

Recommended Change in the Book of Procedures for Presbytery and Council

As the CREC has grown larger, we have more contact with denominations and churches outside our own confederation. One of the important issues that we face in our relationships with other churches and denominations is how to handle excommunicated church members and defrocked ministers. On the one hand, if churches were anything like normal, we would recognize the discipline of other churches and denominations without question. But the sad fact is that the churches of Christ are not anything like normal. Therefore, on the other hand, we cannot take for granted that excommunication or defrocking have been handled fairly or righteously. We have a responsibility to reconsider the discipline of other churches and denominations.

This matter concerns pastors wanting to become ministers of a CREC church, missionaries wanting to be supported by CREC churches, and members seeking to join CREC churches. In the case of a member, missionary, or pastor who is under some form of discipline, has been excommunicated, or has been defrocked, we the member churches of the CREC have an obligation to conduct ourselves so as to preserve the unity of the body of Christ, which means that we should usually recognize the discipline and decisions of other Christian churches. But we also have an obligation to the individuals and families who come to us who may not have been treated fairly or righteously in the church they left.

In such circumstances, we are in a very sensitive position, especially when we are considering pastors and missionaries, but in some cases even in the transfer of a church member. Pastors and missionaries are church leaders. Their influence is broad and the matters surrounding a defrocking or excommunication of a pastor or missionary may be complex, involving multiple churches, trials, and appeals. Sometimes this may involve more than one denomination or church organization. When pastors or missionaries come to us who have been disciplined in some form by another church, it is important that we investigate matters carefully and fairly, not being prejudiced against an individual who may have been treated with undue rigor or judged by improper standards, nor being disrespectful to church courts and decisions of other denominations or churches.

The question, then, is what procedure or process is appropriate for dealing with this kind of problem? Let's begin by reviewing our present procedure. First, local church membership in the CREC is decided at the local church level. Under the provisions of Article IV.D, it would only be in the most unusual circumstances that a question of church membership could be addressed by the presbytery.

Ordination is treated slightly differently. We test would-be ministers at presbytery level and recommend that presbytery be involved in the process of approving a minister for a local church. Our constitution does not require that a local church agree with the decision of the presbytery, but it does state that rejection of the recommendation of presbytery might bring a local church under the sanction of presbytery, depending on the reasons for rejecting the candidate and the reasons the local church decided to approve the candidate. The point is that Christian ministers are subject to greater scrutiny and presbytery takes part in the process.

This is also true in the case of churches joining the CREC from another denomination, affiliation, or from independency. Candidate churches and mission churches are examined by their sponsoring church and undergo an exam of some sort when they join the presbytery, but we do not have a process in place to deal with difficult situations that involve church discipline.

These procedures offer at least a guideline for considering how we should deal with those who come to us from other churches or denominations. In the case of members wishing to transfer to a CREC church, the normal procedure would be for the elders of the local church to review their application for membership and consider any matters that might be a problem. If there are lingering questions about their relationship to a previous church or denomination, the elders would normally be the ones to judge the matter. But it is certainly possible to imagine cases where the elders of the local church would want to consult with the presbytery before coming to a decision. And it is even possible to imagine cases in which the presbytery would want to review the application for transfer. I am thinking in the first instance of an application for transfer of membership that might involve difficult decisions about relationships with one or more churches either in or outside of the CREC in cases where the local church felt it needed help with making a judgment. In the later instance, I am thinking of cases in which there is enough controversy surrounding a particular individual and his history that the reputation of the presbytery or the CREC as a whole may be on the line. In either of the two scenarios above, the involvement of the presbytery is to be desired. In the first case, it would be sought by the local church. In the second case, the initiative could come either from the local church or from the presbytery. In an extremely sensitive situation, it is possible to imagine the initiative coming from council.

