

Bound for Life

In the previous article we touched briefly on the question of why it is so difficult to get out of the ministry. When Article 12 of the Church Order describes the “way out,” so to speak, it speaks about *exceptional and substantial reasons*. In other words, a minister cannot just say one day: “I no longer feel like doing this,” or “I got a better job offer—I quit.”

To understand this better, let’s have a closer look at Article 12. It does indeed describe the exit-option for exceptional and substantial reasons, but the main point is, that *a minister of the Word, once lawfully called, is bound to the service of the church for life*.

That sounds like a daunting commitment. And apparently it is not sufficient that the minister himself thinks that his reasons to get out are exceptional and substantial. No, the exit light will only turn green when the consistory with the deacons, the classis, and the deputies of the regional synod all agree on this.

BOUND TO WHAT?

Before we get to the question of “why” a minister is bound to serve for life, it is good to have a right idea of what it means and what it does not mean.

It does not mean that the office of minister has an indelible or permanent character. In the Roman Catholic Church ordination is a sacrament, called “Holy Orders.” This makes one a priest forever.

Through his church, God entrusted ministers with the glorious message of salvation by grace in Jesus Christ

When a priest misbehaves, he can lose his legal rights, like administering sacraments, but once ordained even the church cannot strip him of his “ordination.” The office is permanently bound to the person. Once a priest, always a priest.

In the Reformed churches the office is not bound to the person, but to the service of the church. In Article 6 it says that “no one shall serve in the ministry unless he is bound to a certain church.” This implies that if a man, once ordained as a minister, for whatever reason is no longer serving a certain church, he is no longer a minister. In some circumstances there is flexibility when it comes to applying this principle—think of the last paragraph in Article 11—but eventually a man who is not bound to a certain church will lose his ministerial status. The federation does not employ ministers “at large” or “in general service.”

It is important to keep this in mind when reading Article 12. We tend to focus on the words “a minister of the Word is bound

for life.” That’s the heading, after all. But the first question is, of course: bound to what? Well—to the service of the church, it says. Then the next question is: which church?

Now, it becomes important to remember the difference outlined above. The ordination of a priest makes him an office bearer in the worldwide institution of the (Roman Catholic) church, regardless of how and where and even if he is serving in that institution. The ordination of a Reformed minister makes him an office bearer in the local church that called him. As the Form for Ordination puts it: “The Holy Spirit has made you pastor and teacher of this congregation.” He is therefore bound to service in that church. Articles 6 and 12 speak the same language.

SERVING FOR LIFE, UNLESS . . .

And yes—that lawful calling and ordination is for life in that church. Is it always healthy, attractive, or satisfying to serve perhaps for decades as minister in the same church? That’s a different discussion. But the principle is clear. If no other local church calls him, he cannot say after ten or twenty-five years: “It has been nice getting to know you. But I’m done here.” Whether serving one church in your lifetime or six—the ministry is a calling for life. If he moves to a second or third congregation, he must again be prepared to serve that local church for the rest of his life.¹

It is true—all this does not mean that a minister cannot move from church A to church B. But it’s interesting that here again it is not just the minister on his own who one day decides that he is going to move from A to B, just because he feels like it.

Article 9 makes clear that, yes, a minister can move from church A to church B, but only if he is lawfully called by church B, and only if the consistory with the deacons of church A gives him permission to do so. That’s not just a formality. It indicates again that the office of minister of the Word is not tied to the man only, but to the man in his service of the church. That link is indispensable.

At the same time, the fact that the ministry is a calling for life in the service of the church does not mean that it is impossible for a minister to be released from his office. Three articles in the Church Order regulate scenarios that can lead to a situation where a minister will no longer serve the church for the rest of his life: Articles 11, 12, and 71. At this point we won’t look at these articles in more detail but note that in all those scenarios it is not the minister’s

decision to leave the ministry. In Article 12 the request may come from the minister, but in all three situations the judgment of the consistory with the deacons is decisive, in cooperation with the representatives of the federation: the classis and the deputies of regional synod. That makes sense. After all, those are the bodies that issued and approved his call.

BUT WHY?

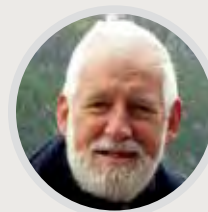
Two questions are left: the “why” question has not been answered yet, and what could qualify as *exceptional and substantial reasons*?

To begin with the latter—it is impossible to make a list or categorize such reasons. It is very personal. I remember one case. The brother was a capable, well-read theologian; he knew his biblical languages as no other; but he was deeply unhappy in the ministry. Eventually he became a teacher and he flourished.

Finally—why do we have the rule that a minister is bound to serve for life? As we saw earlier, through the call of the congregation he is called by the Holy God himself. But the same is true for elders and deacons (Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons). And they serve only a few years (Art. 24). In a future column I hope to come back to this “term-eldership” topic.

A practical aspect of having ministers serving for life is that those men have studied long and have been trained for many years. But there is more. In Scripture, God calls prophets and apostles to bring his Word to his people, and many were called for life. Think of Isaiah and Jeremiah in the OT, and the apostles, as well as men like Timothy and Titus in the NT.

The church can be busy with many good things, but its supreme task is to teach and preach God’s Word. Through his church, God entrusted ministers with the glorious message of salvation by grace in Jesus Christ, and they are called to deliver this message to God’s people, as long as they are able. 



Jan DeGelder, Minister Emeritus
Flamborough Canadian Reformed Church
jdegelder@cogeco.ca

¹ “Sometimes it was said of a minister with little chance to ever receive a call, ‘he brought his shovel along.’ This meant: he will stay here till his grave is dug and he is buried. In essence, this applies to all ministers, and they, too, had better realize it.” W. W. J. Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, Winnipeg 1990, 51