-month period between the candidate's licensure and ordination. During this period the candidate would perform, in the residence setting only, all the essential acts of ministry, but as a licensed minister without ordination. Continued study and experience, a classis-assigned mentor, and the classis itself would assist in the development of essential pastoral skills. When in the judgment of the mentor and the classis, satisfactory development had taken place, the licensed minister would be ordained.

### *A Home for Theological Education with Responsibility for Oversight*

Early on, the task force realized that with the dissolution of the Board of Theological Education in 1992, theological education as a denominational priority had become virtually homeless. It had been reduced to one of the agenda items of one of the seven committees of the General Synod Council. Initially, two proposals to redress this perceived flaw in the denominational structure competed for acceptance. One was to recommend the creation of an additional (or eighth) committee of the General Synod Council charged specifically with this responsibility; the other was to recommend the creation of a board or agency to be charged with the oversight of theological education. After thorough discussion, both proposals were set aside in favor of a proposed Commission on Ministerial Formation. Its ten members would number among them five theological educators, two pastors, one certified clinical pastoral education minister, and two laypersons. Along with general oversight, this commission was to select a team of pastors and General Synod professors of theology to prepare annually an examination which would form a standardized written component to be added to the traditional classical examination for licensure.

### *Appropriate Flexibility in the Preparation of Ministers*

This concern was with the task force from the beginning. In the spring of 1994, representatives of the Classis of California had addressed a memorandum to the MAPS, urging that consideration be given to the creation of an alternate program for gifted and experienced individuals unable to fulfill the traditional program requirements. Especially emphasized was the increasing number of persons ministering in unique and specifically ethnic situations. The response of the task force was to include in its second meeting a session with Ella Campbell, John Cato, Kenneth Mallory, and Luiz Perez, representing the leadership of the RCA's four ethnic councils. This fruitful gathering made clear both the affirmation of appropriate flexibility and the unacceptability of any program that might result in a second-class ordination.

The issue of flexibility was addressed in the draft report under the heading, "Approved Alternate Route." To qualify for this route, candidates were to meet five criteria, have the recommendation of a classis, and the approval of the proposed Commission on Ministerial Formation. The candidate could then pursue an approved program of theological education, significant portions of which would occur in the candidate's first language.

### *Comprehensive Definition of the RCA Role in Ministerial Formation*

The task force responded to this concern by attempting to define the respective roles of the candidate, individual church members, congregations, classes, candidate care committees, regional synods, General Synod, seminaries, teaching churches, residency churches, and mentors. The simple goal of this lengthy portion of the draft report was to sensitize each level of the church to its crucial contribution to the formation of its ministers. While grateful to God for the modest miracle of a report that was at least in significant measure both comprehensive and coherent, the task force was unanimous about the need to inform both 1996 synod delegates and the whole church of its proposals and to invite the church's discussion and response. Therefore, a summary of the draft report appeared in *The Church Herald* of May 1, 1996 (James Cook, "The Making of Ministers," 9-12), and the following recommendation (as amended by the Advisory Committee on Church Vocations) was brought to the 1996 General Synod:

To distribute the Report of the Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the Reformed Church in American to all RCA congregations, clergy, classes, regional synods, theological professors, and theological students for study and response; and further, to request task force members be available to representatives of classes and other

interested groups in the RCA for discussion and consultation; and further, to request all responses be submitted to the task force (c/o James Cook, Western Theological Seminary, 101 E. 13th Street, Holland, MI 49423) on or before February 15, 1997; and further, to instruct the task force to present a final report to the 1997 General Synod.

### **The Response of the Church**

The church's response to the work of the task force was phenomenal. More than eighty communications in writing poured in from both lay and ordained individuals, from classes, regional synods, seminary faculties, and denominational commissions. The length of these communications varied from one page to nine single-spaced pages. In general they followed the format of this letter from a pastor:

I would like to begin by stating how impressed I was by the seriousness taken by the task force in examining this issue. I was also impressed by the overall content of the report, which reflected a sincere commitment to Jesus Christ and his church. That being said, however, I have reservations concerning several areas of the report which I feel compelled to comment upon.

The reservations expressed in this letter and its eighty companions ranged from mild concerns to strong opposition. The question, "How does the philosophy of a residency requirement differ from a required internship?" illustrates the former; the statement, "The residency program violates Reformed theology, polity, and practicality! The Classis of . . . cannot overstate its opposition to it," represents the latter.

