

WHY "COMPLEMENTARIANS" HAVE A PLACE IN THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA

by Rev. Tom Stark, retired Reformed Church in America pastor, Lansing, Michigan

There is a fear that the 2013 removal of the "conscience clauses" from the *Book of Church Order* of the RCA endangers the future service of men who are "complementarians". These men believe that the Scriptures limit the offices of authority in the church- pastors, elders and deacons in the RCA, pastors and elders in presbyterian denominations- to men. This is in contrast to the "egalitarian" view, which holds that all offices are open to men and women.

As a complementarian myself, I am naturally concerned that men who hold this position not be hindered in the RCA. However, the following historical record in the RCA answers the fear held by some complementarians:

1. The 1958 General Synod adopted the report of a special committee appointed in 1954, which first recommended that all offices be opened to women, beginning in 1962. The report made clear "that in case the offices are open to women... each congregation and each consistory continues the responsibility of deciding whether the Spirit of God is calling anyone to an office No deliverance of General Synod on the question of women's eligibility to office will change the Reformed principle of church polity that the power of ordaining and installing rest in consistory and classis." (Minutes of the General Synod, 1958, p. 328) The 1958 booklet was cited often by later synods. The report was reprinted in 1965 and 1991. The quotation above clearly acknowledged that not all congregations would ordain women, and left the decision to the local level.

2. When it adopted the report above in 1958 the General Synod sent a proposed *Book of Church Order* amendment to the classes ("classes" = plural of classis- a local grouping of churches) to open the three offices of minister, elder and deacon to women, but the amendment failed to gain approval of two-thirds of the classes that year, and in three different years after that. In 1971 the General Synod proposed an amendment to the *Book of Church Order* to open the offices of elder and deacon to women (not pastors) and it passed. In 1972 the General Synod Executive Committee published in the RCA's magazine, The Church Herald, the following: ". . . [congregational] bylaws, if these limit [the offices of elder and deacon]. . . should be changed to be in accordance with *The Government of the RCA* . . . [This] does not mean that a congregation must elect women to be elders and deacons. . . a consistory/congregation may still determine by its own procedures which members are to be nominated. . . such nominations cannot be disallowed because a member is a female".

3. The General Synod in 1973 was asked to endorse an overture to allow congregations to adopt by-laws to restrict the offices of elder and deacon to women. The Synod declined, giving as its reason: "In practice, the ordination of women will be adopted in some churches and not in others, depending on the interpretation of Scriptures and the judgment of the consistory and congregation as to what will most contribute to the upbuilding of the church."

4. It has been legal for women to be elected elders and deacons in the RCA since 1972. It has been legal for women to serve as pastors since 1979 or 1981 (there are differences of

interpretation as to the date). Pastors and elders usually meet women pastors and elders at classis and General Synod meetings. Pastors, seminary students, congregations, and consistories have served in the RCA through all those years, without penalties.

5. Evidently complementarian men in the RCA do not think that the ordination of women is a "salvation issue", or that would have prevented us from serving in the RCA in the first place.

6. The "conscience clauses" were a set of amendments to the RCA *Book of Church Order*, proposed by the General Synod of 1980, approved by two-thirds of the classes, and given final adoption at the Synod of 1981. They spelled out the responsibility of office holders to not obstruct women seeking office, and not to be expected to participate in actions which were contrary to their consciences, as guided by Scriptures. After their adoption the RCA's *Church Herald* included them in an article I wrote for the magazine (October 2, 1981):

"Women in Church Offices: Where We Are Now"

"The Rev. Tom Stark is pastor of the University Reformed Church in East Lansing, Michigan, and co-author of the 'Proposal to Maintain Peace in Diversity in the RCA Concerning Women as Church Officers.'

