

Overture 6

Re: Life (Indefinite term) Eldership

Overture from the Reformed Church of Nelson

Re: Life (Indefinite term) Eldership

Esteemed Brethren,

I. Overture

The Session of the Reformed Church of Nelson respectfully overtures Synod 2014 as follows:

That Article 6 of the Church Order be replaced by the following:

Elders and Deacons may be chosen by the congregation for either indefinite (lifetime) service or limited terms of service (ordinarily of three years or more) according to local regulations.

II. Grounds:

1. The Bible lays down no law regarding either life/indefinite terms or limited terms.
 - a. Since the Bible doesn't stipulate the length of service, we must look to the implications of God's gifting and call to serve as elders and deacons. John Murray argues convincingly that the Biblical pattern leans toward life eldership (see John Murray's article *Arguments against Term Eldership* – Counsel of Chalcedon, Jan-Feb, 1990, pg.42.).¹
 - b. Judging from church history, it would appear that elders were always elected for life. One simply cannot find term eldership in older writings of the Church – leading to the conclusion that it is a newer interpretation of Scripture.
 - c. Therefore, we believe that life eldership should *at least be allowed* alongside term eldership.
2. Our current practice already recognizes that an elder or deacon is ordained to that office for life, unless removed from that office. This is reflected in Church Order Article 8's instruction *to install* a previously ordained office-bearer. If an office-bearer retains the ordination, he should be allowed also to retain the office if the congregation electing him so desires. *We have added the phrase "by the congregation" to make it clear that the congregation should decide to take the step of lifetime service under the guidance of the session – the session should not take such a step unilaterally.*
3. The RCNZ officially places teaching and ruling elders as equals on session and in Presbytery. Therefore, since pastors are elected for indefinite terms, our Church Order should allow for ruling elders to be elected for indefinite terms as well. There is no need for votes of affirmation from the congregation for pastors every 3 years – therefore, there should be no such vote for ruling elders.

¹ You may access that article here:

http://chalcedon.org/docs/counselpdf/1990_1%20Arguments%20Against%20Term%20Eldership.pdf

4. Some of our sister Churches already either allow or require life eldership:
 - a. The OPC currently allows individual congregations to decide whether to elect elders and deacons to either lifetime service or limited terms of service (OPC: Form of Government, chapter XXV article 2).
 - b. The PCEA requires lifetime eldership (PCEA Handbook 2.5).
 - c. The URCNA officially does not stipulate the length of term, which allows individual congregations to set the terms of office to an indefinite period.²

III. Objections:

1. Some object to indefinite service because they do not want the responsibility of serving Christ and His Church for an indefinite period – that cuts into their personal and family time. However, that is not necessarily the case. Many churches do not have sufficient men to rotate through the 3 year term system. Therefore, we have fewer elders than necessary and a heavier workload. Indefinite term eldership would allow churches to elect the elders that God has given and spread the workload accordingly, without needing to worry about keeping men in reserve for the next election. Ironically, accepting longer responsibility could actually reduce the long-term workload of our office-bearers!
2. Others object that the term system is useful for removing wayward or incompetent office-bearers from the leadership of the church. As true as that may be, the Biblical question would be, Is it faithful shepherding of God’s flock to merely allow a man to “rotate off” when he should actually be rebuked, corrected, or even removed from office? To refuse to be honest with such men is to simply postpone the confrontation until later when it will create much more harm to the man, his family and to the Bride of Christ.³ It is always best to deal with such situations early – and the beauty of indefinite-term/lifetime eldership is that God’s under-shepherds are encouraged to deal with such situations the right way, the first time.

IV. Practical Considerations:

1. To make the transition from term eldership to lifetime or indefinite eldership, the session should do its homework. A session would need to study the issue, and inform the congregation thoroughly of the importance and advantages to such a change. Currently serving office-bearers should NOT transition from a term of service to lifetime service without a direct vote of the congregation affirming that transition.

² See the Article explaining this here: <http://www.blog.christurc.org/2011/06/24/should-elders-be-ordained-for-life/> This article also explains a number of different arguments that Murray’s article does not address.

³ You have to remember that in our transient society, an incompetent or wayward office-bearer may move to another city/church. That new church is unlikely to call and ask how that man served as a deacon or elder (even though that would be wise). So while you were unhappy with his service, this new church will take the fact that he was not removed from office as proof that he is fit to serve. We know that is not the way it is supposed to work, but a “former office-bearer” often gets elected much faster (and with less prayerful consideration) than an “inexperienced” man. It may be easier, in the short term, to allow a man to “rotate off” but it certainly isn’t safer for the church overall.

Overture 6

Re: Life (Indefinite term) Eldership

2. We live in a transient society, where it is relatively simple to move from one city or country to another. Currently serving or previously serving office-bearers *should always* consider such moves based on their church concerns, personal careers, and family concerns. Therefore, whether a church has lifetime service or term service should not make any difference to the normal moves of life. If anything, a church practicing lifetime service would encourage an office-bearer to properly weigh such church concerns instead of potentially brushing them aside.

3. Along those same lines, if an elder or deacon is elected to lifetime service that would not prevent him from asking for a sabbatical from service, or from resigning from office due to work/family/other pressures. We already allow such resignations in our current system, and the same would be true with lifetime service.

4. It is possible for a church to have elders serving indefinite and limited terms at the same time. We know that, because every church with a pastor and elders has exactly that! However, we believe that it would be best to have only one system amongst the elders or deacons in one local congregation.

5. Just as pastors are allowed to retire from office, so long-serving office-bearers should be allowed to retire as “emeritus” and still retain the respect of God’s people for their long contribution to the work of the Lord.