

AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES OF RHODE ISLAND PROCESS FOR REVIEW OF MINISTERIAL STANDING

The Process for Review of Ministerial Standing contains the policy and procedures for the review of ministerial standing of professional church leaders affiliated with American Baptist Churches of Rhode Island (ABCORI, or the Region).

PREAMBLE:

Strengthening the spiritual health and vitality of its constituent churches and their ministerial leaders is an important role of ABCORI and its professional staff. Programs, services, and pastoral care are ways in which this central concern is expressed for local churches and their professional leadership. Care for professional church leaders and the congregations they serve is an ongoing process. When issues of compatibility between a congregation and professional church leader emerge, those issues are handled within the Region's ongoing service of care toward its churches and their leadership.

However, when there are allegations and/or evidence that a professional church leader's conduct is inconsistent with the Region's standards of personal and professional conduct, the Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches, and/or legal statutes, a formal process will be initiated to review the ministerial standing of the professional church leader against whom the allegations or evidence has been brought.

This review must be seen as part of an ongoing process of care. Its primary concern is for justice, reconciliation, and healing for both the congregation and the individual(s) involved.

It must be stressed that this is an ecclesiastical process, not a legal process. However, mandated reporting will be followed prior to and during this process. Specifically, any allegations involving the abuse, neglect, or exploitation of children or elders must, by Rhode Island law, be reported. In cases of any other allegation of criminal activity, the claimant will determine if they wish to make a criminal complaint.

PROCEDURES:

The ABCORI Standing Committee on Ordained Ministry (SCOM) has the responsibility for the Region's Process for Review of Ministerial Standing. All participants shall exercise great care to assure that the allegations and the process remain confidential unless some decision is reached which requires notification. Violation of this confidentiality is itself misconduct.

A review of ministerial standing is called for when there are allegations and/or evidence of:

- Personal or professional misconduct of an ethical, sexual, or financial nature;
- Violation of expectations the church has about ethical behavior for its professional leaders, as articulated in Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders of American Baptist Churches; or
- Legal action that would bring a church into disrepute.

(As noted in the Preamble, allegations and/or evidence of an incompatibility between a congregation and a professional church leader do not warrant a review of ministerial standing, but instead are addressed as part of the Region's ongoing service of care toward its member churches and their leaders.)

Allegations and/or evidence of conduct warranting a ministerial review may be brought by Region staff, laypersons, or other professional church leaders. The process proceeds according to the following steps:

- 1. Written Allegations:** Formal allegations should be addressed to the Executive Minister of the Region or to the Chair of SCOM, each of whom would then notify the other. The allegations must be specific in content, made in writing, and signed. Any supporting documentation (PDFs, screenshots, etc.) should be included.
- 2. Pastoral Intervention:** When formal allegations have been made, there is an ongoing need for pastoral intervention for the claimant, the professional church leader, their families, if any, and the congregation being served. These pastoral interventions will be coordinated by the Executive Minister and may be done upon the request of the Executive Minister by members of the Region's staff, members of SCOM, or clergy in the Region who are not directly involved in the process.
- 3. Informing the Professional Church Leader about the Allegations:** The Executive Minister shall inform the person in writing of the allegations, the initiation of a review process, and the procedure for the review process. This is to be sent in writing, on ABCORI letterhead and signed by the Executive Minister, via certified mail with registered return receipt. A copy of the letter will be kept in the Region's locked files.
- 4. Preliminary Exploration:** The Preliminary Exploration begins within thirty (30) days after formal allegations have been made. SCOM shall meet separately with the claimant and the professional church leader in question to clarify the allegations, respond to any questions, and determine what steps to take. If either party fails to appear at their scheduled meeting, SCOM may proceed with the review process. There are five possible courses of action:
 - a. SCOM may determine there is no warrant for a review hearing.
 - b. SCOM may, in the event of an unusually grave or emergency situation, temporarily suspend recognition of ordination for a period of not more than ninety (90) days. During this period SCOM shall convene a review hearing to consider the matter fully. Notice of this decision shall be given to the person in question and the appropriate denominational bodies. The temporary suspension cannot be appealed.
 - c. The professional church leader in question may acknowledge the truth of the allegations and work with SCOM to develop a plan to address the situation without utilizing the full process of a review hearing. The plan must include input from the

claimant as well. If a mutually agreeable plan of action is developed and accepted, the review process ends and cannot be appealed.