**Amendments to the Book of Church Order
Adopted in 1981
Concerning Women as Church Officers**

- a. Amend Part 1, Article 1, Section 3 (*BCO*, p. 12) to read: The ministers of the Word are those men and women who have been inducted into that office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established by the church. (*"Persons" was replaced by "men and women."* – *Ed.*)
- b. Amend Part II, Article 2, Section 7 (*BCO*, p. 24) to read: If individual members of the classis find that their consciences, as illuminated by Scripture, would not permit them to participate in the licensure, ordination, or installation of women as ministers of the Word, they shall not be required to participate in decisions or actions contrary to their consciences, but may not obstruct the classis in fulfilling its responsibility to arrange for the care, ordination, and installation of women candidates and ministers by means mutually agreed on by such women and the classis.
- c. Amend Part II, Article 10 (*BCO*, p. 40) by adding the following section: Section 15. Ministers of the Word shall not be pressured in such a way as to lead either one who supports or one who opposes, on scriptural grounds, the ordination of women to church offices to offend against his or her conscience; nor shall any church member be penalized for conscientious objection to, or support of the ordination of women to church offices; nor shall any minister of the Word obstruct by unconstitutional means the election, ordination or installation of a woman to church offices.
- d. Amend Part I, Article 5, Section 2 (*BCO*, p. 19) by adding the following new subsection:

a. They [the Board of Elders] shall not penalize nor permit to be penalized any member for conscientious objection to, or support of, the ordination of women to church offices: nor shall they permit any member to obstruct by unconstitutional means the election, ordination, or installation of a woman to church offices."

7. The Commission for Women recommended to the General Synod of 2012 that the consciences clauses be removed. Four classes sent overtures asking for the same action. The Commission and the classes all stated: "Without the clauses, it would still be true that no one would be forced to be present for the ordination of a woman if it were against their conscience. It would still be true that one could abstain from voting for a ministerial candidate over whom they were conflicted. It would still be true that no local church could be forced to ordain women as elders and deacons or to call a woman as minister. However, it would be clear that the RCA does ordain women to office, without exception or caveat." (MGS, p. 485)

8. Dr. Cor Kors is the Director of the Ministerial Formation Coordinating Agency (MFCA), which supervises ministerial candidates at non- RCA seminaries. On the MFCA web site he has written (4/15/2013):

MFCA "CORE VALUES" AND THE ELIMINATION OF THE CONSCIENCE CLAUSES

My personal response to the questions is "Yes, there is a place for complementarians in the RCA." The RCA is extremely diverse and has a history of respecting differing voices. I believe that Jesus' prayer in John 17 is especially apropos when it comes to matters such as respecting each other's biblical interpretations and co-existing in the harmony it mandates.

I must stress that this is my personal opinion. I do not speak for others, since to my knowledge; they have not discussed or made decisions regarding the questions stated above. For one, I know that the MFCA Board of Trustees has not dealt with the questions regarding the future of complementarians in the RCA and the MFCA process. The "Core Values of the MFCA," as stated below, constitute the operating principles of the agency and provide the building blocks upon which the governing policies are formulated and carried out. As the director of the agency, I am expected to interpret these values and make conclusions regarding them. It is with that in mind that I believe there is a place for complementarians in the RCA and that we can respectfully endorse the qualified candidate for the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (CFM) who is committed to the complementarian position.

Our "Core Values" are:

We value being proactive in contributing to the success of our candidates; therefore we

- *help candidates discern and respond to their call to ministry with integrity*
- *offer equal and fair access to those who are called to ministry*
- *recognize that barriers exist (language, disabilities) but we do not allow them to deter the candidate*
from responding to the call to ministry
- *demonstrate love and respect for every candidate*

We value the integrity of a certification process that balances care for candidates and the church's traditions; therefore we uphold

- *rigorous but not rigid application of the standards on preparation*
- *being instinctively and intentionally relational as we approach our work*
- *the distinctive roles of all parties in the process*

- *honest, direct communication with the candidate*

We value the distinctive role the MFCA plays in strengthening the ministry of the RCA; therefore we commit to

- *providing an educated clergy from all regions of the church*
- *working with diverse candidates from non-traditional backgrounds*
- *remaining culturally relevant*
- *a diversity of voices around the table*
- *good stewardship of the resources given to us*

These values call for respectful treatment of all candidates, and I commit myself to perform my role in the MFCA with those as guidelines.

