



FORM OF GOVERNMENT AND BOOK OF CONFESSIONS

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ADOPTED BY THE CONGREGATION

PREAMBLE

Jesus Christ, the Head and King of the Church

Jesus Christ, upon whose shoulders the government rests, whose name is called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace; of the increase of whose government and peace there shall be no end; who sits upon the throne of David, and upon His kingdom to order it and to establish it with judgment and justice from henceforth, even forever (Isaiah 9:6-7); having all power given unto Him in heaven and in earth by the Father, who raised Him from the dead and set Him at His own right hand, far above all principality and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come, and has put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be the Head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him that fills all in all (Eph. 1:20-23); He, being ascended up far above all heavens, that He might fill all things, received gifts for His Church, and gave all offices necessary for the edification of His Church and the perfecting of His saints (Eph. 4:10-13).

Jesus, the Mediator, the sole Priest, King, Prophet, Savior, and Head of the Church, contains in Himself, by way of eminency, all the offices in His Church, and has many of their names attributed to Him in the Scriptures. He is Apostle, Teacher, Pastor, Deacon, Bishop, and the only Lawgiver in Zion.

It belongs to His Majesty from His throne of glory to rule and teach the Church through His Word and Spirit by the ministry of men; thus, exercising His own authority and enforcing His own laws, for the edification and establishment of His Kingdom through these humble means of the Ministry, Word, and Sacraments, throughout the earth, to the end of the world.

Christ, as King, has given to His Church patterns of government, community, and worship, for the maturing of his people and the manifestation of his glory in the world. All things needed for doctrinal truth and the practice of godliness are contained in His Word, the Church's supreme authority. The only standard by which all matters of faith and life may be determined is the voice of Christ, speaking through His inspired Word.

Since the ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven, He is present with the Church by His Word and Spirit, and the benefits of all His offices are effectually applied by the Holy Spirit by means of the Word proclaimed and the Sacraments administered. All these benefits are received by faith alone as the sole instrument of union with Christ and His body.

The Church, the Body and Bride of Christ

We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. We believe that the Church is the family and royal priesthood of God the Father, the body and bride of God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship and temple of God the Holy Spirit. We believe that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church. We believe that the Church is one in all ages and is founded upon Christ Jesus, crucified and risen, as the Chief Cornerstone. We believe that through the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ will fulfill His commission as the Last Adam to fill the earth with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea and to subdue every enemy of God, death being last of all.

We acknowledge that the Church of God, purchased with Christ's blood, is manifested in diverse but united particular congregations in all the earth. We believe that the Church is one in Christ, as all Christians and all local communions are joined together as living members of His mystical body. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, to which all of God's people belong. This mystical union in Christ is the basis and root of our organizational unity.

We believe that it is the duty of each Christian to be committed to a Biblically ordered congregation, under the rule of elders, ordinarily located in their geographical area. Church of the Redeemer (COTR) of West Monroe, Louisiana, has been so constituted by Christ through His duly ordained representatives as a particular congregation of the body of Christ. We believe that churches are to be connected with one another in a conciliar fashion, as representative elders, or presbyters, come together in assemblies to share in the governance of the Church. Thus, for the purpose of manifesting our oneness in Christ, as well as mutually cooperative shepherding, oversight, accountability, and discipline, our presbytery affiliation is the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC). Our desire for mutual ministry and mission is not, however, limited to the churches of our presbytery or denomination. We long for the oneness of Christ's many congregations to be manifested publicly and governmentally in the world, through shared councils and common ministry and mission. This unity need not mean uniformity, but it should mean that bonds of mutual love and trust are evident. We long to labor with other congregations in doing the work of the kingdom in Word, Sacrament, and service. Our motto towards our fellow Christians and sister churches is the familiar refrain: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity."

Preliminary Principles

The purpose of the Church's existence is to fulfill Christ's mission of gathering the nations into His kingdom and maturing them into His obedient and faithful people, through means of Word, sacrament, and service, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. At the center of our church's life is gathered worship, in which God renews covenant with us and gives us the gifts of His kingdom.

As a Presbyterian Church in the Reformed tradition, we hold to a representative form of government. The church is ruled by the session, which consists of men ordained to the offices of pastor, teacher, evangelist, and ruling elder, as described elsewhere in this Constitution. The Constitution of COTR consists of the “Form of Government” and the “Book of Confessions.” As a local congregation, COTR may choose its own officers (in conjunction with the approval of presbytery in the case of elders laboring in word and doctrine), admit members and perform excommunications, withdraw from the CREC and pursue a different denominational connection at any time, revise its Constitution, and possess its own property. This Constitution does not claim to perfectly or comprehensively reflect the Bible’s teaching on Church polity; while our desire is to be as biblical as possible in our given circumstances, this document remains a fallible human product. As such, officers and members are not expected to agree with every detail, but do need to be willing to live under its terms.

COTR desires to be at peace with all other faithful churches. We lament the fragmented state of Christendom and long for the day when God’s churches will be united as one visible family under the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. We see our membership in the CREC as a way of practicing biblical ecclesiastical polity under compromised circumstances. We long for an ever widening connection with the Church catholic. Should COTR ever desire to leave the CREC for another denominational affiliation, COTR may do so with the session’s approval and a two-thirds majority vote, in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution. COTR shall aspire to only leave in a peaceable and orderly manner, treating our brethren with respect, and with a commitment to joining another association of faithful churches as soon as possible.

We believe that all human life is created by the Triune God in His image. Human life is a gift of God and therefore to be protected in all its dimensions, including pre-born babies, the aged, the physically or mentally handicapped and every other stage or condition of life from conception through natural death. We are therefore called to defend, protect, and value all life regardless of its quality.

We believe that God wonderfully and immutably creates each person as male or female. These two distinct, complementary sexes/genders together reflect the image and nature of God Himself (Genesis 1:26-27). Rejection of one’s biological sex is a rejection of the image of God within that person.

We believe that the term “marriage” has only one meaning: the uniting of one man and one woman in a single, exclusive union, **signifying the union that exists between Christ and His Church, for the purpose of mutual society, help, and comfort and the propagation of the human race**, as delineated in Scripture (Genesis 2:18-25). We believe that God intends sexual intimacy to occur only between a man and a woman who are married to each other (1 Corinthians 6:18; 7:2-5; Hebrews 13:4). We believe that God has commanded that no intimate sexual activity be engaged in outside of a marriage between a man and a woman.

We believe that any form of sexual immorality (including adultery, fornication, homosexual behavior, bisexual conduct, bestiality, incest, and use of pornography) is sinful and offensive to God (Matthew 15:18-20; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

We believe that God offers redemption and restoration to all who confess and forsake their sin, seeking His mercy and forgiveness through Jesus Christ (Acts 3:19-21; Romans 10:9-10; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). We believe God requires us to treat every person with compassion, love, kindness, respect, and dignity as is worthy of God's image-bearers and we repudiate unloving and injurious behavior directed toward any individual as out of accord with Scripture and the doctrinal position of COTR.

COTR acknowledges that God alone is Lord of the conscience; that while reason and tradition are helpful guides in Church life, all human authorities are subordinate to the Word of God in matters of faith and practice; that Christ has instituted a government and officers in His Church to preach and protect the purity of the gospel, to administer the Sacraments according to the prescriptions of the Word, and to shepherd, discipline, and serve the flock as needed; that the Church has genuine authority, as its officers and courts represent the Lord Jesus Christ on earth, with the power of the keys to bind and loose; that Church councils and courts may and have erred, and therefore all Church power is but ministerial and declarative, not absolute; that we are called to dwell together in brotherly love, bearing with one another, forgiving one another, and praying for one another, so that the world may know that we are Christ's disciples and that He is the One sent by the Father; that we are to seek to maintain the bond of peace and unity in the faith with all other faithful Christians, ministering alongside one another in word and deed, no matter their denominational connection; and that we are duty bound to work for the end of the denominational system and the establishment of a truly catholic and Reformed church in the world.

