**Classis Supervisor Handbook**

*Church Supervision Task Force, Albany Synod*

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**The Purpose and Burdens of Supervision**

One of the core responsibilities of a classis is to care for its congregations. It does this,broadly, by exercising “a general superintendence … over the interests and concerns of the congregations within its bounds” (*BCO* 1.II.2.3., p. 29). This duty takes very specific form when a church has no installed minister. In that circumstance, the classis must appoint a minister from the classis to serve as supervisor when the consistory of that church convenes to conduct its business (*BCO*, 1.II.7.3., p. 34).

The presence of a minister supervisor from classis is essential for a consistory that has no installed minister. In the strictest sense, a consistory is not a consistory when there is no minister present. (For that matter, neither is it one without any deacons, or any elders.) Moreover, because a minister is a member of the classis and is accountable to the classis, the presence of a minister in the proceedings of a consistory is essential for the classis to be able to care adequately for a congregation. The interests of a classis are represented at the consistory level in the person of the minister, whether as installed pastor or as supervisor.

In addition, consistories often benefit greatly from the presence of a minister supervisor. Together with an elder supervisor that some classes appoint, a minister supervisor can, out of his or her experience, provide practical guidance, theological reflection, biblical encouragement, useful warnings, and suggestions of new possibilities. Effective supervision helps a consistory to do its work well and conveys the classis’s tangible support and care to the consistory.

The importance of supervision is clear. Even so, the necessity of classis supervision of consistories without installed pastors is for some classes a tremendous burden. Particularly for the six classes of the Regional Synod of Albany, the imperative to provide a supervisor for each pastor-less consistory is becoming increasingly difficult to fulfill. Our numbers and our geography make this obligation more and more onerous for already burdened ministers. In two of our classes, ministers could very well be responsible for two consistories besides their own, any of which might require a lengthy drive at night in treacherous weather. As a result of these and other difficulties, some classis leaders are finding it increasingly difficult to get ministers to fill supervision assignments.

What is to be done? We wish to offer here a first step: a statement of *essential* expectations regarding classis supervision for classes to use as they seek to fulfill this important responsibility. Other steps will be needed, particularly to help move beyond basic requirements to best practices. For this, we would especially want to share models of excellent supervision by elders, as there are experienced elder supervisors in some of our classes who help their assigned consistories tremendously. We do well to learn from them.

At this point, however, our task is to provide the basic requirements of supervisors (both elder and minister), classes, and consistories in the responsibilities of supervision.

**General Considerations**

Before we get to that, however, we must address a few items that are reflected in our outline of expectations below.

The first of these concerns how often a supervisor must attend meetings of the supervised consistory. Of course, the ideal would be monthly, or however often the consistory is accustomed to meeting. But the ideal and the real are often in tension here, as it is often simply not practical for the supervisor to attend every month.

It must be said here that this is not (or should not be) why some classes provide an elder supervisor. The presence of an elder supervisor at a consistory meeting does not satisfy the expectation in the *BCO* that the consistory meeting has present all three offices of deacon, elder, and minister. The elder supervisor, who is not a member of the classis nor is accountable to the classis in the way that a minister is, cannot represent the interests of the classis in the same way that the minister can and must. As profoundly helpful as the elder supervisor can be, the presence of such a person is not really a substitute for a minister supervisor.

Consequently, the minister supervisor must be present at every consistory meeting. Yet the key here is in the terminology: every *consistory* meeting. For there to be a consistory meeting, it must have deacons, elders, and ministers. There are times when the consistory has to act as a consistory, when it must take formal action or make formal decisions that only the consistory can, in which case it needs the minister supervisor with the elders and deacons. That is when those gathered do so *as a consistory*. There may be other times, however, when the elders and deacons would benefit from convening together in order to discuss what they’ve been doing, or to pray together, or to help move some already agreed-upon projects forward. In those circumstances, those gathered would not call the gathering a “consistory meeting,” nor would they make formal consistory decisions. Such gatherings, though beneficial for the church, would not require the presence of a minister supervisor.

Even so, the consistory must meet as a consistory at some time, and with some frequency greater than “never.” How often? We read the *Book of Church Order* as setting the minimum frequency of meetings for a consistory at quarterly (*BCO* 1.II.9.1.b., p. 37). For that reason, we believe that minister supervisors must attend meetings of the supervised consistory at least once every three months, and that for other gatherings of the consistory they would style such meetings not as “consistory meetings” but as “deacon and elder gatherings” or the like.

Yet we think another option might work for some consistories in certain circumstances. That is to configure the meeting so the minister supervisor can participate in it by means of speakerphone or Internet conferencing software. Unless the bylaws of the church specifically prevent such remote participation, a consistory and its supervisor could consider this option on occasion. On these occasions, the meeting would be a real consistory meeting, one with the minister supervisor participating remotely.