d. The professional church leader in question may dispute the allegations in full or in part, and yet work with SCOM to develop a plan to address the situation without utilizing the full process of the review hearing. The plan must include input from the claimant as well. If a mutually agreeable plan of action is developed and accepted, the review process ends and cannot be appealed.

e. The professional church leader in question may dispute the allegations and SCOM may decide to utilize the review hearing process to investigate and make a decision about the allegations.

- 5. Review Hearing Notice:** When a review hearing is scheduled, all parties involved are to be notified and informed about the process in a manner that maintains the confidentiality of the process and all involved. The hearing should not be less than thirty (30) days nor more than ninety (90) days following notification.

The professional church leader in question is to be supplied with a written copy of the allegations, a description of the review hearing procedure, and a notification of their rights. These include the right to be present, the right to present evidence including witnesses on his or her behalf, and the right to have an advocate present. This advocate may be clergy or lay and is intended to provide support and assistance to the person throughout the process.

Being an ecclesiastical process, there is no official role or place for attorneys in this review process. If any involved parties wish to seek legal counsel, they must do so outside the official review process. Attorneys are not permitted to participate in the preliminary exploration, the review hearing, or the appeal process.

- 6. The Review Hearing:** The hearing is held to thoroughly investigate the allegations. The hearing shall be fair, impartial, and confidential for the professional church leader in question, the persons making the allegations, and the wider church family. SCOM may specify the amount of time allowed for presentation of the allegations, for the defense, and for summary statements. If a person fails to appear at a scheduled review hearing, SCOM may proceed with the review process.

Both the claimant and professional church leader have the right to have an advocate throughout the review process. This advocate may be clergy or lay, and is intended to provide support to the individuals through the process.

The following is a guide for how the hearing may progress:

- Introductory statement by the chair of SCOM.
- Prayer.
- Reading of the allegations by the chair of SCOM.

- Presentation of the information or testimony supporting the allegations. This may be done by the claimant or in writing if the claimant is not comfortable being present.
- Presentation of information or testimony refuting the allegations, including opportunities by the professional church leader in question and/or their witnesses to speak.
- Questions by SCOM to any of those offering information, testimony, refutation, or response.
- Closing statement by the claimant and/or their advocate.
- Closing statement by the professional church leader in question or their advocate.
- Prayer for continuing guidance and comfort for those involved in this situation and for those who are given the responsibility to come to a decision.
- Adjournment of the review hearing.

Following the hearing, SCOM meets in executive session to deliberate and make its decision based on the preponderance of evidence presented at the hearing.

If SCOM decides that the allegations are not upheld, no action is taken in regard to the professional church leader's ordination and standing in ABCORI and ABCUSA.

If SCOM decides that the allegations are upheld, SCOM must then also decide which of the following actions will be taken:

- a. Develop a plan, short of censure, suspension of standing, or withdrawal of standing, for the professional church leader in question to address the situation.
- b. Allow the professional church leader in question to voluntarily relinquish standing or recognition of ordination in ABCORI and ABCUSA.
- c. Censure the professional church leader in question, but allow the recognition of ordination to stand.
- d. Suspend recognition of ordination or standing, and provide a documented plan the person must follow in order to have recognition restored.
- e. Withdraw the recognition of ordination or standing in ABCORI and ABCUSA.

7. Notification of Decision: The Executive Minister shall notify the claimant and the professional church leader of its decision within fifteen (15) days of the review hearing. In the event of suspension or withdrawal of ministerial standing, the Executive Minister shall also notify the American Baptist Personnel Services, the Regional Executive Ministers Council, the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board, the Ministers Council, the originating church, the church (or church organization) being served at the time of the allegations, the church (or church organization) now being served, and any other bodies which have relied on American Baptist recognition for endorsement, approval, or certification.