Chapter 1: MEMBERSHIP

1.1 Membership in COTR as a Particular Body

Membership in our local expression of Christ's Church is constituted by a profession of faith, sealed in baptism. Baptism is the rite of initiation into the covenant of grace and the catholic Church; the one baptized maintains good standing in the Church by walking in faith, by the grace of God.

Membership at COTR is "catholic," open to Christ's disciples of all races and ages. While baptism marks out membership in the catholic Church, professing believers, together with their children, ordinarily enter the membership of COTR, as a local body, when they have approval of the session. New members are expected to affirm the membership vows before the session and ordinarily, will be expected to swear their membership vows in front of the congregation in the context of a covenant renewal worship service, as the session deems prudent.

Those joining COTR from outside the catholic Church officially, as new believers or covenant children, join at their baptisms; those already baptized join COTR when the session has approved and received their transfer of membership (or if they have no Church they are currently members of, they join when the session approves their profession of faith).

Parents (or sponsors/guardians) may take vows on behalf of their children, who cannot yet express their faith. Children born to at least one member parent (or belonging to a member sponsor/guardian) are regarded as heirs of the covenant even before baptism, and become full members of COTR at their baptisms.

The elders of COTR are responsible to examine the orthodoxy of all candidates for membership, and to see that their lives do not contradict their professions. The session should make sure that all candidates coming for membership by transfer have been baptized in the Triune name. The session may delegate the task of meeting with prospective members to a commission of two elders. Interviews with prospective members should include a discussion of the candidate's Christian experience/life, the content of the membership vows, and ways in which the Church and new member can mutually serve one another.

Membership vows include:

1. Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving His wrath, and without hope apart from His sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you trust in Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel, as priest, king, and prophet?

3. Do you now promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will strive to live a life of repentance and obedience, in a manner worthy of the followers of Christ?
4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourself to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to pursue its purity and peace?

1.2 Transfers from other congregations

If those requesting membership in COTR are presently members of another congregation, the session of COTR will send a request of transfer to the leadership of that congregation. If no reply is made in thirty days, the COTR session may receive the member based upon profession of faith. It is the desire of COTR to respect the governmental actions of other churches as much as possible. No one baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to be re-baptized. If the prospective member has been under discipline, a full investigation is to be made.

1.3 Records of Membership

The session of COTR is to keep careful records of membership, including baptisms for the purpose of providing loving oversight of the congregation. The session should always keep the congregation informed of changes in Church membership.

1.4 Associate Membership

In special circumstances, persons who hold membership in another congregation may come under the pastoral care of COTR without becoming full, voting members of COTR. In these cases, permission should be secured from the person's home church. Associate memberships may be dissolved on request, and the person returned to the full care of their home church.

1.5 Release or Transfer of Membership

If any member requests to be released to the care of another Christian church, he should notify the session. The session will release him with a blessing, except as noted here. If any member requests a release while under church discipline, the session will delay acting on the request until the disciplinary matter is resolved. The matter can be resolved by acquittal, repentance, censure, or excommunication; or, if the COTR session is reasonably confident the receiving Church will continue the disciplinary process in a biblical manner, the member may be released into the

pastoral care of that church, with a complete report of the matter passed along to the governance of that church.

If members move from our geographical area, they are charged to find a new church home within twelve months. This time may be reduced or extended at the session's discretion. After this time is expired, their names will be removed from the membership roll of COTR.

Members of this church who willfully, without plausible reason or excuse, consistently absent themselves from COTR for Lord's Day worship shall be subject to Church discipline, as the session deems appropriate, for the purity of the church and the spiritual health of the absent member. If a member begins attending another church without transferring membership for longer than twelve months, he may have his name erased from the membership roll of COTR. If a member refuses to attend another church or meet with the Session for reconciliation, his name will be removed from the roll of COTR (which action will constitute excommunication)."

1.6 Communicant Membership

Under the headship of Christ, the responsibility for overseeing the administration of the sacraments remains with the elders. Sacraments belong to the Church and not to families. All baptized children are to participate in the Lord's Supper when they are physically able to do so [see Section 4.5]¹. All baptized children are subject to the nurture and discipline of the Church, along with their parents.

1.7 Electors, Elections and Congregational Meetings

Electors are regular (i.e. not "associate") members of the Church, age eighteen and above. The session may revoke voting privileges as part of the disciplinary process. Voting will take place by electors in the election of Church offices, including pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons; if necessary, the dismissal of those same officers; the adopting or amending of the Constitution; leaving the CREC and making a new ecclesiastical affiliation; major property transactions and on other matters the session may deem wise or necessary. The session must provide at least two weeks' notice before all congregational meetings. Votes should ordinarily be held in conjunction with a Lord's Day service to maximize attendance. At least 50% of the congregation's voting membership must be present as a quorum for a vote. A passing vote requires the affirmation of two-thirds of those voting, unless otherwise provided for in the Constitution.

¹ We acknowledge in accordance with the constitution of the CREC that we are required to receive transfers from other CREC congregations who may not be paedobaptists and consequently, not accept the practice of covenant communion, in such cases, the parents would not be required to have their children participate in the Lord's table but are encouraged to give careful consideration to the position of COTR in regard to the covenant standing of the children of believing parents.

Chapter 2: OFFICERS AND ORDINATION

2.1 *Offices*

The following table lays out the various offices that COTR recognizes, as well as our terminology:

Elders/Presbyters (Session)		Diaconate
Teaching Elders	Ruling Elders	Deacons
Pastors/Ministers		
Teachers/Doctors		
Evangelists/Missionaries/Church Planters		

Jesus Christ has appointed several offices for the edification and growth of His Church. The extraordinary offices of apostle and prophet have now ceased, as their foundation-laying role in redemptive history is complete (Eph. 2:20). COTR's form of government includes and makes provision for the following ordinary and perpetual offices: Teaching elder (which includes pastors, teachers, and evangelists, Eph. 4:11), ruling elder, and deacon. Pastor, teacher, and evangelist are all offices of Word and Sacrament. Ruling elder is an office of service and rule. Deacon is an office of service and stewardship, under the oversight of the session. Deacons are assistants to the elders, with a special calling to minister mercy, primarily among the family of God, and secondarily in the world, as well as performing other assorted tasks. The session may also create additional non-authoritative orders of men and women within the congregation to provide service and give assistance to the officers.

The New Testament uses the term "elder" (or "presbyter") with great breadth, to refer to both officers who minister in Word and Sacrament, as well as ruling elders, who do not ordinarily preach, teach, or administer the Sacraments. A distinction between elders who rule and elders who are also responsible for teaching and the Sacraments is made in Scripture (2 Chron. 19:8; Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 5:17-18; 2 Tim. 3:17-4:2), with the latter linked to the Old Covenant priestly office as its new covenant counterpart (1 Cor.9:13). Hence, we officially distinguish ruling elders and those elders who are lawfully ordained to be elders laboring in the Word and doctrine, as pastors, teachers, or evangelists. Teaching elders and ruling elders co-labor together in shepherding the flock as members of the same session (1 Pt. 5:2-4), but these various types of elders differ in respect to personal calling, gifts, function, and (strictly speaking) office.

2.2 *Officers in Relation to the Local Church*

While it is important for the Church to always have pastoral leadership, in the providence of God, we understand that the local Church may not fill all these offices at all times. Indeed, some positions may only be rarely filled.

It is lawful and proper that there be fixed congregations, that is, a certain company of Christians who meet in one assembly at a regular time and place for public worship, under the oversight of officers. When believers multiply to such a number that they cannot conveniently meet in one place, under one session, it is practical that they divide into distinct local congregations, for the better maintenance of worship and government, and for the fulfillment of their mutual duties to one another. The ordinary way of dividing Christians into distinct congregations, and most conducive to edification, is by the respective bounds of their dwellings (parishes). This is because those who dwell together, being bound to another as neighbors, generally have better opportunity to fulfill these obligations to one another. It is our desire to be a congregation that multiplies herself, as God prospers us.

There must be a plurality of elders in a congregation. Likewise it is most helpful that there be deacons to take special care for the relief of the poor. The number of each office is to be proportioned according to the condition and needs of the congregation.