It is important to recognize that the RCA is mostly an egalitarian denomination and the majority of our members support women in leadership. Our posture as a denomination is that we embrace the gifts and authority of women in ministry. It is not only difficult, but also painful for female leaders when they must serve in contexts where there are those who do not support them in their ministry. That is accentuated if individuals are hostile toward them. I pray that such experiences for women will lessen and be non-existent in the near future.

There will be a tension when complementarians co-exist with egalitarians; there is no way around that. Both sides will naturally want to defend and promote their cause. Both will have biblical and social arguments supporting their point of view. It is my premise that the **intent** of the conscience clauses, despite their elimination, may, by common consensus, continue to exist as part of how we relate as Christians in community. Individuals, as they serve on consistory and in classis, should be allowed a conscientious scriptural objection regarding women in leadership, and, those same individuals should agree not to obstruct women from their call to serve. I believe that we are mandated to live in harmony with love, grace and mercy at the center of our relationships. This matter should not be one to divide us...

COR

9. Some are frustrated that students at non-RCA seminaries go through a separate process with the MFCA. This requirement applies to all such students- men and women, students at any seminaries, from liberal to very conservative. MFCA requires summer short courses in RCA Theology, Worship, History, Missions, etc., in order to orient students to the RCA who are at schools of various or no denominational backgrounds. Over the years many students have complained about taking an additional Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) course, which MFCA strongly urges for everyone.

10. *Christianity Today*, in its September 2013 issue erroneously stated the effect in the RCA of the removal of the conscience clauses:

"WOMEN- PASTOR OBJECTORS OVERRULED Clergy who object to female pastors have lost one more denomination to call home. The Reformed Church in America (RCA) has been ordaining women since 1979, but has also allowed clergy to conscientiously object to the proceedings. This summer's vote to remove 'conscience clauses' from its Book of Church Order means RCA clergy can no longer refuse to participate in ordinations because of the candidate's gender."

(This same mis-interpretation has appeared in a number of blogs.)

Rev. Tom DeVries, General Secretary of the RCA, responded on Oct. 3:

"Dear Christianity Today Editor,

In the Reformed Church in America (RCA), we celebrate the gifts and ministry contributions of all people. We are grateful for women and men in ministry that have responded to God's call and serve the church and the world with passion and commitment.

With that understanding, I was saddened by the inaccurate reporting in your news summary regarding the recent removal of a conscience clause from our Book of Church Order. The headline and content of the summary was both misleading and erroneous.

In removing the conscience clause, the Book of Church Order is now silent on the role of women in the offices of the church. The RCA Commission for Women in recommending the removal of the clause described this change as follows:

"Without the clauses, it would still be true that no one would be forced to be present for the ordination of a woman if it were against their conscience. It would still be true that one could abstain from voting for a ministerial candidate over whom they were conflicted. It would still be true that no local church could be forced to ordain women as elders and deacons or to call a woman as minister."

The RCA is a denomination that encourages women to use their ministry gifts in the offices of the church. It is also a denomination that does not impose a hermeneutical understanding that would cause one to violate their conscience in making decisions around the role and ordination of women.

Please share this information in order to correct the misinformation previously printed in Christianity Today.

Celebrating the gifts of all God's people,

*Rev. Tom De Vries, D. Min.
General Secretary, Reformed Church in America"*

(I have found no record that *Christianity Today* printed Tom DeVries' letter.)

11. An ordination or installation service for a minister is a special meeting of classis, with a quorum of three ministers and three elders. The stated clerk of the classis usually makes sure a quorum will be present. Member are free to attend or not, and many of us attend only a few such services, which are often held on Sunday, during a congregation's regular services.

12. The removal of the conscience clauses does not require anyone to believe anything which is un-Scriptural, nor does it require them to do anything that is un-Scriptural.