

Overture RSE 2021

The overture was presented by the Ancaster CanRC to Classis Ontario West March 2021. It was then presented by COW March 2021 to Regional Synod East 2021. It is now being submitted by RSE 2021 to General Synod 2022.

Introduction

Esteemed Brothers,

Since near the beginning of our federation of churches, theological students wishing to undergo a preparatory examination with a view to becoming eligible for call within the churches have been bound to do so in the classis in which they live, as decided by General Synod Homewood–Carman 1958 and mirrored in our Church Order (Art. 4B). For reasons that we hope will become clear in this overture, we believe it would be better to change this regulation and the Church Order to read that the preparatory examination will take place in the student’s home classis, that is, the classis to which the church belongs which sent the original attestation to the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS) at the time of the student’s enrollment. Exceptions will need to be made for students originating outside of the Canadian/American Reformed federation, but the thrust of our proposal concerns the regular occurrence of students arising out of our federation who seek such an examination.

Since the start of our federational seminary in Hamilton in 1968, Classis Ontario West¹ has conducted the bulk of both the licensure examinations (where students seek to speak an edifying word, CO Art. 21) and the preparatory examinations (where students seek to become candidates for the ministry, CO Art. 4B). In practice this means that most students are examined twice by COW (albeit at subsequent meetings). While the churches of COW have undertaken this work to the best of their ability, they believe the time has come to share that responsibility (and the accompanying workload) across the federation of churches.

Observations

1. Since the start of our federation of churches in the 1950s and as a result of the Lord’s blessing, the number and frequency of brothers seeking to undergo a preparatory examination has steadily increased. This was augmented further when in 1968 the federation established what is now the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS) which soon became the primary source of ministers for the federation. With one exception, in each of the decades since CRTS opened, the seminary has matriculated an increasing number of MDiv students. The average number of MDiv graduates per year has risen from 1.3 in the 1970s to 4.1 in the 2010s, with two of the largest graduating classes occurring in 2016 and 2019.²
2. GS 1958 adopted a set of regulations for the preparatory examination which included where those examinations are to take place: “The preparatory examination will take place in the classis where the student resides.”³ The current Church Order reflects this regulation in Article 4B where it states that, “Only those shall be declared eligible for call within the churches who (1) have passed a preparatory examination by the classis in which they live. . .”
3. Since CRTS has always been based in Hamilton, theological students have typically moved to this city to engage in their studies. Naturally, they become members of a local church and very frequently they become members in one of the churches belonging to the area of Classis

¹ Previously part of Classis Ontario South. Due to growth, that classis eventually split into Classis Niagara and Classis Ontario West, the latter of which includes many of the churches closest to the Seminary.

² See Appendix 1 “MDiv. Enrollment at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary”

³ See Appendix 2 for the original Artikel 188 (in Dutch) of the *Acta van de Synode Homewood–Carman* and Appendix 3 for the English translation of the same.

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Ontario West. In practice this has meant that when it comes time for students to undergo a classical examination (i.e. licensure or preparatory), the majority of them undertake to do this in COW.

4. The classis examination for licensure consists of evaluating the student’s sermon proposal as well as testing him in the area of doctrine and creeds. On average this occupies nearly two hours of meeting time per student. The preparatory examination is more involved and consists of evaluating the student’s sermon proposal as well as testing him in the areas of Old Testament exegesis, New Testament exegesis, and doctrine and creeds. On average this occupies nearly three hours of meeting time per student.
5. Since the start of our federation of churches, the means and cost of travel going from the eastern to the western churches has changed dramatically. In the 1950s cross-country travel was mainly by train or automobile, taking many days and costing many dollars. In the last decades, air travel has become far more common-place and, by comparison, costs much less. Many church members travel east and west on a regular basis for pleasure or business. In our time, air travel is not considered an extraordinary expense and is one of the most efficient ways to travel across Canada.
6. Regional Synod West of November 2, 2015, overtured General Synod Dunnville 2016 asking “That the Classis of a theological student’s home church conduct his examination to be given consent to speak an edifying word, or to be declared eligible for call.” In denying this overture GS 2016 stated, “Although there may be merit to the ideas contained in the Overture, neither part of the Overture can be adopted in its current form.”
 - a. A number of issues with this overture were raised by Synod Dunnville in Article 112 as follows:

“3.2 Overture 2 is incomplete:

 - 3.2.1 The Overture does not contain a clear request for action, nor a statement that can be adopted. Neither the statement of proposal, nor the paragraphs under the heading of “Overture”, could be adopted by synod in their current form.
 - 3.2.2 The specifics of how such an overture would be implemented have not been spelled out. This is evident in the concerns raised by the letters from the churches. The Overture requests that CO 4B be changed. However, implementation of the proposal would also require:
 - 3.2.2.1 Interaction with GS 1958 Art. 188. This article stipulates the guidelines for ecclesiastical examinations in the federation. These guidelines would need to be changed;
 - 3.2.2.2 Direction for local classes, whose regulations would need to be changed to accommodate this overture;
 - 3.2.2.3 A recommendation regarding possible funding needed to cover the extra cost of travel for the students. This, in turn, could require further amendments to the Support Guidelines of the CNSF;
 - 3.2.2.4 A recommendation for how to deal with foreign students.”
 - b. Specific concerns and questions raised by various churches to GS 2016 (and recorded in the Observations of Art. 112) of how the proposed change would be implemented include the following:
 - i. Who will bear the travel costs of students seeking to be examined in their home classis?
 - ii. Extra travel may be a burden on the students.
 - iii. Which church will issue an attestation for a student seeking to be examined in their home classis?

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- iv. How will students seeking to be examined for licensure (Art. 21 CO) be accommodated in time to begin their summer internship under the Pastoral Training Program?
 - v. Would it be possible for students to request that their church of residence could become their “home church” for the purposes of being examined?
7. GS 2019, in response to two overtures seeking a change to the timing of when students of theology may seek licensure ad Art. 21 CO, decided “That as part of the ‘general ecclesiastical regulations’ of Article 21 of the Church Order, the churches grant their students for the ministry the opportunity to come before a classis after they have completed two years of study in the M.Div. degree, in order to seek permission to speak an edifying word” (*Acts*, Art. 85). Synod also stipulated that “the summer immediately following classical permission or licensure—whether this be after either the student’s second or third year of studies—the student must follow a summer internship. . .”

Considerations

1. Over the years, the steady climb of the number of MDiv graduates at CRTS has meant a steady increase in requests for classical examination. In turn this has meant a corresponding increase in the responsibility and workload of the ministers and elders who are delegated to Classis Ontario West (COW) where the majority of licensure and preparatory examinations take place. COW is the locale of these examinations primarily because of the stipulation mentioned in the regulations of GS 1958 and captured in the Church Order Article 4B. It is not uncommon for two or three students to undergo a licensure examination at one meeting of COW (taking between 4 and 6 hours of meeting time) followed by a similar number undergoing a preparatory examination at the next COW (taking between 6 and 9 hours of meeting time). As well, each examination takes significant preparation prior to the meeting on the part of the ministers conducting the examination. To share the responsibility and accompanying workload in conducting these examinations, it would be good if at least some of them could be shared by other classes across the federation. This would necessitate a change in the general synod regulations as well as in the Church Order (Art. 4B). Since the general synod regulations adopted in 1958 are currently still in Dutch, it would be beneficial for all the churches if a general synod approved and published an English translation while incorporating the proposed necessary changes.
2. There is clearly a desire beyond the borders of Classis Ontario West to make a change of this nature as evidenced by the overture of Regional Synod West 2015. Churches in western Canada in the recent past supported the idea of having some of the ecclesiastical examinations spread across the federation. While GS 2016 did not adopt the overture, it left the door open for this concept to be revisited saying that “there may be merit to the ideas contained in the Overture” but that it cannot be “adopted in its current form.” This wording supports the current effort to present a new overture which takes into consideration the questions and concerns noted by GS 2016.
3. Students seeking to undergo a licensure examination (per Art. 21 CO) are frequently if not always in a different position than those seeking to undergo a preparatory examination for candidacy (per Art. 4B CO). The former group is generally eager to take the examination as soon as possible so they can begin their summer internship which their studies require of them. Since their examination is comparatively shorter and lighter, they have in recent years consistently requested of COW (which normally convenes in June as most classes do) to be examined in May, shortly after the school year at CRTS has concluded. In contrast, the latter group having already completed their internships a year or two earlier, is preparing for a longer and more involved examination and appreciate the extra few weeks to prepare. Thus they have

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consistently asked to be examined at the regular June meeting of COW. COW has acquiesced in these matters which means that the churches meet an extra time to accommodate the needs of the students.