2.3 Selection and Calling of Officers

The session of elders will examine any potential candidate for office with regard to his doctrine and manner of life. If he has any disagreement or reservation about any portion of the Church's doctrinal views as expressed in the Constitution (specifically this Form of Government and the confessional standards), then he must inform the session of it. The session will determine if such a scruple excludes the candidate from office. All candidates must meet the general qualifications for the office set down in Scripture (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5-9; 1 Pt. 5:2-4). If an officer later changes his views on some matter that would require taking an exception to the Constitution, he should notify the appropriate Church courts as soon as possible. Teaching elders should notify the session and presbytery; other officers should notify the session.

In the case of a pastor, teacher, or evangelist, the candidate should also be examined by presbytery as to his fitness for ministry in terms of both doctrine and life. Candidates for ministry of Word and Sacrament should ordinarily have some formal theological training under the oversight of a body of elders. They should also excel in knowledge of the Scriptures in their original languages, have proficiency in all areas of theology and Church history, and have gifts of preaching and/or teaching. All the procedures of the CREC related to ministerial calling should be followed. The terms of a pastoral call, including compensation, vacation time, ministerial expenses, etc., shall be determined by the session when a call is issued, and then reviewed annually by the session. Because he labors in the gospel, a teaching elder shall

ordinarily draw his living from the gospel, receiving support from the tithes and offerings of the congregation.

If a man is already ordained to the office for which he is a candidate at COTR, his examination, by whatever Church court is involved, does not have to be comprehensive. His earlier ordination should be examined as to its validity, he should be interviewed with regard to his fitness for office and his calling, and he should be prepared to discuss his exceptions to the COTR Constitution.

The election of persons to the offices of ruling elder and deacon shall be done in the following manner: At such times as determined by the Session, communicant members of the congregation may submit names to the Session, keeping in mind that each prospective officer should be an active male member who meets the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 (the session may also nominate candidates for office). After the close of the nomination period nominees for the office of ruling elder and/or deacon shall receive instruction in the qualifications and work of the office. Each nominee shall then be examined in:

- a. his Christian experience, especially his personal character and family management (based on the qualifications set out in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9),
- b. his knowledge of Bible content,
- c. his knowledge of the system of doctrine, government, discipline contained in the constitution of COTR and the book of procedures of the CREC.
- d. the duties of the office to which he has been nominated, and
- e. his willingness to give assent to the questions required for ordination (see section 2.7 for elders, section 2.8 for deacons).

If there are candidates eligible for the election, the Session shall report to the congregation those eligible, giving at least thirty (30) days prior notice of the time and place of a congregational meeting for elections.

If one-fourth (1/4) of the persons entitled to vote shall at any time request the Session to call a congregational meeting for the purpose of electing additional officers, it shall be the duty of the Session to call such a meeting on the above procedure. The number of officers to be elected shall be determined by the congregation after hearing the Session's recommendation.

If a candidate is not approved for office by the session, he may request from the session a list of deficiencies or areas of concern, stated in biblical terms, and a proposed course of action for remedying these concerns.

After a candidate is approved for election, the session will call a congregational meeting in order for the voting members to cast their votes on the candidate by way of written ballot. The voting ballot will provide the candidate's name and the option of voting yes or no. **Voters may abstain**

from the vote by not submitting a ballot. Blank, defaced or illegible ballots will be discarded. If more than one candidate is up for election at the same congregational meeting, each candidate shall have his own ballot. In order to be elected, a candidate must be approved by at least two-thirds of the ballots cast. If the candidate is elected, the elders will ordain him through laying on of hands and prayer at an appropriate time, according to specifications of the COTR Constitution.

Once in office, the officer will serve for life, unless he resigns or is removed or is elected for another office, or is granted emeritus status in accordance with section 3-7. Leaves of absence from service in these offices may be granted by the session. The length of the leave of absence should be agreed upon by both the officer and the session. Even while on sabbatical, the officer holds his office, but he is not expected to carry the ordinary work load in the life of the Church. The status of Church officers should always be communicated to the congregation.

If an officer tenders his resignation, the session may receive the resignation but may not act upon it until the next regularly stated meeting, or one month later. When the resignation is accepted by the session, the congregation must be notified of this action (see section 3-7).

2.4 The Session and Diaconate: Organization, Procedures, and Responsibilities

Under Christ, as the Head and King of the Church, the power of Church rule has been vested in the session, composed of all elders, including pastors, teachers, evangelists, and governors (ruling elders) in the local Church (2 Chron. 19:8). Ordinarily, the Church should be ruled by a plurality of qualified elders. The moderator of the session, responsible for calling and overseeing meetings, is the pastor. One member of the session shall serve as clerk and be responsible for the session's communications to and from other Churches, the presbytery, and the congregation. The clerk is elected by the session to a two year term, and may serve unlimited consecutive terms.

The session must meet at least twice a year. In meetings, the clerk of session will record accurate minutes of the actions taken by the session. Minutes are to be submitted back to the whole session for approval. In all meetings of the session, each elder has one vote; the moderator only votes in cases of ties.

The elders as a session are collectively responsible for ruling and shepherding (1 Pt. 5:1-2); equipping (Eph. 4:11-12); gathering the people for covenant renewal worship (Heb. 10:25); leading in times of prayer and fasting (Acts 6:4; 13:1-3); teaching and preaching (1 Tim. 5:17); determining and overseeing admission to the Sacraments, which are baptism and the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper (Mt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26); administering Church discipline and restoring offenders (Mt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-5); counseling with members as needed (Prov. 11:14); and praying for the healing of the sick, including anointing with oil (Jas. 5:14-15). The session may also create (and dissolve) committees, commissions, orders, and boards, dedicated

to particular areas of ministry in the life of the Church. The session may also draft and approve position papers and resolutions that speak the mind of the Church to particular issues. More specific duties of each office within the eldership are described below.

The session constitutes the Church's legally incorporated representatives, or trustees (unless it chooses to commit this task to a specially chosen board from the membership), and as such, may act on the Church's behalf. The elders in session are also authorized to delegate responsibilities to the deacons, hire and fire Church staff, define responsibilities for Church staff, delegate responsibilities to the staff for subordinate ministries, approve the annual budget and expenditure policies, and organize various non-authoritative "orders" of Church members for service and assistance. The session also commissions or licenses ministerial students, and oversees the course of their training for the eldership. In all these ways, the elders act jointly, not severally.

All church-related concerns and complaints should be brought to the attention of the session. A member should present concerns that are grave in nature in writing to either the pastor or clerk of the session for consideration by the session. All members of the Church are welcome and invited to call upon the session (or any individual member thereof) for special counsel, for prayer, or for confession of sin and absolution.

The session is responsible for sending the pastor and one additional delegate to all CREC presbytery and council meetings, in accord with the CREC constitution. The pastor is a permanent delegate to all higher courts. The delegate in addition to the pastor may be chosen by a vote of the session. Delegates are to vote their conscience at higher assemblies, but should also consider the desires and will of the entire COTR session.

The diaconate is composed of the deacons. The diaconate should elect a chairman to serve a two year term. The chairman is responsible for organizing the diaconate, calling and overseeing meetings, keeping minutes (or appointing another to do so) from meetings, and serving as a liaison between the diaconate and the session, and the congregation. The diaconate is also responsible for electing a treasurer to a two year term to make necessary and accurate financial reports. The treasurer does not have to come from within the diaconate, provided another member of the congregation is willing and able to serve in this capacity. There is no limit to the number of consecutive terms chairmen and treasurers may serve. The session may replace a chairman or treasurer at any time. The diaconate must meet at least twice a year.

Under the general oversight of the elders, the deacons manage the financial, physical, social, and benevolent functions of the Church (Acts 6:2-4). Such responsibilities include preparing and administering the annual budget to be approved by the session, building maintenance, fellowship meals, administrative support, mercy ministries, and distribution of the deacons' fund to those in need. The deacons may be divided into specialized orders if expedient.