Providing concrete illustrations for this sort of thing is difficult and maybe the following attempt is inadequate. But perhaps the first sort of case may be illustrated in the following. Mr. Jones and his family were members of a Roman Catholic church in a community of about 10,000 people. As they studied the Bible, they were led to protestant convictions and they spoke about their newfound faith openly to their friends in their church. They continued to attend the Roman Catholic church which they grew up in for about a year after they were persuaded it was not serving God properly. Their reasons for staying were 1) they did not yet know where to go; and 2) they felt an obligation to talk to friends and other church members about the problems they saw in the Roman Catholic church. As the local priest became more and more frustrated with their attitude and especially their criticism of the Roman Catholic church, he instituted the process of excommunication. The Jones family was upset and left the church before the trials were completed, but they were excommunicated from the Roman Catholic church for being heretical trouble makers.

Not knowing protestantism well and not really knowing where to go next, the Jones family attended the nearest protestant church to their home. It was a liberal Methodist church and they became dissatisfied with it relatively soon, but they had friends in that church as well, so they stayed on for a while. As they had at the Roman Catholic church, the Jones tried to influence others around them. They criticized the liberalism in the pulpit, in the Sunday school programs, and church publications. The Methodist minister also became upset with the Jones family and asked them to desist from their criticism of the church.

When the Jones family came to the CREC church, they had already displeased community leaders in the Roman Catholic and Methodist churches and had gained for themselves a reputation as trouble makers. In the small city of 10,000 residents, they were known as disruptive people, in spite of the fact that their family had lived there for a long time and had caused no trouble before their change of faith. But there were ambiguities surrounding their situation. There were complaints against them that seemed to ring true, at least at some level. In the small town in which they live, the Jones family was widely criticized, but also loved by their friends. There was also concern that the local CREC congregation, a small, struggling group which was just getting started, would be hurt by allowing them to join. The elders did not want to be unfair to the Jones family, but they also did not want to simply bring them in as members without in any way considering their past. What should the elders do? Should they talk to the local Roman Catholic priest and the Methodist minister? How should they deal with the excommunication? The priest and the minister of the CREC church work together in opposing abortion and have hitherto had a good relationship.

In a hypothetical situation of this sort, it would be natural for the pastor and elders to consult with with the minister of the presbytery and/or pastors and elders from other churches. If Mr. Jones were a local politician, or well enough known that his church membership would potentially become a matter of public controversy, it is conceivable that the local church elders would persuade him to bring his case to presbytery so that he, and the local church, too, could be vindicated by a larger body. Nothing in our constitution requires presbytery involvement, but a local church might desire it.

The second situation, that in which the presbytery itself takes the initiative, would be an exaggerated form of the first situation, a case involving a man whose reputation and public status could influence the CREC as a whole. In such circumstances, it is conceivable that presbytery or council would request the local church to seek the involvement of presbytery.

Dealing with problems related to ministers and missionaries is more complicated because these men are public figures and interdenominational problems are far more likely to arise from their transfer to the CREC, especially when they are subjected to discipline, or have been excommunicated or defrocked. I had originally thought that perhaps Burke Shade or Steve Wilkins might provide an illustration for this sort of matter, but in Burke's case, he had already transferred to the FORC before the PCA took action against him and he came into the CREC from the FORC. In Steve's case, there were no charges, admonitions, or sanctions against him in the PCA when he transferred to the CREC. But both of them were controversial figures and some sort of exam vindicating them of false accusations might have been appropriate.

We have had another situation that is extremely complicated and I do not know the details well enough to rehearse them accurately, so let me just state it in general terms. A church wishing to join the CREC is being sued by another local church from a different fellowship. This is the sort of case that requires a serious presbytery review, perhaps a committee appointed to research and bring its recommendation to presbytery. Whatever action the CREC decides to take here, it involves the reputation of the presbytery and the denomination.