- a. In view of the different needs of these students at the different stages of their training, from a practical point of view it would be prudent to retain the current practice of having students seeking licensure to do so in the “classis where they live,” which in practice will mean mostly in COW. This will allow them to undergo that examination in as efficient a time-frame as possible so they can begin their summer internship promptly. However, for the reasons mentioned above (#1, 2), it would also be prudent (while still practical and manageable) to have students seeking candidacy request a preparatory examination of their home classis. “Home classis” in this case simply means the classis (within the CanRC federation) to which the church belongs which sent the original attestation concerning the student at the time of his enrollment at CRTS. In this way most students would undergo their licensure examination in one classis (frequently COW) while undergoing their preparatory examination in another classis (their home classis) with the result that the responsibility and work involved in examining students would be shared more equitably across the federation.
4. Currently in our federation there are eight classical areas, four in the West and four in the East (Ontario). All four classes in the East typically meet within easy driving distance of Hamilton. Students seeking to undergo a preparatory exam whose home classis is in Ontario can drive to that classis with relative ease and little expense. What expense there may be can be reimbursed by the student’s home classis since a theological student is not typically in a strong financial position. Similarly, for a student needing to travel to a classis in Western Canada, the cost of his return travel can be borne by his home classis. The expense of a flight from Hamilton (or Toronto) to Western Canada is not prohibitive for a classis and would not significantly impact its budget. Given that currently there is an average of four students graduating annually from the MDiv program, a western classis could expect on average to have one such request for a preparatory examination every second year. For a classis budget this is quite manageable. As far as the students from the West are concerned, compared to the way examinations are currently conducted, this would amount to one additional flight back to the area of their home church, reimbursed by their home classis. Such a trip is unlikely to be viewed as a burden and much more likely to be viewed as a blessing in that a student is apt to find himself able to visit family and friends.
5. With respect to the issue of whether regulations of a local classis would need to be amended to accommodate preparatory examinations, very little change if any is likely to be needed. Local classes across the federation already have established regulations concerning the *peremptory* examination (which is the most detailed and involved of all the classis exams) since any classis can expect to examine a candidate for the ministry called by one of the churches in that area. Further, every classis is aware of the regulations produced by GS 1958 on the matter of preparatory examinations. Thus in principle any classis could already handle a preparatory examination and it would require at most only a minor adjustment to the regulations of a classis to clarify the details. The only other new matter that might impact classis regulations would be the matter of covering the cost of return travel for the student being examined (as above, no. 4). This issue too is minor in nature and, if this overture is accepted by the churches by way of general synod, can become part of the common “travel expenses” that a classis normally covers for its delegates.

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6. Concerning the matter of a foreign student or, more broadly, a student originating outside of the CanRC federation⁴ who becomes a member in one of the Canadian Reformed Churches near CRTS and who seeks to undergo a preparatory examination within our federation, it is not possible to speak of him returning to his home classis. He will simply need to be examined in the classis where he lives as per the current arrangement. The general synod regulations and the Church Order will need to account for this possibility.
7. Concerning the question of which church will issue the required attestation (per Art. 4B CO) for the student seeking to undertake the preparatory examination in his home classis, the answer would be the same as the current arrangement which is articulated in the regulations of GS 1958: “At the time of the preparatory examination, the following documents must be presented: . . . an attestation from the church or churches to which he [the student] belongs or has belonged during the last three years” (I.3.b; see Appendix 3). There is nothing about the current proposal that would necessitate a change to this regulation.
8. With respect to the question of whether a student (understood to be a student originating within the CanRC) could request that the classis in which he currently resides becomes his “home classis,” the answer would need to be “no.” It would not be orderly or fair if a student gets to choose his examiners in this arbitrary manner. It behooves the churches to establish regulations that are equitable and not prone to partiality.
9. The changes contemplated in this overture will take some time for students, churches, and classes to absorb and adjust to. Given that General Synod Guelph–Emmanuel 2022 is to be held in the month of May, and that students are regularly examined for licensure and candidacy in the months of May and June, it would be wise to decide that these changes take effect beginning in 2023.