The deacons may also enlist the aid of qualified and gifted women to assist them in their work in accord with the teaching of God's Word (Rom. 16:1-2; 1 Tim. 2:9-15). These women would assist the deacons, serving in a variety of ways (caring for children, including orphans, women in need, the poor, the sick, the bereaved, the imprisoned, and the elderly; they could also assist in counseling and discipling other women, teaching children, ministering to the Church and world through the visitation ministries of the church). They would work under the oversight of the deacons and at their direction as needed.

A joint officer meeting of all elders and deacons together must be held at least once a year, under the oversight of the pastor/moderator.

The pastor shall serve as moderator of congregational meetings, though the session may choose to appoint another elder to be moderator in his place, if necessary. The clerk of the session is responsible for keeping minutes in joint officer and congregational meetings. In congregational meetings, the congregation should always be given ample time to ask questions and discuss matters, especially before a vote.

2.5 Ordination

Ordination is a rite which includes the laying on of hands and prayer, to set a man apart to a particular office and function within the Church. Insofar as ordination confers office in the Church, with attendant privileges and responsibilities, it is an act of God, not merely the human officiants. Ordination is effective by the grace of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, in accord with biblical teaching. The practice of ordination is important to good order within the life of the Church. With regard to ordination, we uphold these principles:

No man ought to take upon himself any ecclesiastical office without a lawful calling. A man should only be ordained if he has a call to a particular work or service in a local body or mission field. Only qualified, examined, and elected men have been duly called to office, and only such are to be ordained.

Ordination is always to be continued in the Church, but officers are only to be ordained into a particular office one time. If a man has already been ordained to office in another local Church, he is to be installed, rather than re-ordained, in the new Church that has called him.

Ordination is the solemn setting apart of a person to some public Church office. Ordination is a ritual of the Church through which the Spirit confers all the privileges and

obligations of the office to which the man has been called. A man is ordained into a particular office, whether teaching elder, ruling elder, or deacon. No man should be ordained to the same office more than once, but if he is called and elected to a new office, he should be ordained into the new office. (Pastors, teachers, and evangelists share a common ordination, even though they differ in the specialized nature of their callings.)

Every officer is to be ordained by the imposition of hands, and prayer, by a body of elders.

Elders from other faithful presbyteries and denominations are welcome to participate in the ordination services of COTR since their offices are recognized and respected.

In the ordination of a man to an office of ministry in Word and Sacrament, it is most fitting to include fellow elders laboring in the Word and doctrine who minister at other congregations in the same presbytery. In this way, the Church shows its submission to and cooperation with the whole presbytery in calling the man to be ordained.

It is agreeable to the Word of God, and very expedient, that when officers are ordained or installed, that both the man and congregation should be charged in a fitting way to fulfill their responsibilities to one another.

Ordinations and installations should take place in a public assembly of the Church, preferably during a Lord's Day service.

Ordinations should be followed by the right hand of fellowship in order to welcome the man into his new office.

Vows are not the essence of the ordination ritual. But vows made by both the officer(-elect) and the congregation are mutually edifying, as both parties promise to serve one another in their respective spheres, in mutual dependence upon the Lord's mercy.

2.6 Vows for a Teaching Elder

When a pastor (or other elder laboring in the Word and doctrine) is ordained, he and the congregation are to take the following vows. The vows and declaration are best administered by another pastor from the presbytery. The laying on of hands and prayer are to be inserted between the vows of the man and the vows of the congregation.

ORDINATION AND INSTALLATION QUESTIONS TO THE PASTOR-ELECT

1. Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as originally given, to be the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?
2. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the confessions and catechisms, as being true to the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures; and do you further promise that if at any time you find yourself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system of doctrine, you will, on your own initiative, make known to your presbytery and session the change which has taken place in your views since the assumption of this ordination vow?
3. Do you approve of the form of government and discipline of this church as being in conformity with the general principles of biblical polity?
4. Do you accept the office of pastor in this church, and promise faithfully to perform all the duties thereof, and to endeavor by the grace of God to adorn the profession of the Gospel in your life, and to set a worthy example before the church of which God has made you an officer?
5. Do you promise subjection to your brethren in the Lord?
6. Have you been led, as far as you know your own heart, to seek the office of the holy ministry from love to God and a sincere desire to promote His glory in the Gospel of His Son?
7. Do you promise to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the Gospel and the purity and peace and unity of the church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise against you on that account?
8. Do you engage to be faithful and diligent in the exercise of all your duties and obligations as a Christian and a minister of the Gospel, whether personal or relational, private or public; and to endeavor by the grace of God to adorn the profession of the Gospel in your manner of life, and to walk in fashion worthy of imitation before the flock of which God shall make you overseer?
9. Are you now willing to take charge of this church, agreeable to your declaration when accepting their call? And do you, relying upon God for strength, promise to fulfill in this congregation the duties of a pastor, not lording it over the people, but living among them as one who serves, as a representative and ambassador of Jesus Christ?

QUESTIONS TO CONGREGATION

1. Do you, the people of this congregation, continue to profess your readiness to receive _____, whom you have called to be your pastor?

2. Do you promise to receive the word of truth from his mouth with meekness and love, and to submit to him as unto Christ in the due exercise of ministry and discipline?
3. Do you promise to encourage him in his work, and to assist his endeavors for your instruction and Spiritual edification, as he labors to represent Christ to you?
4. Do you engage to continue to him while he is your pastor that competent worldly maintenance which you have promised, and to furnish him with whatever you may see needful for the honor of religion and for his comfort among you?

Pastor: I now pronounce and declare that _____ has been regularly elected, ordained, and installed as Pastor of this church, agreeable to the Word of God, and that as such he is entitled to all encouragement, honor, and obedience in the Lord: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

People: Amen.

INSTALLATION OF AN ORDAINED PASTOR

When a pastor (or other elder laboring in the Word and doctrine, already ordained) is installed, he is to take the following vows. (The congregation takes the same vows as at an ordination. The same declaration may be made as well, omitting the word “ordained.”)

QUESTIONS TO THE PASTOR:

1. Are you now willing to take charge of this congregation as their pastor, agreeable to your declaration in accepting its call?
2. Do you conscientiously believe and declare, as far as you know your own heart, that, in taking upon you this charge, you are driven by a sincere desire to promote the glory of God and the good of the church?
3. Do you solemnly promise that, by the assistance of the grace of God, you will endeavor faithfully to fulfill all the duties of a pastor to this congregation, and will be careful to maintain a godly manner in all respects, as becoming a minister of the Gospel of Christ, agreeable to your ordination?
4. Do you promise to uphold all the vows of your ordination, with regard to confessional subscription and ministerial integrity, doing all your duties in such a way that your labor serves the peace, purity, and edification of the church, to the glory of God?

All vows may be modified as needed to accommodate men called to various ministries of Word and Sacrament, or the roles of assistant or associate pastor.

2.7 Vows for a Ruling Elder

When a ruling elder is ordained or installed, he and the congregation are to take the following vows. The laying on of hands and prayer (at an ordination service) are to be inserted between the vows of the man and the vows of the congregation.

ORDINATION AND INSTALLATION QUESTIONS FOR RULING ELDER(-ELECT)

1. Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as originally given, to be the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?
2. Do you sincerely receive and adopt in good faith the confessions and catechisms, as being true to the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures; and do you further promise that if at any time you find yourself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system of doctrine, you will, on your own initiative, make known to your session the change which has taken place in your views since the assumption of this ordination vow?
3. Do you approve of the form of government and discipline of this church, as in conformity with the general principles of biblical polity?
4. Do you accept the office of elder in this church, and promise faithfully to perform all the duties thereof, and to endeavor by the grace of God to adorn the profession of the Gospel in your life, and to set a worthy example before the church of which God has made you an officer?
5. Do you promise subjection to your brethren in the Lord?
6. Do you promise to strive for the purity, peace, unity and edification of the church?

QUESTION FOR THE CONGREGATION

Do you, the members of this church, acknowledge and receive this brother as elder, and do you promise to yield him all that honor, encouragement and obedience in the Lord to which this office, according to the Word of God and the constitution of this church, entitles him?

