

APPENDIX 3

GUIDELINES FOR CHURCH VISITS IN THE FREE REFORMED CHURCHES OF AUSTRALIA ADOPTED BY SYNOD 1998

(Re: Article 44 of the Church Order¹)

Footnotes amended
according to Article 42 of the Acts
of Synod West Albany 2000

(1)

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

- Has the consistory informed the congregation about the annual church visit?
- Are all office-bearers present? If not, what are the reasons for their absence?
 - o Note: If two-thirds of the office-bearers are not present the visit shall be postponed.
- Has any member of the congregation brought any complaint to the consistory regarding church life in general since the previous visit?
- Does consistory need any help or information from the church visitors?

1. OFFICE AND SUPERVISION OF DOCTRINE

1.1 Ministers of the Word

- 1.1.1. Do the ministers of the Word fulfil their office faithfully?
- 1.1.2. Do they adhere to the Three Forms of Unity and the Church Order?
- 1.1.3. Is their conduct in public and private life befitting faithful servants of the Lord?
- 1.1.4. Does consistory supply the ministers with adequate means to support their families? (Article 11 CO)²

¹ ARTICLE 44 - Church visitors

Each year classis shall authorise at least two of the more experienced and able ministers to visit the churches in that year. If necessary, the classis may authorise a capable elder to carry out this task together with a minister. It shall be the task of these visitors to inquire whether all things are regulated and done in full harmony with the Word of God, whether the office-bearers fulfil the duties of their office faithfully as they have promised, and whether the Church Order is being observed and maintained in every respect, in order that they may in good time fraternally admonish those who are found negligent in anything, and that by their good counsel and advice all things may be directed towards the edification and preservation of Christ's church. They shall submit written reports of their visits to classis.

² ARTICLE 11 - Proper support

The consistory, with the deacons, on behalf of the congregation which it represents in this matter, shall provide for the proper support of its minister(s).

- 1.1.5 What arrangements has consistory made for the retirement of its ministers according to Article 13 of the Church Order?³
- 1.1.6 Is the preaching in conformity with God's Word and the Three Forms of Unity?
- 1.1.7 Is it evident from their preaching that the ministers diligently study the Word of God?
- 1.1.8 Is the preaching evaluated by consistory? (Articles 20 and 26 CO)⁴
- 1.1.9 What are the results of such evaluation?
- 1.1.10 The positive fruit of the preaching promised in Scripture is growth in love for the Lord, and therefore for the neighbour. How is this fruit evident?
- 1.1.11 How does consistory activate and stimulate Bible study societies for the youth and adults?

(The following two questions apply only if the church is vacant)

- 1.1.12 What attempts are being made to call a minister and does this take place according to Articles 3c and 43 CO?⁵
- 1.1.13 Is the counsellor called upon in all important cases, and is he willing to help?

³ ARTICLE 13 - Retirement of ministers

If a minister of the Word, by reason of age, sickness or otherwise, is rendered incapable of performing the duties of his office he shall retain the honour and title of minister of the Word. He shall also retain his official bond with the church he served last, and this church shall provide honourably for his support. The same obligation exists towards a minister's widow and orphans.

⁴ ARTICLE 20 - Task of elders

The elders shall together with the ministers of the Word govern the congregation with pastoral care and discipline. For the upbuilding of the congregation they shall make home visits as often as is profitable but at least once a year. They shall watch that their fellow office-bearers are faithful in carrying out their duties and ensure that in the congregation everything is done decently and in good order.

ARTICLE 26 - False doctrine

To ward off false doctrines and errors the ministers and elders shall use the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning and admonition, in the ministry of the Word as well as in Christian teaching and family visiting.

⁵ ARTICLE 3 - The calling to office: C Ministers

Before a vacant church extends a call the advice of the counsellor shall be sought. The approval of classis shall be required for a repeated call to the same minister for the same vacancy.

ARTICLE 43 - Counsellors

Each vacant church shall request classis to appoint as counsellor the minister it desires as such, to the end that he may assist the consistory in maintaining good order and especially may lend his aid in the matter of the calling of a minister; he shall also sign the letter of call.