Recommendations

To bring about the desired change of having preparatory examinations conducted by a student’s home classis, it is recommended that General Synod Guelph–Emmanuel 2022 decide:

1. That the regulations for the preparatory examination adopted by General Synod Homewood–Carman 1958 be amended as follows:

From the existing,

“2. The preparatory examination will take place in the classis where the student resides.”

to

“2. The preparatory examination will occur in the classis to which the church which sent the student’s original attestation to the federational seminary belongs. The preparatory examination for a student not originating within the Canadian & American Reformed Churches will occur in the classis in which he lives.”

⁴ Synod Dunnville 2016 (Art. 112) spoke of “foreign students,” no doubt envisioning non-Canadian brothers from Australia, South Korea, China, South Africa, and other countries. But it has also been the case that *domestic* students (i.e. Canadian citizens) from other federations or denominations within Canada have sought training at CRTS. In times past this has included students belonging to the Free Reformed Churches of North America and more recently the United Reformed Churches of North America. Theoretically this list could include Canadian brothers from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church or the Eglise Reformée du Quebec, and possibly other churches. Some may choose to retain membership within their own federation/denomination but others may seek to join a local CanRC and stay within the federation. Thus the overture uses the terminology “a student originating outside the CanRC federation” to cover all such scenarios.

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2. That these revised regulations for the preparatory examination as well as the existing regulations for the peremptory examination as found in Article 188 of GS 1958 be published in English as part of the acts of the present general synod.

3. That Church Order Article 4B be amended as follows:

From the existing,

“Only those shall be declared eligible for call within the churches who (1) have passed a preparatory examination by the classis in which they live. . .”

to

“Only those shall be declared eligible for call within the churches who (1) have passed a preparatory examination by classis...”

4. That the above changes to both the regulations of preparatory examinations and the Church Order take effect as of January 1, 2023.

5. That the cost of return travel for students undergoing a preparatory examination in their home classis be borne by that classis.

Appendix 1

M.Div. Enrollment at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary

Academic Year	Enrollment Total	Graduated	Average # of Students/year per	
1969/70	4	0		
1970/71	6	4		
1971/72	3	1		
1972/73	4	1		
1973/74	4	0		
1974/75	4	1		
1975/76	7	1		
1976/77	6	2		
1977/78	5	0		
1978/79	6	3	13	1.3
1979/80	5	1		
1980/81	9	0		
1981/82	11	1		
1982/83	15	3		
1983/84	14	5		
1984/85	12	2		
1985/86	10	3		
1986/87	10	4		
1987/88	9	4		
1988/89	6	0	23	2.3
1989/90	11	1		
1990/91	13	3		
1991/92	11	1		
1992/93	15	5		
1993/94	15	2		
1994/95	15	3		
1995/96	18	3		
1996/97	17	6		
1997/98	13	3		
1998/99	11	5	32	3.2
1999/00	8	1		
2000/01	10	1		
2001/02	9	3		
2002/03	8	1		
2003/04	11	4		
2004/05	10	1		
2005/06	11	2		
2006/07	16	3		
2007/08	17	3		
2008/09	17	3	22	2.2
2009/2010	15	6		
2010/2011	15	4		
2011/2012	13	2		

2012/2013	19	3		
2013/2014	18	3		
2014/2015	17	5		
2015/2016	18	8		
2016/2017	14	1		
2017/2018	16	3		
2018/2019	19	6	41	
2019-2020	19	3		4.1

Source: CRTS

Appendix 2

Artikel 188 van de General Synode 1958 Homewood-Carman

Regeling kerkelijke examens.

Bijlage V.

Ds. G. van Dooren leest voor het “Ontwerp regeling voor de kerkelijke examens” (Acta, art. 151). Het wordt punt voor punt besproken, en daarna aangenomen.

De regeling luidt als volgt:

“I. Praeparatoir Examen.