Pastor: I now pronounce and declare that _____ has been regularly elected and, ordained, and installed as an elder in this church, agreeable to the Word of God, and that as such he is entitled to all encouragement, honor and obedience in the Lord: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

People: Amen.

If the ruling elder is being installed rather than ordained, the same vows are to be used, though the word “ordained” may be omitted from the declaration.

2.8 Vows for a Deacon

When a deacon is ordained or installed, he and the congregation are to take the following vows. The laying on of hands and prayer (at an ordination service) are to be inserted between the vows of the man and the vows of the congregation.

ORDINATION AND INSTALLATION QUESTIONS FOR THE DEACON(-ELECT)

1. Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as originally given, to be the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?
2. Do you sincerely receive and adopt in good faith the confessions and the catechisms of this Church, as being true to the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures; and do you further promise that if at any time you find yourself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system of doctrine, you will, on your own initiative, make known to your session the change which has taken place in your views since the assumption of this ordination vow?
3. Do you approve of the form of government and discipline of this church, as in conformity with the general principles of biblical polity?
4. Do you accept the office of deacon in this church, and promise faithfully to perform all the duties thereof, and to endeavor by the grace of God to adorn the profession of the Gospel in your life, and to set a worthy example before the church of which God has made you an officer?
5. Do you promise subjection to your brethren in the Lord?
6. Do you promise to strive for the purity, peace, unity and edification of the church?

QUESTION FOR THE CONGREGATION

Do you, the members of this church, acknowledge and receive this brother as deacon, and do you promise to yield him all that honor, encouragement and obedience in the Lord to which this office, according to the Word of God and the Constitution of this church, entitles him?

Pastor: I now pronounce and declare that _____ has been regularly elected, and ordained, and installed a deacon in this church, agreeable to the Word of God, and that as such he is entitled to all encouragement, honor and obedience in the Lord: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

People: Amen.

If the deacon is being installed rather than ordained, the same vows are to be used, though the word “ordained” may be omitted from the declaration.

Chapter 3: DUTIES AND PRIVILEGES OF OFFICERS

3.1 New Covenant Officers in General

As suggested above, the Church of Jesus Christ inherited a form of government from old covenant Israel. While this pattern has been transformed and adapted to the new covenant situation, the precedents and principles of the old covenant system are still relevant and instructive as a model for Church polity. The Church, as the New Israel, is to fulfill Israel’s calling in history, through Christ. Analogies between old covenant and new covenant positions look roughly like this:

Old covenant prophets and priests = New covenant elders laboring in the Word and doctrine
 Elders of the people/gate, judges, kings/shepherds = Ruling elders
 Levites, assistants/apprentices = Deacons

The ministry of the priests, as well as apostles and prophets is carried on in the work of the elders laboring in the Word and doctrine. However, these ministers do not claim prophetic or apostolic inspiration; instead they build upon the foundation that has already been laid once and for all in the apostolic era (Eph. 2:20). Elders laboring in the Word and doctrine fulfill the priestly role, as the primary liturgical and sacramental officers of the Church; and the prophetic role, as they declare and apply God’s Word to the congregation and the world, and they lead the people in intercessory prayer before the throne of grace. In their governing role, they work with the other elders.

Elders of the people, or ruling elders, are not, properly speaking, liturgical or teaching officers, but rather focus on overseeing the people the other six days, outside of Lord’s Day gathered worship. Their work is to build up and strengthen the community, providing wise oversight and direction. As “chief laymen,” they are responsible for maintaining good order and justice in the community, acting as judges, peacekeepers, and counselors. Along with the teaching elders, they oversee the formal Church discipline process.

Deacons have the most flexible job description, as the elders determine what they are to do in a given situation. They are to elders laboring in the Word and doctrine what Levites were to the priests; or what Joshua was to Moses; or what Elisha was to Elijah; or what Gehazi was to Elisha; or what Baruch was to Jeremiah; etc. They are assistants to elders, and may be apprentices-in-training, as well. Deacons may function as specialists in almost any area of

Church life – mercy ministry, teaching, music, stewardship, administration, liturgical assistance, etc. But the diaconal office is not one of authority or governance in the Church. In general, they do those things that allow the elders to focus more directly on the ministries given to them as members of the Church session; thus, we find in the biblical record, new covenant deacons are especially called upon to care for those in need (Acts 6:1-6). This mercy ministry function is the central assigned task of the diaconate at COTR, though the session may direct the diaconate or individual deacons to engage in other works as well, in accord with the nature of the office as described below.

We now turn to the specifics of each called ministry in the Church.

3.2 The Office of Pastor (or Minister)

The pastor is an ordinary and perpetual officer in the Church (Eph. 4: 11; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9). The pastorate is especially the new covenant counterpart to the old covenant priesthood, even as each local congregation is a miniature fulfillment of the typology of the old covenant temple. The pastor is the primary servant-priest among and towards the royal priesthood of the whole congregation, with the goal of presenting the people in Christ as an acceptable offering to the Father, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:16). In addition to the general duties described in section 2.4, it especially belongs to the pastoral office,

To pray for and with his flock, as the mouth of the people unto God; to pray publicly for the people, especially in gathered worship; to pray privately for and with the people, especially for the sick; and to pray for the lost;

To oversee the planning and leading of the Lord's Day liturgy, as the priests of the Old Covenant led the people in worship at the tabernacle and temple;

To read, preach, and teach the Scriptures publicly, as the mouth of God to people, even as the priests in the Jewish Church were trusted with the public reading and exposition of the Word;

To study the Scriptures diligently, in order to feed the flock divine truth, as he preaches, teaches, convinces, reproves, exhorts, and comforts from the Word;

To train the people to live as a royal priesthood, offering Spiritual sacrifices in all of life, and especially in gathered worship;

To administer the Sacraments publicly, and privately in emergency situations, as the priests under the Law administered the sacrifices;

To declare absolution to the Lord's repentant people, both publicly in gathered worship, and privately, after they have confessed their sins;

To bless the people from God, declaring a benediction, as the priests did under the Old Covenant;

To encourage husbands and fathers to be faithful in loving their wives as Christ loves the Church and in raising their children in the fear and admonition of the Lord; to encourage wives and mothers to be diligent and faithful by caring for their families with joy and contentment; to encourage the unmarried to pursue purity and service in accord with their vocations; and to encourage children to grow towards maturity in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ;

To take care of the poor, in conjunction with the other officers;

To represent the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, in lovingly caring for and disciplining the flock in conjunction with the other elders;

To authorize and deputize the ruling elders and deacons to administer the Lord's Supper in his absence;

To lead the session as moderator and overseer;

To represent the local congregation as a permanent delegate to all higher assemblies of the Church;

To serve as bishop, or superintendent, over a collection of local Churches, if so called.

Should the Church ever be without a pastor, it should strive to secure one without delay (Mt. 9:36). The elders should seek out suitable nominees as necessary. The elders will examine a nominee with regard to his doctrine, manner of life, and confessional adherence. In addition to the qualifications for elder, pastoral candidates must meet the biblical criteria for shepherds (2 Samuel 12:1ff, Ps. 23, John 10:11-16, etc.). Following this process, the elders may approve the nominee as a candidate to be placed on a ballot. After a candidate is approved for election, the session will call a congregational meeting in order for the voting members to cast their votes on the candidate by way of written ballot.

The voting ballot will provide the candidate's name and the option of voting yes or no. Voters may abstain from the vote by not submitting a ballot. Blank, defaced or illegible ballots will be discarded. If more than one candidate is up for election at the same congregational meeting, each candidate shall have his own ballot. In order to be elected, a candidate must be approved by at least two-thirds of the ballots cast. If the candidate is elected, the elders will extend a provisional

call to him to be pastor. His call to be pastor is finalized only after the CREC's presbytery duly approves him. Following CREC approval, he may be ordained (if necessary) and installed as pastor. (It is also lawful for the candidate to be examined by the presbytery before a vote of the congregation. In such cases, the congregation's call is not provisional.)