1.2 Elders and Deacons

- 1.2.1 Does the calling and the election and re-election of elders and deacons take place according to the Church Order? (Articles 3a, 3b and 23 CO)⁶
- 1.2.2 Have all office-bearers signed the subscription form for office-bearers? (Articles 24 and 25 CO)⁷
- 1.2.3 How many elders and how many deacons does the church have?
- 1.2.4 How is it determined that their present number is sufficient?
- 1.2.5 Do the office-bearers diligently attend the church services?
- 1.2.6 Do the office-bearers diligently attend the meetings of the consistory?
- 1.2.7 How do the elders faithfully carry out the duties of their office according to the Form for Ordination?
- 1.2.8 How do the deacons faithfully carry out the duties of their office according to the Form for Ordination?
- 1.2.9 Is their conduct in public and private life befitting faithful servants of the Lord?
- 1.2.10 How do they prepare themselves for their office?

⁶ ARTICLE 3 - The calling to office: A. All office-bearers.

No one shall take any office upon himself without having been lawfully called thereto. The calling to office shall take place by the consistory with the deacons, with the cooperation of the congregation, after prayer, and in accordance with the local regulations adopted for that purpose. Prior to the ordination or installation the names of the appointed brothers shall be publicly announced to the congregation for its approval on at least two consecutive Sundays. If no lawful objection is brought forward the ordination or installation shall take place with the use of the adopted Form.

ARTICLE 3 - B. Elders and deacons. The consistory with the deacons shall give the congregation the opportunity to draw the attention of the consistory to brothers deemed suitable for the respective offices. The consistory with the deacons shall present to the congregation at the most twice as many candidates as there are vacancies to be filled. From this number the congregation shall choose as many office-bearers as are needed. Those elected shall be appointed by the consistory with the deacons.

ARTICLE 23 - Term of office

The elders and deacons shall serve two or more years according to local regulations, and a proportionate number shall retire each year. The places of the retiring office-bearers shall be taken by others unless the consistory with the deacons judges that the circumstances and the well-being of the church render it advisable to call them into office again. In that case the rule of Article 3 shall be observed.

⁷ ARTICLE 24 - Subscription to the Confession by ministers and teaching staff

All ministers of the Word and all teaching staff at the theological seminary shall subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity of The Free Reformed Churches of Australia by signing the Form(s) adopted for that purpose. Anyone refusing to subscribe in that manner shall not be ordained or installed in office. Anyone who, being in office, refuses to do so shall because of that very fact be immediately suspended from office by the consistory, and classis shall not receive him. If he obstinately persists in his refusal he shall be deposed from office.

ARTICLE 25 - Subscription to the Confession by elders and deacons

Elders and deacons shall also subscribe to these Three Forms of Unity by signing the Form adopted for that purpose. Anyone being in office who refuses to do so shall because of that very fact be immediately suspended from office by the consistory. If he obstinately persists in his refusal he shall be deposed from office.

- 1.2.11 Is there a good liaison between the respective offices regarding the execution of their office?
- 1.2.12 As to the ministry of mercy, does the congregation contribute liberally and willingly for the needy?
- 1.2.13 How do the deacons report to the congregation?
- 1.2.14 Is equality maintained among the office-bearers according to Article 22 CO?⁸

2. ASSEMBLIES

- 2.1 How often are consistory meetings held? (Articles 36 and 37 CO)⁹
- 2.2 Does the clerk keep an accurate record of all important matters? (Article 30 CO)¹⁰
- 2.3 Are only ecclesiastical matters dealt with in an ecclesiastical manner? (Article 30 CO)¹¹
- 2.4 Are all consistory meetings opened and closed with prayer? (Article 29 CO)¹²

⁸ ARTICLE 22 - Equality of respective duties

In the local congregation equality shall be maintained among the ministers, among the elders, and among the deacons, regarding their respective duties, and in other matters, as much as possible.

⁹ ARTICLE 36 - Consistory

In all churches there shall be a consistory composed of the minister(s) of the Word and the elders. It shall meet regularly and be chaired by the minister. If a church is served by more than one minister they shall chair in turn. The consistory shall also meet regularly with the deacons to deal with those matters as described for that purpose by the Church Order, and further with all things which the consistory considers necessary for the general management, including the material affairs of the church.