1. Het praeparatoir examen moet met goed gevolg zijn afgelegd om in één der kerken beroepbaar te zijn.
2. Het praeparatoir examen wordt afgenomen door de classis, waarin de examinandus zijn domicilie heeft.
3. Bij het praeparatoir examen moet overgelegd worden:
 - a. bewijs van met goed gevolg afgelegde wetenschappelijke examens als bedoeld in de besluiten van Homewood–Carman 1958 te dezen (Acta, Art. 151),
 - b. attestatie van de kerk of kerken tot welke de examinandus de laatste drie jaren behoorde.
4. Bij het praeparatoir examen wordt onderzoek gedaan naar het volgende:
 - a. geschiktheid voor de prediking; daartoe wordt de examinandus hoogstens drie weken van tevoren een tekst opgegeven, over welke hij ter classis een preekvoorstel leest; bespreking van dit preekvoorstel.
 - b. bekwaamheid in de uitlegging van de Heilige Schrift volgens de grondtekst aan de gemeente; waartoe minstens veertien dagen tevoren aan de examinandus een hoofdstuk uit het Oude Testament en een uit het Nieuwe Testament worden opgegeven.
 - c. Kennis van de leer der kerk.
5. Bij gunstige afloop van het praeparatoir examen moet de examinandus beloven, bij zijn optreden voor de gemeente niets te zullen leren, dat niet in overeenstemming is met de gereformeerde belijdenis, en wordt hij daarna als proponent beroepbaar gesteld, waarvan hem acte wordt verleend.
6. Het praeparatoir examen wordt kosteloos afgenomen, wanneer het samenvalt met een gewone vergadering.

Opmerking: De synode is van gedachte, dat het zogenoemde “onderzoek naar de beweegredenen tot het zoeken van het ambt” niet een apart “vak” moet zijn, maar behoort te geschieden tijdens en door de wijze van het onderzoek, beschreven onder 4.

II. Peremptoir examen.

1. Het examen wordt afgenomen door de classis tot welke de beroepende kerk behoort, onder medewerking van minstens twee der deputaten, die de particuliere synode hiervoor zal aanwijzen.
2. Voor het examen moet bij de classis ter tafel zijn:

- a. de beroepsbrief en de verklaring van aanneming.
 - b. bewijs van de goede uitslag van liet examen, waardoor de beroepeue in de kerken beroepbaar gesteld was.
 - c. Attestatie van de kerk of kerken, tot welke hij sedert dat praeparatoir examen behoorde.
3. Het examen duurt minstens drie uur, en loopt over de volgende onderwerpen:
- a. preekvoorstel van de examinandus over een door hem zelf gekozen tekst; bespreking van dit preekvoorstel.
 - b. de uitlegging van de Heilige Schrift volgens de grondtekst; waartoe minstens drie weken van te voren de beroepene twee hoofdstukken uit het Oude Testatment en twee uit het Nieuwe Testament opgegeven worden.
 - c. Kennis van de inhoud der Heilige Schrift, waaronder niet slechts verstaan wordt de bijbelse geschiedenis als zodanig met aanverwante theologische “vakken”, maar kennis van de hoofdinhoud van de Bjibelboeken, zodat blijkt, dat de examinandus genoegzaam thuis is in de Heilige Schrift.
 - d. kennis van de leer der kerk, alsmede haar geschiedenis, haar verdediging en haar verklaring.
 - e. de geschiedenis der kerk.
 - f. kennis van de geboden des HEEREN in hun betekenis voor het christelijk leven.
 - g. kennis van de kerkenordering.
 - h. kennis van de vereisten voor de uitoefening van de onderscheiden atnblelijke diensten.

Opmerking: de verdeling van de examentijd over de verschillende onderdelen staat aan de classis.

- 4. De beroepene ondertekent na gunstige afloop van liet examen de verklaring, die voor de dienaren des Woords is vastgesteld in 1619.
- 5. Bij conflict tussen de classis on de deputaten der particuliere synode inzake de beoordeling van het, examen staat de beslissing aan de particuliere synode.
- 6. Wanneer het peremptoir examen samenvalt met een gewone vergadering der classis, wordt het kosteloos afgenomen.”