While COTR encourages her pastor(s) toward a long-term view of the ministry, in the providence of God, changes in a pastor's call to a particular Church arise for both righteous and sinful reasons. In cases involving moral failures requiring disciplinary proceedings, the disciplinary process for the removal of a pastor is the same as for other officers, as described below. For cases that do not involve moral failures or disciplinary proceedings (e.g., Acts 15:33-41, Rom. 15:22-33, 1 Cor. 16:5-12), the procedure for terminating the call of a pastor, thereby dismissing him from service at COTR, is as follows: The pastor may submit his resignation in writing and in person to the session. The session is to receive his resignation but is not to act on it until the next regular, stated meeting or after at least one month has passed. If the session accepts his resignation, he is relieved of his pastoral call to COTR.

As need and resources dictate, COTR may call a man to serve as a pastoral assistant or associate pastor. The assistant is to be called by the session and after examination by the session and presbytery, ordained and/or installed according to the principles of the Constitution. An assistant does not have a vote on the session, and may not serve as a delegate to a higher court, but he does have full power to minister in the Word and sacraments. An associate is called in the same manner, except his call also requires the election of the congregation by a two-thirds vote. He becomes a member of the session and may be a delegate to a higher court. Job responsibilities for assistants and associates are to be determined by the session.

3.3 The Office of Teacher

The Scripture holds out the name and title of teacher, as well as that of pastor. This is another form of ministry and eldership in the Church, overlapping with, yet distinct from, the pastoral office. In addition to the general duties described in section 2.4, it especially belongs to the office of teacher,

To feed the flock with the Word of God in various ways, and to oversee the educational ministries of the Church;

To preach and administer the Sacraments in the absence of the pastor;

To study the Word diligently and continually;

To teach the Word with special depth, complementing and supplementing the work of the pastor;

To defend the Word against attacks from the world, and apply the Word to various realms of cultural thought and practice;

To teach and train children, new converts, students, and especially men aspiring to Church office;

To work in the educational ministries and institutions of the Church, including schools, colleges, and seminaries;

To write on behalf of the Church, so that the fruit of his studies may be more widely disseminated;

To assist the other officers in the production of position papers, which speak the mind of the Church on a given issue.

The Lord has given different gifts to His body, which is why pastor and teacher are distinguished (Eph. 4:11-12). Though these different gifts may meet in, and accordingly be exercised by, one and the same minister, it is most profitable for the edification of the body, if there is more than one minister, for each minister to focus on those areas where his gifts most excel. Nevertheless, where there is only one minister in a particular congregation, he is to perform, as far as he is able, the whole work of the ministry, pastoring as well as teaching. Assistant and associate pastors may be designated teachers as the session desires.

3.4 The Office of Evangelist

Evangelists are those elders called to pastoral ministry who are especially gifted and equipped for Church planting, reaching the lost through word and deed, campus ministry to colleges and universities, and missionary service. Evangelists have the full power of pastoral office in administering the Word and the Sacraments. Their office overlaps considerably with pastors and teachers, though it focuses more on evangelism and Church multiplication than discipleship and routine pastoral duties internal to the Church.

When the session and/or presbytery and/or council commissions an evangelist to plant a new Church, his work and the new congregation shall remain under the oversight of a sending body until the new body is able to become a particularized, congregation with its own pastor, ruling elders, and deacons. The sending and overseeing body may provide guidelines for the work of the evangelist in his missionary and Church planting efforts.

3.5 Other Church-Governors (or Ruling Elders or Lay Elders)

As there were in Old Covenant Israel elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the Jewish Church, so Christ has instituted governors in the New Covenant Church, commonly called ruling elders (2 Chron. 19:8; Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28). These men are “elders of the gate,” called upon to oversee the social life of the community as “chief laymen.” They are to be wise and God fearing men, fit for leadership. Ruling elders are especially gifted in governing, though they may have other gifts as well. Governing the Church as a ruling elder is a matter of serving and caring for the people, setting before them a godly example in vocational and familial life, counseling and encouraging them, and engaging in discipline as needed. It is imperative that ruling elders know the people of the congregation well and command their trust and respect.

Ruling elders differ from other elders (the elders who labor in the Word and doctrine) in that they are not subject to examinations from presbytery with regard to their call to office; they typically have daily vocations outside the Church; and they usually do not receive remuneration from the Church for their services. However, on the session, they rule jointly with the other elders and have the same formal authority. They may serve as representatives of the Church in presbytery and council meetings.

It especially belongs to the office of ruling elder,

To serve on the session, and thus rule the people;

To advise Teaching elders in their special work and represent the congregation on the session;

To oversee the doctrine and practice of the flock;

To set an example of godliness in all things;

To act as peacekeepers and judges in cases of dispute;

To pray with and for the people, especially in time of illness; and to anoint the sick with oil when requested, along with the elders who labor in the Word and doctrine;

To counsel and nurture the members of the congregation towards godliness, encouraging and correcting them as needed;

To assist the pastor in leading the liturgy when needed or appropriate;

To assist in the distribution of the Lord’s Supper and the collection of tithes and offerings;

To execute Church discipline when and as situations require it;

To join with the deacons in caring for the poor and needy.

Ruling elders labor beside teaching elders (pastors, teachers, and evangelists) in lovingly shepherding and discipling the people. In times of necessity or in the absence of an officer ordained to administer the Sacraments, ruling elders may administer.

3.6 The Office of Deacon

The Scripture holds out deacons as distinct officers in the Church. Deacons are called to be assistants to the elders who labor in the Word and doctrine (Acts 6:1-6) just as the Levites were assistants to the priests; and also to act as assistants to the ruling elders, operating under their oversight and authority. Deacons can be gifted and used in a wide variety of ways in the life of the Church. Deacons serve in ways authorized by the elders, freeing the elders to focus on their more specialized tasks. Primarily, it belongs to the office of deacon,

To take special care in mercy ministries and in meeting the needs of the poor, the immigrant, the prisoner, the fatherless, and the widow, first within the household of God, and second, in the world;

To befriend the friendless, and care for those in distress, in times of illness, bereavement, or other adversity, after the example of the Lord Jesus Christ;

To disburse funds from the Church treasury on behalf of the session;

To encourage the rest of the Church's membership to excel in hospitality and benevolence, ministering to one another and to those outside the Church in deed as well as word;

To assist the music ministry of the Church as needed, able, and directed by the session;

To teach the flock and evangelize the lost, as needed, able, and directed by the session;

To assist in the distribution of the Lord's Supper and the collection of tithes and offerings;

To assist in the Church's liturgical feasts and fellowship meals;

To make recommendations to the session about budget and property, as stewards of the Church's resources and assistants to the elders; and

To care for and maintain the property of the Church.

While the office of deacon is not ordinarily one of administering Word and Sacrament, in times of necessity or in the absence of an officer ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, deacons may administer.

Men who are training for an elder ministry may serve as deacons as part of their preparation, to test their gifts, gain experience, and prove their faithfulness.

As noted above (section 2.4), the deacons may also enlist the services of gifted women to assist them in their work.

3.7 Resignation or Removal from Church Office

While Church offices are ordinarily perpetual, sometimes officers have their call terminated for providential or moral reasons. If an officer desires to take a leave of absence, he will present a letter to the session. The length of such a sabbatical should be agreed upon by the officer and the session. If the session approves, it will notify the Church. If the session deems a leave of absence prudent for the well-being of the Church or the officer, the length of the sabbatical should be mutually agreed upon.

If an officer desires to resign, he should present his resignation in writing to the session. The session is to receive the resignation but cannot act upon it until the next regularly stated meeting or until at least one month has passed. If the resignation is sought for reasons of moral or doctrinal irregularity, then the resignation will not be a substitute for any appropriate Biblical discipline.

