

COUNCIL HANDBOOK

THE TASK OF THE OFFICE-BEARERS IN BUILDING UP THE CONGREGATION

“The LORD builds up Jerusalem.”

Ps. 147 : 2

*“For we are God’s fellow workers; you are
God’s field, God’s building. ... But each one
should be careful how he builds.”*

1 Corinthians 3 : 9 - 10

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THE UPBUILDING OF THE CONGREGATION

1. The Church is God's building

The Bible speaks of the church gathering work of the Son of God in terms of a building. We sing in Ps. 147 that the LORD builds up Jerusalem. In the O.T. this reference to a building was connected to the temple, but certainly not restricted to it. We also come across the expression "the house of Israel." The LORD promises that He would build this house. In the N.T. we hear the Lord Himself saying that He will build His church upon the work of the apostles. Paul writes to the church at Corinth that they are God's building (1 Cor 3:9). The foundation of this building is Christ. He is also called the Cornerstone. The believers, Jews as well as Gentiles have to be built into this spiritual house (Eph.2:19-22). The gathering of the church is like building a house.

This image shows the care and love of our God. God created man so that mankind would know God, love Him and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him (Heidelberg Catechism L.D. 3). However, man fell into sin and became totally depraved. As a result man is by nature man inclined to hate God and his neighbour. Yet the LORD did not let go of the work of His hands. He showed His electing love in revealing that He would still reach this eternal blessedness in which man would praise and glorify Him, except now it would go through the atoning work of the Mediator our Lord Jesus Christ. Right after the fall He gave the promise that the seed of the woman would overcome the seed of the serpent. In faithfulness to this promise the LORD God set apart the people of Israel from the other nations, sent His only Son to die on a cross, poured out the Holy Spirit upon the church, and kept His church during the generations and centuries. This plan of God to save a fallen mankind and to renew all things lies at the foundation of the church. We believe that the Son of God gathers, defends and preserves for Himself a church chosen to everlasting life. The church is the gathering of true believers who seek their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit. The reality and power of God's redeeming work is seen in the gathering and upbuilding of the church.

The Lord builds Jerusalem, the church and He used the apostles for this purpose. This is why the apostolic teaching is the foundation of the church. The apostles in turn appointed office-bearers in the churches. It is through their work that the Lord Jesus builds up His congregation. Paul calls himself and the others "God's fellow workers" (1 Cor. 3:9). This expression shows the great responsibility given to the office-bearers. They are to build up the congregation in the fear of the Lord (2 Cor.10:8; 12:19; 13:10). It is through their labours that the congregation receives the salvation of God (Ps. 132:16). In this ongoing building process lies a great calling for God's servants, the office-bearers. Their task is not only to establish churches but also to strengthen them. The apostle Paul did this in his ministry. We read several times in Acts that he returned to the churches to strengthen them (14:22; 15:41; 18:23).

The apostle also gives several instructions about the way office-bearers must fulfil their task. He even warns: "But each one should be careful how he builds." (1 Cor. 3:10) One cannot build in his own way and according to his own blue-print. It has to fit the blue-print of the Master Builder and the Foundation that has been laid. This warning of the apostle shows the need for ongoing vigilance. This is why the churches not only have articles in the Church Order about the suspension and deposition of unfaithful office-bearers, but also stipulate in Art. 73 that the office-bearers shall mutually exercise Christian censure and shall exhort and kindly admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office. There is a need to ask ourselves the question whether as office-bearers we are building up the congregation in the proper manner.

The warning of the apostle is the more necessary and urgent because there are so many forces that try to stop the building process, disrupt it or even want to tear down the house. The congregation consists of sinners. Our own sinful nature can be an obstacle in the gathering and building up of the church. We can give in to worldly influences and pressures. In addition to this there are the constant attacks of the devil

and the world. This is enough reason to be on our guard. This is also enough reason to mutually exercise Christian censure. The churches have to be built up in the fear of the Lord. They have to grow in love, trust, obedience and knowledge. Therefore the question is not only, are the overseers building on the only foundation, but also, is the congregation being built up by the work of the overseers?

2. The need to evaluate

To be church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a great gift of grace. At the same time it comes with great responsibilities, certainly for the office-bearers. One only has to read the Form for the Ordination of Office-bearers to see the importance of these responsibilities. The Lord Jesus uses their labours to work toward the coming of His Kingdom and to confirm His people in the redemption obtained by His death. He wants His people to be confirmed in the faith, in love, obedience, trust and knowledge. It is therefore important to make sure that the office-bearers are serving the congregation correctly. This requires ongoing vigilance, reflection and evaluation.

The term evaluation needs some further explanation. Art. 73 of the Church Order does not speak of evaluation, but of exercising censure, exhorting and kindly admonishing each other. These terms point to a situation in which an office-bearer is negligent. If the situation would not change it could even lead to suspension or deposition. The term evaluation does not imply that there is something which requires censure. It is important to keep these two matters distinguished. The term evaluation is not to be used to replace what Art. 73 stipulates. Nor should the significance of Art. 73 C.O. be reduced in thinking that in evaluating their work as overseers, the council is keeping this article. There should always be the opportunity to exercise this Christian censure. At the same time it will be helpful to evaluate the way in which the offices function in the congregation, in order to help and stimulate each other, with the upbuilding of the congregation as one's goal.

3. The weaknesses and strengths of evaluating

Some notes of caution are in place. The process of evaluating has its weaknesses and strengths. We must keep in mind that the building of the church is the work of the Lord. Human plans and methods cannot give faith. If that were the case then the better the plans and the methods the more successful the church. The Spirit gives faith and uses the gospel for that purpose. Evaluating is only a tool. At the same time we should not ignore these plans and methods either. After all the Lord involves office-bearers and gives them responsibilities. It would be wrong to say, "The Lord has to do it therefore it does not matter how I do it." We have to make sure that we do our work in agreement with the style of the Master Builder. Sloppiness or, carelessness are not proper on this building site, for this is God's building.