ARTICLE 37 - Consistory and the deacons

Where the number of elders and deacons is small the deacons may be added to the consistory by local arrangement. This shall invariably be done where there are less than three elders and less than three deacons. In these circumstances matters pertaining to supervision and discipline shall be handled with the advice of the deacons and matters pertaining to the office of deacons with the advice of the elders.

¹⁰ ARTICLE 34 - Chairman and clerk

In all assemblies there shall be a chairman and a clerk. The chairman's task is to present and explain clearly the matters to be dealt with and ensure that everyone observes due order in speaking; he shall deny the floor to those who argue about minor things or who let themselves be carried away and cannot control their emotions, and discipline those who refuse to listen. His task shall cease when the assembly ends. The clerk shall keep an accurate record of all things worthy of being recorded.

¹¹ ARTICLE 30 - Authority of the assemblies

These assemblies shall only deal with ecclesiastical matters and in an ecclesiastical manner. A major assembly shall deal only with matters which could not be finished in the minor assembly or which belong to its churches in common. A new matter may be put on its agenda only when the minor assembly has dealt with it.

¹² ARTICLE 29 - Proceedings

The proceedings of all assemblies shall begin and end with prayer.

- 2.5 Do the deacons meet on a regular basis? (Article 40 CO)¹³
- 2.6 Which matters are dealt with by consistory in the presence of the deacons, and which are dealt with in their absence?
- 2.7 Are decisions of major assemblies faithfully adhered to? (Article 31 CO)¹⁴
- 2.8 Does consistory see to it that all financial commitments established by synod are faithfully paid?
- 2.9 Are boundaries between congregations clearly defined and does consistory adhere to these?
- 2.10 How often does the consistory meet with the congregation and what is dealt with in these meetings?
- 2.11 Are funds and title deeds kept in such a place and manner that there is no occasion for misuse, or difficulties in the event of death?
- 2.12 Are the archives of the church safely kept?
- 2.13 Is there a functional Committee of Management which has a clear mandate regarding its duties and responsibilities?
- 2.14 How is the congregation informed about the finances of the church?
- 2.15 Are the funds of the church and of the deacons managed with good care and sufficient control?
- 2.16 In which way is the church involved in mission work?
- 2.17 In which way is the church involved in evangelisation?

3. Worship, sacraments and ceremonies

- 3.1 Are the sacraments administered according to Article 51 CO?¹⁵
- 3.2 Is Holy Baptism administered as soon as feasible, according to Article 52 CO?¹⁶

¹³ ARTICLE 40 - Meetings of deacons

The deacons shall meet regularly to deal with the matters pertaining to their office. Their meetings shall begin and end with prayer.

¹⁴ ARTICLE 31 - Appeal

If anyone complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly he shall have the right of appeal to the major assembly; and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order.

¹⁵ ARTICLE 51 - Administration of sacraments

The sacraments shall be administered only in a church service by a minister of the Word with the use of the adopted Form, and under the supervision of the elders.

¹⁶ ARTICLE 52 - Baptism of infants

The consistory shall ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism to the children of believers as soon as feasible.

- 3.3 How is the purpose and significance of Baptism made known to the parents?
- 3.4 How does consistory see to it that parents uphold their baptismal vows according to Article 53 CO?¹⁷
- 3.5 How does consistory activate the congregation to maintain and establish Reformed education? (Article 53 CO)¹⁸
- 3.6 For which age groups and how often are catechism classes held?
- 3.7 How many attend catechism instruction?
- 3.8 Is there faithful attendance? Are reasons given for absences?
- 3.9 What is taught?
- 3.10 What are the fruits of this teaching?
- 3.11 Are there classes for special groups or instruction for individuals? If so, please describe these.
- 3.12 How often are the classes visited by the elders?
- 3.13 How does consistory see to it that no one is admitted to the church rashly? (Articles 55 and 57 CO)¹⁹
- 3.14 How often is the Lord's Supper celebrated? (Article 56 CO)²⁰
- 3.15 How is the congregation prepared for the Lord's Supper?
- 3.16 How does consistory guard against the profaning of the Lord's Supper? (Articles 20 and 57 CO)²¹

¹⁷ ARTICLE 53 - Baptismal promise and education

The consistory shall make sure that the parents honour their vows to instruct their children, to the utmost of their power, in the doctrine of the Scriptures as summarised in the confessions, and to have them instructed in the same by the instruction provided by the consistory.