Members are urged to be extremely reluctant to bring charges against any officer, covering over offenses and overlooking shortcomings in a spirit of brotherly love, and remembering what the Bible says about those who bear false testimony and judge others (especially rulers) harshly. If two or three witnesses believe an elder or deacon to be morally or doctrinally unfit for office, then they may present charges to the session in writing and in person (1 Tim. 5:19). If the session (excluding the accused from voting, in such a case) decides that the question is worthy of an investigation and/or hearing before the session and, at their discretion, they may inform the congregation of the charges, announce the date(s) of the scheduled investigation and/or hearing, and call witnesses to render testimony. If the charges are sustained by the other elders after trial, then the accused officer, depending on the gravity of the charges and his response to correction, may be rebuked by the session (1 Tim. 5:20), or may be removed from office (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9), or both. If the charges prove to be slanderous, those who brought them may be subject to censure by the session.

In case an officer under discipline has charges against him sustained, his call to office may be involuntarily terminated by a vote of the session (excluding said officer, if he is an elder). In such a case of removal from office, the officer may appeal this judgment within thirty days of this action to the CREC courts for binding arbitration.

An officer may also be relieved of his office at any time if three-fourths of the congregation petitions the session to that effect. The officer may appeal the action of the congregation within thirty days of the action to the higher courts of the CREC, according to any provisions of the CREC Constitution, if he believes the congregation has acted without sufficient warrant.

An officer (elder or deacon) may also be removed from office if all the elders (other than an elder whose call to office is being challenged) agree to remove him from office. Again, he may appeal as described above. The session should always notify the congregation of changes in the status of an officer, as soon as reasonably possible.

When a deacon or ruling elder by reason of age or infirmity desires to be released from the active duties of the office, he may at his request and with the approval of the Session be designated deacon or elder emeritus. When so designated, he is no longer required to perform the regular duties of his office, but may continue to perform certain of these duties on a voluntary basis, if requested by the Session or a higher court. He may attend Diaconate or Session meetings, if he so desires, and may participate fully in the discussion of any issues, but may not vote.

Chapter 4: LITURGY AND SACRAMENTS

4.1 The Covenantal Form of Worship

The Lord's Day (Sunday) worship service at COTR seeks to follow the Bible's covenant renewal pattern of Calling, Confession/Cleansing, Consecration, Communion, and Commissioning. Every covenant renewal service should include a call to worship; singing to God; confession of sin and declaration of forgiveness; calling upon God's name in prayer; reading and exposition of the Word; the collection of tithes and offerings; confession of our common faith; celebration of the Eucharistic feast with bread and wine; and a benediction.

An evening service may also be called by the session for the purpose of providing another time of fellowship and instruction. Such a service should ordinarily consist of the reading and exposition of the Word of God, the singing of psalms and hymns, and prayer. Though not strictly a "covenant renewal" service (since the Lord's Supper is not ordinarily observed), this service is not to be viewed or treated as "optional" or unimportant to the well-being of the congregation. It should be conscientiously attended and participated in with joy and zeal.

The session may also schedule other services, especially in accord with the historic Christian calendar. While only Lord's Day services are considered "mandatory," members are strongly encouraged to participate in these other worship events, unless providentially hindered. Members are also encouraged to participate in other educational programs and social events in the life of the Church.

4.2 The Nature of Baptism

Baptism is a blessed sacrament of the New Covenant instituted by our Lord as a sign and seal of salvation and initiation into his new humanity. The sacramental washing with water in the name of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, officially admits a person into the kingdom, temple, and covenant family of God. By the promise of the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit, baptism becomes an effectual means of salvation to believers. As a means of grace, baptism testifies of their identification with the Triune God of Scripture, union with Christ, regeneration, forgiveness of sin, consecration to walk in newness of life, and fellowship in the Body of Christ (Mt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 2:11-12; Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:3-5; Tit. 3:5; Mark 1:4). The one baptism of the New Covenant is the fulfillment of the many baptismal events and rituals of the Old Covenant, as well as circumcision, and anointing into office; hence, baptism is not to be repeated.

Baptism, as a public instrument of union with Christ and His people, is ordinarily to be performed in the context of a Lord's Day covenant renewal service (prior to the beginning of the service). However, baptism's validity is in no way tied to its enactment at a certain time or in a

certain place or by a certain person. Especially in cases of extremity or emergency, baptism may be performed outside of a regular worship service and by any baptized person. Ordinary requirements to perform baptism in an orderly fashion may be rescinded because the efficacy of the sacrament is not absolutely tied to its regular, public administration or to the office or piety of the one who administers; and the blessing of the sacrament is of more worth than good order in the life of the Church. In cases of emergency baptisms, the session and congregation should be notified of the action as soon as possible.

While symbolic actions surrounding the rite of baptism and drawing attention to its meaning may be appropriate, the baptismal liturgy should be kept simple and unadorned with other actions. Washing with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit should not be encrusted with additional, extra-biblical rituals that would obscure or subvert the meaning of baptism itself.

4.3 Recipients of Baptism

Baptism, as has been nearly universally held in the Church, is appropriately administered to the children of Christians in infancy, since to them, no less than to adults are the promises of the kingdom. Every covenantal administration in Scripture makes provision for the next generation; the ritual washings and baptismal types of the Old Covenant included children; Jesus declared that even the infants of His people participate in his covenant and kingdom, and are believers; and the Apostles continued the practice of including children by baptizing households and regarding the children of Christians to be “in the Lord.”

Thus, Christ and His redemptive benefits belong to disciples of all ages (Acts 2:39; Mt. 18:15-17; Eph. 6:4). That which is signified and conferred in baptism is applicable to infants promised to be in covenant, as well as to adults who profess faith in the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

Baptismal candidates, whether children or adults, must ordinarily be approved by the session. Adults should confess their allegiance to Christ prior to baptism. Minor children in the households of Christians should be baptized on the basis of one or more parent’s (or guardian’s) covenantal membership (Acts 16:31-34) and promise to disciple the child in the home (Gen. 18:19).

The Baptism of Infants: When a child is baptized, parents are encouraged to make public vows. The congregation makes a vow in response to the baptism, receiving the child into the membership and nurture of the Church in the name of Christ. The parental vows are edifying, as a way of professing the parents’ faith in the covenantal promises, declaring what they hope and expect God to accomplish in the administration of the Sacrament, and demonstrating publicly why their child has a right to baptism. In the vows, the parents also profess faith on behalf of their child. The vows are a public way of indicating why the child has a right to baptism.

To the parents:

1. Do you bring this child for baptism trusting in God's covenant promise to be your God and the God of your children?
2. Do you bring this child for baptism trusting God to unite him to the risen Jesus and make him a member of the body of Christ which is the Church of the living God, the household of faith and the family of God?
3. Do you promise in faith and in reliance upon the grace of God to disciple this child by teaching him to love the Lord His God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, bringing him up in the training and admonition of the Lord, so that he might walk worthy of the calling he has received in the gospel all his days?
4. In the name of your child, and on his behalf: Do you renounce the devil and all his works; the vain pomp and false glory of the world, with all its covetous desires; and the sinful inclinations of the flesh, so that you will not follow, nor be led by them?
5. In the name of your child, and on his behalf: Do you believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; and in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords; and in the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, Encourager, and the One who sanctifies the people of God?

To the congregation:

Do you, the congregation of Church of the Redeemer, promise to undertake the responsibility of assisting these parents as they nurture this child in Christian faith and practice to the glory of God?

The Baptism of Adults. The person to be baptized shall stand before the minister and respond to these questions:

1. Do you believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord; and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life?
2. Do you confess your need of the forgiveness of sins and with a humble and contrite heart put your whole trust in the mercy of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord?
3. Do you renounce the devil and all his works; the vain pomp and false glory of the world, with all its covetous desires; and the sinful inclinations of the flesh, so that you will not follow, nor be led by them?

4. Do you promise to continue in the peace and fellowship of the people of God, submitting yourself to the government and discipline of the Church and, with the aid of the Holy Spirit be Christ's faithful disciple all the days of your life?
5. Do you desire to be baptized into this faith and be received into the membership of Christ's Church?

