

RECRUITING OFFICE-BEARERS

In Challenging Times

*Practical steps to help
congregations invite and
equip new leaders*



KEY FOCUS AREA #5:
Leadership Development



Introduction

Recruiting office-bearers in Christian Reformed congregations can be a real challenge, especially when cultural shifts and ministry demands increase.

In some CRC congregations, the Covenant for Office-Bearers is a sticking point that can make it harder to recruit qualified, willing members. Whether due to theological uncertainty, discomfort with institutional language, or a desire for more dialogue, some members hesitate to sign.

But with a strong grounding in our Reformed identity and a renewed focus on local ministry and justice, there are practical and creative ways that congregations can invite and equip new leaders.

We've put together three (3) helpful resources your church can start using today!

What's in this series...

- Top 10 Tips to Help Your Church Recruit Office-Bearers
- Top 10 Things You Can Do When Signing the Covenant for Office-Bearers is a Challenge
- Six Ideas for When You Can't Find Enough Office-Bearers

Top 10 Tips to Help Your Church Recruit Office-Bearers



1

RECAST THE VISION

Remind your congregation that office-bearing is not just “serving time”—it’s a calling to lead in local mission, pursue justice, and help the church flourish. Keep reminding the church how office-bearers are making a tangible difference in your church and community.



2

START WITH PRAYER & DISCERNMENT

Don’t begin with a list—begin with prayer. Ask the congregation to pray for wisdom and openness, and invite the Spirit to raise up people with the gifts your church needs in this season.



3

TELL POSITIVE STORIES

Too often, we only talk about the burdens of office-bearing. Flip the script: highlight the joys, growth, and impact that office-bearers experience when they serve. Use testimonies in worship or newsletters to paint a hopeful picture.



4

FOCUS ON GIFTS, NOT GAPS

Use a gifts-based approach rather than just filling roles. Who has the heart for community? For pastoral care? For administration or stewardship? Match gifts and strengths to roles so people can serve with purpose and energy.



5

REDEFINE THE ROLE

Reimagine what elders and deacons do—not as committee members, but as spiritual leaders and justice-seekers in the local context. Explore creative models (e.g. team-based leadership, term flexibility, role-sharing).



6

LEAN INTO A TEAM MINISTRY MODEL

Build a culture where leadership is shared, not siloed. When people feel they’re part of a team with a shared mission, they’re more likely to say yes. Fellowship and spiritual companionship go a long way.



7

INVEST IN TRAINING & SUPPORT

Fear and uncertainty can hold people back. Provide clear orientation, mentoring, and ongoing support. Agencies like Diaconal Ministries Canada, Thrive, and Resonate Global Mission offer training that builds confidence and skills.



8

INVOLVE NEW & YOUNGER MEMBERS

Don’t just look to long-time members for leadership. Younger adults, new Canadians, and recent members often bring fresh energy and diverse perspectives. Consider a “next gen” track or apprentice model to invite participation.



9

NAME THE JUSTICE MANDATE

Deacons have a unique role in shaping how the church engages poverty, equity, reconciliation, and creation care. Make justice work a core part of the calling—not an add-on.



10

CELEBRATE AND BLESS

Honour your past and present office-bearers with ongoing gratitude and encouragement. When people feel valued and celebrated, others are more likely to step forward with a willing heart.

TOP 10 Things You Can Do When Signing the Covenant for Office-Bearers (CfO) Is a Challenge

1 Create Space for Conversation Before Commitment

Instead of presenting the covenant as a final step, some churches invite nominees into a conversation—with pastors, council, or a small discernment team—to discuss the meaning and intent behind the covenant before signing.

2 Offer a Pastoral Approach to Signing

Pastors or councils meet personally with nominees to walk through the Covenant, answer questions, and affirm the spirit rather than just the wording. This builds trust and allows for honesty.

3 Use a “Season of Discernment”

Some churches offer a structured time (e.g. 30–60 days) for prayer, study, and conversation about the covenant and the role of office bearers before expecting a decision.

4 Provide Theological Clarity and Context

Churches have hosted brief workshops or Q&A sessions on the Beliefs and Confessions of the CRC, helping members understand what they’re being asked to affirm—and what they’re not.