In accordance with the same vow, the consistory shall see to it that the parents, to the best of their ability, and with the cooperation of the communion of saints, give their children education (as stipulated by the civil government) which is based on Scripture and Confession.

¹⁸ ARTICLE 53 - See footnote 17.

¹⁹ ARTICLE 55 - Baptism of adults

Adults who have not been baptised shall be grafted into the Christian church by holy baptism upon their public profession of faith.

ARTICLE 57 - Admission to the Lord's Supper

The consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life. Members of sister churches shall be admitted on the basis of a good attestation concerning their doctrine and conduct.

²⁰ ARTICLE 56 - Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper shall be celebrated at least once every three months.

²¹ ARTICLE 20 see footnote 4

ARTICLE 57 see footnote 20

- 3.17 How does consistory encourage non-communicant members to request admission to the Lord's Supper? (Articles 54, 55 and 57 CO)²²
- 3.18 Does consistory take care that admission to the Lord's Supper is in keeping with Articles 54, 55 and 57 CO?²³
- 3.19 Are those who do not attend visited and if necessary sternly admonished? (Article 20 CO)²⁴
- 3.20 Are names, births, baptisms, public professions of faith, marriages, departures and death of members duly recorded in an accurate and accessible manner? (Article 58 CO)²⁵
- 3.21 How many communicant and non-communicant members does the congregation have?
- 3.22 Are attestations issued to departing communicant members?
- 3.23 Are attestations for non-communicant members sent to recipient churches?
- 3.24 Is the Word of God proclaimed twice every Lord's Day? (Article 62 CO)²⁶
- 3.25 Is the Heidelberg Catechism explained according to Article 63 CO?²⁷
- 3.26 On Lord's Days is the Law of God proclaimed in one service and the Apostles' Creed confessed in the other?
- 3.27 Are only authorised persons allowed to deliver sermons? (Article 3a,c)²⁸
- 3.28 In reading services are only sermons read which were prepared by ministers of The Free Reformed Churches of Australia or their sister churches?
- 3.29 Are ecclesiastical feast days observed according to Article 65 CO?²⁹

²² ARTICLE 54 - Profession of faith

Those who desire to publicly profess their faith shall be examined by the consistory on their motivation and knowledge of the doctrine of God's Word. The public profession shall take place in a church service, with the use of the adopted Form.

ARTICLES 55 and 57 see footnote 20

²³ ARTICLES 54, 55 and 57 see footnote 23

²⁴ ARTICLE 20 see footnote 4

²⁵ ARTICLE 58 - Church records

The consistory shall maintain church records in which the names of the members and the dates of their birth, baptism, public profession of faith, marriage, and departure or death are properly recorded.

²⁶ ARTICLE 62 - Church services

The consistory shall call the congregation together for church services twice on the Lord's Day.

²⁷ ARTICLE 63 - Catechism preaching

The consistory shall ensure that as a rule once every Sunday the doctrine of God's Word as summarised in the Heidelberg Catechism is proclaimed, preferably in the afternoon service.

²⁸ ARTICLE 3a and c - Calling to office

3a see footnote 6; 3c see footnote 5.

²⁹ ARTICLE 65 - Ecclesiastical feast days

- 3.30 Are marriages of members solemnised or confirmed according to Article 67 CO?³⁰
- 3.31 Are mixed marriages solemnised or confirmed?
- 3.32 How does consistory deal with forced marriages?
- 3.33 How does consistory deal with requests for marriage by non-communicant members?
- 3.34 Is Article 68 of the Church Order upheld with respect to funerals?³¹