In addition to this lively correspondence, members of the task force were invited to attend more than twenty forums from New York to California focusing upon their report. Equipped with a twenty-minute, informational video prepared specifically for such gatherings, members met for presentation and discussion with congregations, classes, regional synods, and denominational commissions. In both the forums and the correspondence the majority of participants agreed on the importance of the overarching concerns being addressed, appreciated the effort the task force had made, and affirmed the thinking of the task force on standards, teaching churches, and flexibility. Serious opposition, however, was focused on the logistics of the proposed Candidate Care Committee, the creation of the Commission on Ministerial Formation, and the proposed residency requirement. Copies of all written reports from the forums and of all letter responses were sent to each task force member, but for practical purposes,

subgroups of the task force were assigned responsibility to review each specific section of the draft report. During the months of October and November, 1996, and February and March, 1997, the task force met to revise the report in the light of the church's response.

The November, 1996, meeting was especially noteworthy. Having been made aware that in its membership pastors had minimal representation and seminarians were not represented at all, the task force had as its guests four pastors (John Buteyn, D. Marc de Waard, Jan Luben-Hoffman, and John Rottenberg) and three seminarians (Andrew De Braber, Lisa VanderWal, and Cynthia Van Luen). Major blocks of time at this two-day meeting permitted each of these guests to share personal and constituent responses to the draft report. This proved to be another helpful and rewarding component in the task force's listening process.

### **The Response of the Task Force**

Grateful for the remarkable interest and response of the church, the task force revised its report under the title, "Standards for the Preparation for Ministers of Word and Sacrament," and produced a document which it believed combined the mind of the church with the mandate of the synod.

#### *Items Retained and Revised*

A number of items from the draft report were retained with revisions. The "Theological Charter for the Office of Minister of Word and Sacrament" was substantially rewritten as a statement in three sections rather than two. Although the task force no longer felt that its contents needed to stand in their original place early in the report, the charter was viewed as too valuable to be completely eliminated. It is therefore retained in the final document as the Appendix. The all-important standards for personal qualities and professional competencies are presented under four headings: what the minister is to *be* (e.g., grounded in covenantal relationship to God; faithful, that is, keeps promises and has integrity in word, deed, and relationships; passionate about the gospel); what the ministers shall *know* (e.g., sufficient Greek and Hebrew to understand nuances of the original biblical text of the Word of God, the contents of the Old and New Testaments, the major themes and tenants of Reformed theology as expressed in the Reformed Standards of Unity and how to place these within the larger framework of the history of Christian doctrine); what the minister shall be able to *do* (e.g., lead worship with a Reformed theological understanding of liturgy, preach sermons that communicate clearly a scriptural message to a congregation and that elicit both new faith and discipleship, lead people to faith in Jesus Christ); and what the minister shall *equip and mobilize the church to do* (e.g., bear witness to the gospel, demonstrate stewardship in

the future-directed administration of Christian resources, to manage and motivate a congregation as a voluntary institution for purposeful ministry, promote mutual care in community).

Spelled out are the responsibilities and roles of every participant in the process of ministerial formation: congregations, candidates, classes, candidate care committees, regional synods, General Synod, seminaries, teaching churches, and mentors. This listing of roles is accompanied by an outline of the entire formation process which provides an overview of the candidate's journey from the moment a call to the ministry of Word and Sacrament is discerned, through the completion of theological education, to the post-ordination requirements for mentoring and continuing education.

Following careful review of the church's response, both positive and negative, the task force decided to retain its proposal for a Candidate Care Committee. In doing so it reaffirmed the value of a continuing committee to represent the four entities most committed to the candidate's success within the formation process: the classis, the seminary, the teaching church, and the home church or immediate support network. At the same time, it revised the proposal to create more flexibility and to address the potential logistical problem created by geographical distance. In its final form provision is made that, when necessary, the membership of the committee may change from time to time, and that when candidates are far removed from their classis of origin, the latter may invite a member of the classis in which the candidate resides to serve on the committee in its behalf.

There was never any doubt that the teaching church program would be retained. Some form of such congregational contribution to the formation of ministers has long been integral to theological education in the RCA. The task force and the church proved to be united in affirming the value of providing all candidates for the ordained ministry with this parish-based, in-ministry experience as a major component of the preparation process. In particular, the final report stipulates that the teaching church shall provide a significant period of ministry opportunity, preferably two continuous years, and that the training of supervisors and lay committees be carried out by the RCA seminaries and TEA, the regional synods and classes, and overseen by the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency.