5 Distinguish Between *Core* and *Comprehensive* Agreement

Traditionally, the CRC has distinguished between core agreement (affirming the “system of doctrine”) and absolute agreement on every point. The CfO emphasized upholding the confessions and not teaching against them—not requiring enthusiastic affirmation of every line.

However, the post-Human Sexuality Report (HSR) environment has shifted this balance. In many places, there is now an expectation that office-bearers must affirm the denomination’s stance on sexuality, not just refrain from teaching against it. This has narrowed the field of who can serve.

Even so, councils can still clarify for nominees that signing *doesn’t* mean you have to be without questions, yet *does* mean you are committing to uphold the teaching of the church during your term and not promote views that contradict it

Assure them that your council wants to walk with them in this—not pressure them into a checkbox.

That said, the tone and enforcement at the classical and synodical level may make these local accommodations difficult. Some councils may feel compelled to require full agreement to avoid conflict with classis or denominational leadership.

6 Revise the Language When Referring to the Covenant

Rather than presenting it as a legal contract, churches can frame it as a shared promise to Christ and the community, using language that emphasizes love, unity, and mission.

7 Pair Nominees with Mentors

Before serving, nominees are matched with a current or former elder/deacon to discuss the covenant and what the role is really like. Relational trust helps people take the next step.

8 Acknowledge and Respect Conscientious Objections

If someone cannot sign in good conscience, some councils allow them to submit a written statement explaining their loyalty to Scripture and to the mission of the church, even if they can't affirm every confessional detail.

Since Synod 2022 however, the CRCNA has identified the traditional view on sexuality, as articulated in the HSR, as part of the confessional teaching of the church. This means that office-bearers are now expected to not only uphold the Three Forms of Unity but to affirm the specific interpretation of sexuality found in the HSR as confessional.

For many, this has created a crisis of conscience. Some members—who love Scripture, the Reformed confessions, and the church—may not be able to sign the CfO without reservation. In some contexts, councils have chosen to engage in open, respectful conversations with nominees, asking not just *“Can you sign?”* but *“Can you serve with integrity, within the boundaries we’ve committed to?”* That discernment takes deep trust and wisdom.

Churches can consider asking:

- *“Is this person committed to the authority of Scripture?”*
- *“Do they seek to lead with humility and not teach against the confessions?”*
- *“Even if they wrestle with some aspects of the HSR, do they desire to serve faithfully in the local body?”*

Depending on your classis and regional culture, there may still be space to include such leaders in local roles—even if they cannot be seated at classis. But that comes with risks, including potential scrutiny or consequences. Councils must weigh this carefully and document their discernment process thoughtfully.

9 Invite People into Leadership First—Then into Office

Some churches start by inviting members into ministry leadership roles (e.g. care teams, justice groups, service projects) to develop leadership skills and interest—eventually building toward office bearing.

10 Pray and Wait with Patience

Rather than pressuring reluctant nominees, some councils choose to trust God's timing, believing that forming mature leaders takes time. They keep the door open, build relationships, and continue the conversation for future years.

6 IDEAS FOR WHEN YOU CAN'T FIND ENOUGH OFFICE-BEARERS



Name the Tension Publicly

Be honest with the congregation about the difficulty. Transparency can build empathy and trust—even when people disagree.

Broaden the Invitation

Sometimes people assume they must be theological experts to serve. Instead, invite people who are spiritually mature, committed to Jesus, and willing to learn.

Clarify the Scope of Leadership



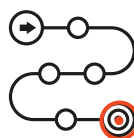
Depending on the classis climate, someone may be able to serve faithfully at the local level even if they can't attend classis. But be upfront about what that means.

Lean into alternative leadership models

In extreme cases, some churches have empowered ministry teams or staff to take on some diaconal or pastoral functions while they rebuild a full council. It's not ideal, but it's faithful improvisation.

Create a discernment path

Instead of just asking, "Will you serve?", invite people into a process of discernment—including reading the CfO together, praying, and offering space for questions and doubts.



Speak to classis, if needed

If your council wants to include someone who struggles to sign the CfO, consider bringing it to your classis proactively—not just for permission, but for conversation and mutual discernment.