A minister bringing his congregation into the CREC does go through a thorough examination by the church recommending his church to the presbytery, but it seems clear

that at least in some cases, more should be required. But what about a pastor from outside the CREC who is applying to become a CREC minister, but who is under some form of discipline, or has been defrocked or excommunicated by his previous denomination or church? It seems to me obvious that he should be examined by presbytery, but I am not sure this is required by our present constitution or book of procedures. Also, the presbytery examination may not be as thorough as it should be. In the case of accusations against a minister, there should be a sufficient review of the case that considers the evidence and accusations. In cases where it is possible and thought desirable, a representative from the denomination or church making the accusations might be invited to presbytery.

Even for a minister in good standing in the CREC, there may be times when presbytery should examine him in order to vindicate him of false charges. Doug Wilson provides a complex example in two areas. One, he was informally, but publicly charged with violating the faith of the Westminster Standards. Doug himself, in consultation with the elders of his church, sought for a presbytery trial in order to prove his orthodoxy. Given his stature in the CREC and the fact that he is so well-known outside of the CREC as well, a public trial of his faith and vindication of his orthodoxy was considered important, though no one in the CREC doubted him. Two, he has been accused by former church members of immoral conduct. But here the charges were frivolous. The accusers refused to cooperate with righteous authority or to submit to Biblical procedures. The case could not be brought before presbytery without injustice since the serious hearing of a frivolous charge would itself be unjust.

The point is that we already recognize the importance of bringing difficult cases involving Christian ministers before presbytery. But we have not offered a clearly defined procedure for dealing with ministers and missionaries who may be under some form of discipline from another denomination or church. The Federal Vision and paedocommunion are still important topics and Christian ministers associated with either of these may be expelled from their denominations. Such ministers may seek refuge with us and we want to welcome those who are worthy, but we also must have a set of defined procedures for dealing with these cases: something that goes beyond appearing before presbytery and answering questions. It must involve relating to the previous church or denomination in some form, even if it is just a letter from the Minister of Presbytery informing them that the presbytery of the CREC has examined the case of the pastor in question and finds that he is not guilty of heresy or church splitting and will be accepted into the CREC.

I recommend that we revise the book of procedures of the presbytery and council to include procedures for dealing people under some form of church discipline or who have been excommunicated from their previous denomination or church, including churches who wish to affiliate with the CREC, officers in a mission church, pastors, missionaries, and members transferring to our churches. In the case of missionaries seeking support from a CREC church, I recommend that the book of procedures include a process by which a missionary under discipline or excommunicated from another denomination or church would have to be examined by presbytery before local CREC churches would be allowed to support him. Of course, our constitution allows the local church to disagree with the judgment of presbytery. If presbytery regarded the local church as making an egregious

error of judgment, sanctions against the local church, including expulsion from the CREC would be possible.

The wording I suggest follows.

1. When a church wishes to affiliate with the CREC and an officer or officers of that church are under some form of discipline or have been excommunicated from their previous denomination or church, prior to reception into the CREC, the presbytery by means of a court/commission should inquire thoroughly into the matter so as to render a judgment regarding the case.

2. A pastor who wishes to become a pastor of a CREC church, join a CREC church, or bring his church into the CREC but is under some form of church discipline or has been excommunicated from another church must undergo a presbytery examination of his faith and life before he can be accepted. The examination must include a careful review of charges and evidence.

3. A missionary who seeks support from or membership in a CREC church, but is under some form of church discipline or has been excommunicated from another church must undergo a presbytery examination of his faith and life before he can be accepted. The examination must include a careful review of charges and evidence.

4. A church member who wishes to transfer to a CREC church, but is under some form of church discipline or has been excommunicated from another church should undergo a presbytery examination of his faith and life before he can be accepted if his case is especially well-known and the reputation of the presbytery or the CREC seems to be at stake.

I also recommend that presbytery recommend that Article IV.D be revised to include a reference to this sort of procedure, if it is deemed necessary. As it is stated now, it may be understood to forbid this sort of procedure. But I am not sure.