Finally, fresh attention was also given to the recognition that in certain circumstances candidates need to be able to qualify for ordination in the RCA through an alternate process. The proposed alternate route is to begin when a congregation or classis assesses and affirms a candidate's skills and experience as related to the standards for the ministry of Word and Sacrament. The task force retained the element of required criteria but replaced the earlier proposed arbitrary age requirement with the stipulation that the candidate have at least five

years of experience in pastoral ministry. The steps in the alternate route itself are then set out in a way that carefully excludes any suggestion of a second-class ordination while providing that the assessment for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry be culturally and linguistically appropriate.

### *Items Rejected and Replaced*

Three significant components of the draft report were rejected and replaced. The first to go was the task force's proposal concerning how the General Synod might both improve standardization in the process of ministerial formation and exercise its oversight over it. These goals were to be achieved by the creation of new, permanent RCA commission: the Commission on Ministerial Formation. This ten-member commission was to be made up of theological educators, pastors, and laity, and would have oversight of the standards and guidelines for theological education in the RCA. In response to multiple concerns expressed by the church, the task force dropped this proposal and proposed in its place the creation of a Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency (MFCA). This agency would coordinate the formation roles of the congregation, classes, and seminaries; provide a unified and cooperative framework for New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS), Western Theological Seminary (WTS), and the Theological Education Agency (TEA) to work together; and review and monitor the implementation of the General Synod Standards for Ministerial Formation. Instead of the earlier heavy concentration of theological educators, its nine members are to represent the General Synod Council; the boards/directors of NBTS, WTS, and TEA; and the church at large. Its membership is to include at least four laypersons, three parish pastors, one specialized minister, and one active theological educator. Its responsibilities are to make both feasible and explicit the General Synod's oversight of ministerial formation.

The second rejected item of the draft report was the provision for a written component in the classis' examination for licensure. This attempt at standardization proved to be very difficult to integrate with the RCA's present polity. Fundamental questions were raised about how the preparation, administration, and evaluation of such an examination could be reconciled with the authority of the classis in such matters. The task force response was to move this standardized, written examination from the evaluation for licensure (the historic responsibility of classis) to the evaluation of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (the historic responsibility of the seminaries). The examination is to be prepared by a team of RCA seminary faculty members selected by the MFCA and is to include sections on biblical knowledge and exegesis, Reformed theology, church history and government, pastoral ministry

practice and ethics, church and society, and such other areas as the MFCA may determine.

The third rejected item was the proposal to insert a minimum twenty-four month residency requirement between the candidate's licensure and ordination. This proposal proved to be the most controversial of all. Objections theological, ecclesiastical, and practical came from every area of the church. In the process, the task force was pointed to the very helpful Group Mentoring Program developed by the Albany Synod as a preferable alternative to accomplish the desired goal: to facilitate the minister's successful passage from the preparatory experience of candidacy to full-time service. Following thorough discussion, the task force decided to replace the residency requirement with the stipulation that "within six months after ordination, the new minister of Word and Sacrament shall initiate a plan for continuing education in formation according to the standards, and shall participate in a three-year mentoring program." Specific areas for focus in this mentoring are to include spiritual growth and well-being, personal and family concerns, the discipline of reading and reflection, and the practice of ministry.

### Conclusion

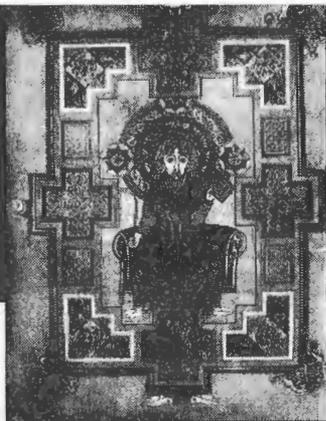
Making Christians is the work of God. Yet Jesus' word, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," makes clear the church's role. Making ministers is also the work of God. But Paul's word, "Do not neglect the gift that is in you," points to the human role in ministry formation. The task force represented the church's contemporary effort to re-form that human role.

In April, 1997, the revised report of the task force was presented to the General Synod Council. Its approval and recommendation brought it to the General Synod of the same year. The response of that body to the work of the task force was described this way in the July/August issue of the *Church Herald*: "Its report was gratefully received by the 1997 General Synod and its standards overwhelming approved, paving the way for necessary *Book of Church Order* revisions—and the creation of another task force to implement the new standards" (23). Thus, the final chapter of this story awaits the six new task force appointees and their translation of the task force's vision into a reality that will strengthen the church and her ministry into the next millennium.

# The Gospel of John

*A Theological  
Commentary*

Herman Ridderbos



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