4. CHURCH DISCIPLINE

- 4.1 How often are members of the congregation visited? (Article 20 CO)³²
- 4.2 How do home visits conform to the purpose for which they are intended? (Article 20 CO). Does the minister participate in these home visits and any other visits?³³
- 4.3 What is the format of the home visits?
- 4.4 How often are those visited who cannot attend the church services?
- 4.5 What is done for lonely brothers and sisters?
- 4.6 How does consistory deal with members living away from the church?
- 4.7 Do the ministers, elders and deacons exhort and admonish one another and exercise Christian censure according to Article 78 of the Church Order?³⁴
- 4.8 What evidence is there that members of the congregation exercise supervision and discipline among themselves according to Article 68 to 73 of the Church Order?³⁵

On Christmas Day, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Ascension Day, and at Pentecost the consistory shall call the congregation together for church services. The sacred events which the congregation commemorates in particular on these days shall therein be proclaimed.

³⁰ ARTICLE 67 - Marriage

The consistory shall ensure that the members of the congregation marry only in the Lord, and that the ministers - as authorised by the consistory - solemnise only such marriages as are in accordance with the Word of God. The solemnisation of a marriage shall take place in a private ceremony, with the use of the adopted Form.

³¹ ARTICLE 68 - Funerals

Church services shall not be conducted for funerals.

³² ARTICLE 20 see footnote 4

³³ ARTICLE 20 see footnote 4

³⁴ ARTICLE 78 - Christians censure

The ministers, elders, and deacons shall mutually exercise Christian censure and shall exhort and kindly admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office.

³⁵ ARTICLE 69 - Christian discipline

Church discipline shall be exercised in accordance with the Word of God and to His honour. Its aim is to reconcile the sinner with God and the neighbour, and to remove the offence from the church of Christ.

- 4.9 Does consistory exercise supervision and discipline over the congregation according to Articles 69 to 79 of the Church Order?³⁶
- 4.10 What information can consistory provide about censures that have taken place since the last church visit?
- 4.11 What information can consistory provide about those who withdraw their membership from the congregation since the last church visit?
- 4.12 Are there dominant sins in the congregation?
- 4.13 What is done to promote the repentance of censured members? (Articles 73, 74 and 79 CO)³⁷
- 4.14 Does consistory ward off false doctrine and errors in the preaching, teaching and visiting? (Article 26 CO)³⁸
- 4.15 What is consistory's response to members who are also members of guilds, trade unions, or other organisations which commit them to un-Scriptural principles or practices? (Article 73 CO)?³⁹

ARTICLE 73 - Discipline in respect of communicant members

A communicant member who obstinately rejects the admonition by the consistory or who has committed a public or some other serious sin shall be suspended from the Lord's Supper. If he continues to harden himself in sin, the consistory shall publicly announce this to the congregation so that the congregation may be engaged in prayer and admonition and the excommunication may not take place without its cooperation.

³⁶ ARTICLE 69 see footnote 35

ARTICLE 79 - Discipline in respect of non-communicant members

A baptised member shall be admonished by the consistory when he as an adult fails to make public profession of faith or when in other respects he is not loyal to the calling to new obedience in God's covenant. If he obstinately rejects the admonition of the consistory and thereby clearly demonstrates that he is indifferent and averse to the covenant or is even hostile to the service of the Lord, the matter shall be made known to the congregation without mentioning the name of the sinner; and the congregation shall be urged to pray for him. If the member continues in sin and is unwilling to listen to the admonitions, then with the advice of the classis (classis church) the consistory shall make a second public announcement, mentioning the name of the sinner and the term after which the excommunication shall take place. If he does not in the said term show any real repentance, the consistory shall in a church service exclude him from the communion of the church, using the adopted Form. If he, after this excommunication, comes to repentance and desires to rejoin the communion of the church, he shall be admitted by way of his public profession of faith after the consistory has made his repentance known to the congregation.

³⁷ ARTICLE 73 see footnote 36

ARTICLE 74 - Announcements during the procedure

In the first public announcement the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned. In the second public announcement, which shall be made only after the advice of classis has been obtained, the name and address of the sinner shall be mentioned. In the third public announcement a date shall be set at which the excommunication of the sinner shall take place in accordance with the adopted Form. The time interval between the various announcements shall be determined by the consistory.

³⁸ ARTICLE 26 see footnote 4

³⁹ ARTICLE 73 see footnote 36