8. Appeal: A person whose recognition of ordination or standing has been suspended or withdrawn may appeal the decision to the Board of Ministries of the American Baptist

Churches of Rhode Island. All appeals will be conducted to determine the appropriateness of the process used by SCOM to reach its final decision. An appeal is not to determine an individual's fitness for ministry; rather, it is to determine if a fair and just process was used by SCOM. The decision of the Board of Ministries shall be final.

- 9. Pastoral Follow-up:** There is need for pastoral care throughout the process, but particularly following a review hearing. Once the hearing is complete, decision made, and actions taken, there needs to be intentional effort made at reconciliation and healing. The church and/or the Region will offer ongoing care and concern to the claimant and/or those who were wronged, and will find ways to express forgiveness and grace to those who have been disciplined.

- 10. Reinstatement:** If there is a desire to be reinstated and have ordination recognized again, the candidate must begin the process by meeting with the Executive Minister. If the Executive Minister finds the candidate is ready to begin the ordination review process, SCOM will meet with the person to review the original action, subsequent history, and present qualifications for ministry. In the event that the certification (recognition) was withdrawn by the decision of a region other than the American Baptist Churches of Rhode Island, SCOM will request appropriate documentation be secured about the prior action so that full information will be available to SCOM in considering reinstatement. The candidate will be notified in writing within seven (7) days of the meeting. If SCOM discerns evidence of a call and gifts for ministry, SCOM will determine a plan with specific steps to be reinstated.

Records: A written summary of SCOM's proceedings, including the written allegations, any supporting documentation, and a statement of SCOM's findings, will be maintained permanently in the minutes of SCOM and in the personnel files of the Region office. Any decision to remove or clear such a file of SCOM's proceedings is to be made with the consent of SCOM. These files will be maintained to respond to requests for information regarding misconduct from future employers of persons who are professional church leaders affiliated with the Region.

Civil or Criminal Lawsuits: A claimant's decision to use the above policy and procedures for handling complaints of misconduct in no way precludes a simultaneous use of the civil or criminal legal justice system.

IMPLICATIONS:

There are different kinds of implications of a decision by SCOM to censure a professional church leader. It may mean:

- That person's name will be deleted from any listing of Professional Ministers of the ABCUSA,
- That the American Baptist Personnel Services will seek to deactivate any use of a person's profile, and
- That all ABC Regions will be notified of the action.

Depending on the requirements of other bodies, this decision may directly affect an endorsement, approval, or recognition which was predicated on ABC action; in some instances, this may mean termination of employment. Depending on the laws of the state, this decision may mean that a person will no longer be authorized to perform pastoral functions such as weddings, funerals, and/or pastoral counseling.

DEFINITIONS:

Professional Church Leader: All current employees of ABCORI and its member churches, as well as former employees of ABCORI, its member churches, or other ABCUSA regions or organizations who currently reside in Rhode Island and engage in ministry with ABCORI and/or its member churches on a full-time, part-time, or volunteer basis are understood to be professional church leaders. Professional church leaders may be lay, licensed, ordained, or non-ordained.

Certification of Ordination: In our tradition, ordination is granted by the local congregation working with the partner churches. The denomination does not ordain; it certifies (also referred to as, recognizes) ordinations of a local church, or from other denominations. A person may voluntarily give up the certification (recognition) of his or her ordination. The denomination may choose to withdraw certification (recognition) of ordination either for cause or after a period of inactivity.

Restoration: Restoration is the process of supervision and evaluation that returns a PCL to certified ordained ministry. SCOM designs the process for each situation and individual. The PCL must willingly cooperate and successfully complete the process for his/her ordination to be certified again.

The Region: The process of certification of ordination in the denomination is decentralized; a Region acts on behalf of the whole denomination in certifying (recognizing), refusing to certify (recognize), allowing certification (recognition) to lapse, or withdrawing certification (recognition) of ordination. There is, in general practice, reciprocity among ABC bodies with all Regions and National Boards agreeing to accept the process as applied in other partner Regions.

Standing Committee on Ordained Ministry (SCOM) is that part of the Region structure which is charged with the responsibility for certification (and withdrawal of certification) of ordination and ministerial standing.