Appendix 3

Article 188 of General Synod 1958 Homewood-Carman¹

Regulations for Ecclesiastical Examinations (See Appendix V of the Acts)

Rev. G. Van Dooren reads the “proposed regulation for the ecclesiastical exams” (Acts, Art. 151). Each paragraph is discussed after which the proposal is adopted.

The regulations are as follows:

I. Preparatory Examination.

1. To be eligible for call in one of the churches, one must have successfully sustained the preparatory examination.
2. The preparatory examination will take place in the classis where the student² resides.
3. At the time of the preparatory examination, the following documents must be presented:
 - a. proof that the student has successfully sustained the academic exams as per the decisions in these Acts of Homewood–Carman 1958 (*Acts*, Art. 151);³
 - b. an attestation from the church or churches to which he belongs or has belonged during the last three years.
4. At the preparatory examination the following will be investigated:
 - a. aptitude for preaching; to this end the student is given a text (no more than three weeks before the examination) on which he will prepare a sermon-proposal to be read at classis; this sermon proposal will then be discussed.
 - b. ability to exegete the Holy Scriptures to the congregation according to the original text; to this end the student will be assigned, at least two weeks prior to the examination, one chapter from the Old Testament and one chapter from the New Testament.
 - c. knowledge of church doctrine.
5. After sustaining the preparatory examination the student must promise, while addressing the congregation, not to teach anything which is not in accordance with the Reformed confession. He will then be declared, also in writing, to be eligible for call as a candidate.
6. The preparatory examination will be held at no cost if it coincides with a regularly scheduled classis.

Observation: Synod is of the opinion that the so-called “inquiry into the motives for seeking the office” should not be treated as a separate subject but should take place during and through the examination as described under 4.

¹ The original Dutch article can be found in the *Acta van de Synode Homewood-Carman* of the Canadian Reformed Churches, 1958, Art. 188, pp.46–7.

² Here and throughout the article the original has the word “examinandus” which literally means “the one to be examined.”

³ The original refers to the temporary provisions for the training for the ministry, which also Article 151 of the Acts of the same synod deals with. Synod Orangeville 1968 (Art. 171) subsequently clarified this point when it decided the following: “To be admitted to the ecclesiastical examinations candidates shall submit proof that they have completed their studies at our own Theological College. Candidates who took their theological training at other institutions shall present a Certificate issued by the Staff of the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches stating that they have followed and/or complemented a course of studies conforming with the training provided by the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches.”

II. Peremptory Examination

1. The examination is conducted by the classis to which the calling church belongs, with the co-operation of at least two deputies appointed for this purpose by regional synod.
2. Before the examination classis must have the following documents:
 - a. the letter of call and the letter of acceptance.
 - b. proof of successfully sustaining the preparatory examination at which time the candidate was declared eligible for call.
 - c. an attestation from the church or churches to which he has belonged since his preparatory examination.
3. The examination will last at least three hours and includes the following subjects:
 - a. a sermon-proposal on a text chosen by the candidate himself; discussion of this sermon-proposal.
 - b. exegesis of Holy Scripture according to the original text; to this end the candidate will be assigned, at least three weeks in advance, two chapters from the Old Testament and two chapters from the New Testament.
 - c. knowledge of content of Holy Scripture, which comprises not only knowledge of the biblical history as such with related theological subjects but also knowledge of the main contents of all the books of the Bible so that it becomes evident that the candidate is sufficiently at home in Holy Scripture.
 - d. knowledge of the doctrine of the church, as well as its history, its defence, and its explanation.
 - e. the history of the church.
 - f. knowledge of the commandments of the LORD with respect to their significance for the Christian life.
 - g. knowledge of the Church Order.
 - h. knowledge of the requirements for the exercising of the various duties of the offices.

Observation: The distribution of time spent on each of the components is to be decided upon by classis.

4. After successfully sustaining the examination, the candidate must sign the declaration as established in 1619 for ministers of the Word.
5. In case of conflict between classis and the deputies of regional synod regarding the result of the examination, the matter is to be decided by the next regional synod.
6. The peremptory examination will be held at no cost if it coincides with a regularly scheduled classis.