In the second place we must keep in mind that the goal of this evaluation is the upbuilding of the congregation. It is not meant to glorify ourselves, or to hurt other office-bearers. If an office-bearer needs to be admonished we should use Art. 73 C.O. Evaluating is a tool to help us use all the talents we have been entrusted with. There is no perfect office-bearer, there is no perfect congregation. The point in question is not whether we can find faults with ourselves or with other office-bearers. The question is: Are we doing our utmost in taking care of the sheep the Lord had entrusted into our care and what can we do as brothers to help each other in this?

In the third place, we must be aware of the fact that we live in a society where people who have responsibilities are closely watched. Behind this lies the idea that power rests with the people. In the church this ought not to be the case. This evaluation is not meant to give in to a rule by popular demand. Effectiveness is not the norm for faithful service. The end would be that are more concerned about pleasing men than the Lord. At the same time we can say that we face more criticism than previous generations. People dare to say more to office-bearers than was the case in the past. That can be wrong, but can also be healthy. It would be wrong if it is done from a human point of view in the sense that one

wants to push his way through. It can be healthy in that as office-bearers and congregation together we sharpen each other as we seek to fulfil the will of the Lord. This shows that in the evaluation the congregation should not be excluded.

There are several benefits to a regular evaluation of what we are doing as office-bearers. It can be beneficial for the congregation. It may help her to grow in love, dedication and knowledge. There is also the benefit for the office-bearers. It may give them a better insight into what is happening in the congregation. It can prevent them from doing things in a haphazardly way. It forces them to make efficient use of time and resources. It gives motivation and helps to identify or even prevent possible mistakes.

In addition to these more immediate benefits there is also the benefit that in this way "new" elders and deacons learn to see what is their task in the congregation. We are faced with a situation in which the older generation is falling away, and the torch has to be handed over to the next generation. That process can never be taken for granted. The older elders may think that the younger ones should know what to do, but that is not always the case. They need to be taught. The younger elders may think that the older ones are out of touch and backwards, whereas in fact they have gained a lot of wisdom and insight over the years. In discussing these things together we can learn from each other and help each other.

In conclusion, this evaluating must be done with thanksgiving and prayer. The Form says: "To do their work well as shepherds of God's flock, the overseers should train themselves in godliness and diligently search the Scriptures"

4. The process of evaluation

One must have a correct understanding of the congregation and the offices in the church to be able to properly evaluate. If, for example, one would approach the church as a human organization and the officers as managers of this organization, then this will determine one's evaluation. The Bible speaks about the church in many ways. They all point to the exalted character of the Church. To mention some: the Church is the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Mother of believers. The Bible teaches us that the congregation belongs to Christ, because He has bought her with His blood in order to present her before His Father. From the Word of God we also learn that office-bearers are servants of the Lord. Yes, they are even called fellow workers of God. For this reason the office-bearers have to know what the Lord requires of His house. They have to be well aware of the fact that the church belongs to God since she has been bought by the precious blood of Christ. Because the congregation is precious in His eyes the office-bearers do well to make sure that they fulfil their calling properly. This shows that our evaluation must have this scriptural doctrine concerning the church as basis.

To go a step further proper evaluation starts with understanding what the Bible teaches about a certain matter, and see how this is reflected in the Reformed Confession, Forms or Church Order. On the basis of this we can formulate our goals. This is why each chapter in this Handbook will start with the

Scriptural information, followed by references to the Confessions, Liturgical Forms and Church Order, in order to come to a formulation of our goals. In some chapters there is also some historical information. We should realize that in order to understand a particular custom we must acquaint ourselves with its history.

Having formulated the goals we can look at means by which we want to reach these goals. For example, the goal of liturgy is that in worshipping the Lord God we may show ourselves thankful to Him and He may be praised by us. How do we bring this about? By means of worship services. But then we can also look at the various aspects of the worship service to see whether they correspond to the goal we have formulated. Another example is the catechism instruction. It is the task of the church to hand over to the

youth the doctrine of salvation. But how is this done? As elders we have to visit the catechism classes, in doing this we evaluate whether the actual instruction indeed correspond to the goal we have formulated.

This evaluation may also bring to light problem areas. The more we understand the Biblical background and our goal the better we will be able to be specific about the problem. It will also help us in finding new ways to reach the goal and solve these problems.

5. The set-up of this evaluation

This Handbook consists of three sections and each section has eight chapters. These chapters cover all the different aspects of the work of the office-bearers. The evaluation takes place over a three year cycle, the usual length of a term in office. The cycle is as follows:

Month	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Sept.	Home Visits	Church Discipline	Study Societies
Oct.	Liturgy	Work of Mercy	Finances
Nov.	Holy Baptism	Evangelism	Congregation and Council
Dec.	Lord's Supper	Federation	Counselling
Feb.	Preaching/Prayer	Special Visits	Council
Apr.	Communion of saints	Catechism	Mission
Mar.	Education, Instruction	Marriage	Committee of Administration
May	Task of the Minister	Task of the Elder	Task of the Deacon

Each chapter ends with several questions to help the evaluation. It may be necessary to spell out how certain things are done in the church. But that in itself is already part of the process of evaluating our work. To facilitate the discussion and make it more fruitful the office-bearers do well to read a chapter ahead of time. At the end of this Handbook there is a section called: Mandates and Regulations. Each church has its own mandates, guidelines, regulations or policy statements. They are referred to in the pertinent chapters, but their full text can be found in the last section.

May this Handbook help office-bearers to be faithful servants in God's house, for His glory and the upbuilding of the congregation.

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