A second item we must address is search committees. Some consistories needing supervision expect eventually to call a new minister. As part of that process, they will appoint a search committee. It can be a great benefit to a search committee that a minister from the classis be appointed to help them. This person could be the minister supervisor of the consistory. But we would urge classes not to assume that the two roles are always joined. To add resourcing of a search committee to a minister supervisor’s responsibilities can make an already heavy burden unbearable. We encourage classes to engage in regular and honest conversation about appropriate assignment of responsibilities for search committees.

Third, we want to highlight the reality that classis supervisors, both ministers and elders, do this work as volunteers, giving of their time generously with no expectation of payment. However, many of them have to travel significant distances in order to attend these other consistory or search committee meetings. This travel ends up accumulating at a significant financial cost for these supervisors. For this reason we include in our suggested expectations below statements that would arrange for reimbursement for miles driven by the supervisors.

**Basic Expectations**

Having laid some groundwork, we would like to offer you now these lists of basic expectations.

***of the Minister Supervisor***

In serving as the supervisor of another church’s consistory, the minister supervisor will agree:

* to attend in person at least one consistory meeting a quarter;
* to participate in consistory meetings by telephone or teleconferencing (e.g., Skype, Hangouts, Zoom) by mutual agreement with the consistory;
* to attend any special meetings of the consistory needed for calling a minister, or to arrange for another minister to attend in one’s place;
* to attend any special meetings of the board of elders convened as a judicatory for the purpose of considering discipline of a member or officer of that church, or to arrange for another minister to attend in one’s place;
* to communicate clearly and in advance with the consistory and with the elder supervisor about one’s schedule of participation;
* to work with the classis and the consistory in order to determine an appropriate classis resource person who will assist the search committee, should one be convened;
* to be responsive to email from members of the consistory.

***of the Elder Supervisor***

In serving as a supervisor of another church’s consistory, the elder supervisor will agree:

* to attend in person at least one consistory meeting a quarter;
* to communicate clearly and in advance with the consistory and with the minister supervisor about one’s schedule of participation;
* to be responsive to email from members of the consistory.

***of the Supervised Consistory***

In receiving the support of the supervisor(s), the consistory will agree:

* to include the supervisor(s) in all relevant correspondence regarding consistory meetings and business;
* to give the supervisor(s) the same rights to speak at meetings as all consistory members have;
* to convene as a consistory (rather than as a joint meeting of the board of deacons and the board of elders) only when the minister supervisor is able to attend either in person or by some teleconferencing means;
* to reimburse the supervisor(s) for travel expenses incurred in attending consistory and, if relevant, search committee meetings, at the current federal rate.

***of the Classis***

In appointing a minister (and perhaps also an elder) to supervise a consistory that has no installed minister, the classis will agree:

* prior to the start of the supervision, to inform supervisors of their responsibilities in the supervision process and to secure their agreement;
* prior to the start of the supervision, to inform the consistory of their responsibilities in the supervision process and to secure their agreement;
* to communicate regularly with the supervisor(s) during the course of supervision concerning the state of the supervised consistory and its congregation;
* Annually, to ask the consistory and the supervisors if new supervisors should be assigned.

**Do we actually need a consistory meeting?**

In many churches it is customary for consistories to meet once a month. However, many are finding this to be a strain on their time when many of the same people are directly involved with supporting the ministry of the church. It’s not uncommon that consistory meetings don’t take action that actually require the consistory. Add the requirement of a supervisor from classis to attend and many leave the meeting wondering whether a full consistory meeting was needed.

The BCO requires a consistory to meet at least every three months. This is the standard in determining the presence of leadership in the church.

If a consistory plans ahead, the number of official meetings can held to a minimum without impacting the ministry of the church. The benefit would be that people would have more time and energy for other among the church. A risk is that communication and relationship between the consistory and the classis is stopped.

General guidelines for what kinds of decisions a consistory needs to make (that is Elders, Deacons, and a Minister from Classis present). Please review the BCO pages 11-28.

* Oversight regarding the provision and conduct of services of worship, including providing for preaching and presiding when the sacraments are celebrated.
* Oversight of the care and supervision of the property and finances
* Oversight in the election of Elders and Deacons
* Administration
* appointing a Vice President and a Clerk
* keeping a records of baptisms and marriage, membership and transfers
* reporting to Classis every year about the church’s ministry.

Also, the consistory *may* act in anything that needs a decision in anything else that isn’t assigned to other offices (1.I.2.sec2)

**Elders’ oversight- a *minister from Classis is not required by the BCO to be present.***

* Must meet at least 4 times a year

*Oversight of Membership*

* Set qualifications for profession of faith
* Receive members into fellowship,
* Receive requests for baptism
* Receive and send transfers of membership
* Review membership rolls
  + transfer people to inactive list
  + remove inactive folks from rolls (reasons listed in BCO, 1.I.5.g)
  + Has care of members, including oversight of conduct (see 2.I.3); including those not participating in the “means of grace,” and encouraging ways of living that reflect being a Christian.