4.4 The Eucharist (or Lord's Supper, or Communion)

The Eucharist is a blessed sacrament of the New Covenant instituted by our Lord as a sign and seal of His redemptive work, and as a means of offering and giving Himself and His benefits to His people through the elements of bread and wine. By eating the bread and drinking the cup in a worthy manner, as one family, believers Spiritually feed upon Christ, renew their union and communion with Him, memorialize His death before the Father, and Spiritually commune with other covenant members (Luke 22:20; Mat. 26:26-28; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; 1 Cor. 10:14-21). The Eucharistic feast is the climax of covenant renewal worship, as we celebrate peace with God and one another. The Lord's Supper fulfills all the sacramental meals of the Old Covenant.

4.5 Recipients of the Eucharist

COTR practices "open communion." That is, we encourage all baptized Christians (in good standing, not excommunicated) to celebrate the feast of the Eucharist and so commune with Christ in His body. In principle, we confess that the Eucharistic table belongs to all of God's people, and invite all other Christians to join with us in feasting and celebrating the Lord's presence and gifts in and through bread and wine.

Under the headship of Christ, the responsibility for administering the Sacraments is the responsibility of the session. Baptized children are to be encouraged to partake as soon as they are physically able.

The Lord's Supper is ordinarily to be administered in the context of the whole local body on the Lord's Day. The Eucharist may also be administered in extraordinary circumstances by the pastor together with representatives of the session, deacons, or congregation, to the sick and to invalids, who are unable to attend the congregation's regular assemblies.

Chapter 5: CHURCH DISCIPLINE

5.1 Informal and Formal Discipline

One of the marks of a true Church of Jesus Christ is that it maintains discipline. Indeed, a biblical application of discipline is necessary to maintaining the boundary between the Church and the world. The purpose of Church discipline is to prevent, restrain, or even to remove any evil that may threaten the Church; and to promote and encourage that which is good and glorifying to God. Church discipline, in all its forms – preventative, formative, corrective, and final – is essential to the ministry and mission of the Church, for without it the saints are not properly edified and protected, and those outside the Church are led to mock the gospel and the hypocrisy of God's people.

All COTR members are encouraged to love one another as they love themselves. By God's grace, disciplinary procedures will rarely be necessary, as we seek to live together in a community of rich, deep fellowship and friendship, continually encouraging one another in faithfulness and holiness. We must also remember that our Savior warned against the dangers of judging one another without mercy and called upon us to forgive as we desire to be forgiven.

We must let love cover a multitude of sins. However, love also requires confronting sin at times, and when those occasions arise, it is critical that matters be handled in a peaceful, wise, humble, and gracious manner. Only he who is Spiritual should seek to correct a brother in sin. He should do so in gentleness, knowing that he is capable of falling himself. We must first remove the beams from our own eyes. While this Constitution seeks to provide a set of procedures and guidelines for dealing with disciplinary situations, the chief concern of all involved should never simply be doing things according to the proper form, but acting towards one another in love, in a manner most likely to turn the straying one back to the right path. God delights more in love among than the brethren and the exercise of mercy than technically correct procedures carried out in a cold hearted fashion. We desire to be fully biblical in both our procedures and relationships, of course.

The ordinary course of discipline is informal. Members are encouraged to practice self-discipline and self-control, as fruit of the Spirit. Members are urged to overlook the failings of others in love (1 Pt. 4:8), and to stir up other members of the body to charity and good works (Heb. 10:19-25). Most Church discipline should be members lovingly and winsomely holding one another accountable to live according to the rule of Christ.

Formal Church discipline is applied through the official action and judgment of the session. All members should be aware that membership in COTR makes one a proper object of Church discipline as the Scriptures and membership vows require (see, for example of the latter, section 1.5). Church members are children of the heavenly Father, and sometimes His chastening comes through the instrumentality of the Church (Heb. 12:3-11). Except in cases of scandal requiring

immediate action, the pattern of Church discipline will generally include private informal confrontation, private formal admonishment by two or three witnesses (Mt. 18:16), formal public admonishment (Mt. 18:17), and a formal hearing which may result in excommunication (Mt. 18:17). Excommunication should ordinarily be a public act of the Church.

Private sins are those sins which are known only to God and a few others. Public sins are those sins which are notorious, widely known, thus making a public response on the part of the church necessary and proper. Public sins ordinarily call for public censure and/or public confession, as the session sees fit, even if the offender is repentant. The session should always prayerfully consider the various ramifications of such censure or confession, aiming at the glory of God and the good of the body as a whole.

5.2 Procedure of Formal Trials

The following procedure will be followed in cases that require formal trials:

1. *Commencing formal process:* To institute a trial, process must be commenced by an individual or by the Session. Ordinarily, process should not be commenced unless Matthew 18 has been followed, unless the offense is public or the accused is unavailable or unwilling to engage in the Matthew 18 process.
2. *Charges:* Process is commenced by the filing of written charges with the Session. These charges must clearly state with specificity the alleged sins and offenses of the accused. The charges must include the names and addresses of witnesses and identify any supporting documentation or evidence. It is the prerogative of the Session to draft any final charges and to determine whether trial will be held on charges filed. Individuals seeking to institute process against another are to be reminded by the Session that they may themselves be subject to discipline if their charges are frivolous or ill-founded.
3. *Record of the case:* The Session will create a full record of the case, including written charges, citations, minutes, other documentation considered by the court and transcripts of sworn testimony. In all cases, the charges will be formally declared to be filed by the Session of COTR acting as a court in the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ.
4. *Representation:* If process is commenced, the Session shall appoint a prosecutor to prosecute the charges. The accused may represent himself or may be represented by a member of COTR. No attorney may be employed by any party. The members of the Session shall act as judges, unless the member is a prosecutor or defends the accused.
5. *Formal charges:* If the Session decides to proceed to trial on charges, the accused shall be provided a written copy of the charges with the names and addresses of the witnesses

and supporting documentation or evidence. The accused must provide to the Session a written response to the charges within ten (10) days of receipt of same, or he may appear personally before the Session to enter his response if he so requests and the Session agrees to the request. If the accused fails to respond timely to the charges, he may be disciplined for contumacy.

6. *Notice of trial:* If the Session determines a trial is in order after receiving the response of the accused, the accused shall be provided at least twenty (20) days advance written notice of same.

7. *Witnesses:* The prosecutor and the accused may provide the Session with the names and addresses of any witnesses they wish to cite to appear at trial. This request must be in writing and be provided to the Session within ten (10) days of the date of trial. The Session is to promptly send written citations by regular mail to the listed witnesses. Each party shall be responsible for securing the presence of his witnesses. Any member of COTR (including officers) cited as a witness who fails to appear without good cause may be subject to discipline by the Session in a separate proceeding. Any officer or member of COTR who refuses to testify in a trial may be disciplined for contumacy.

When the trial is about to proceed, the Moderator of the Session shall enjoin the members of the Session to recollect and regard their high character as judges of a court of Jesus Christ and the solemn duty in which they are about to engage. Each witness will be required to affirmatively submit to the following oath or affirmation:

“Do you solemnly promise in the presence of God that you will declare the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, according to the best of your knowledge in the matter in which you are called as a witness, as you shall answer to the great Judge of the living and the dead?”

Any witness who does not believe in the existence of God or a future state of rewards and punishments shall not be competent as a witness. Competency shall otherwise be determined by age and understanding. The competency of all witnesses shall be assumed, unless challenged. The Session shall determine the competency and credibility of witnesses. A husband or wife shall not be compelled to bear testimony against one another.

8. *Evidence:* The testimony of more than one witness shall be required to sustain any charge. If there is only one witness, other sufficient corroborative evidence may be produced to substantiate the charge.

9. *Testimony:* Witnesses may be excluded from hearing the testimony of one another if either party requests. The accused, his representative (if any) and the prosecutor may not

be excluded from hearing any testimony.

The witnesses shall be examined in the presence of the parties. Each witness may be cross-examined by both parties. Questions must be pertinent and relevant, and the Session determines same.

10. *Judgment of the case:* On any questions arising in the process of a trial, the discussion shall first involve the parties. When they have been heard, they may be required to withdraw while the Session deliberates upon and decides the issue.

Any judge may recuse himself for good cause. Either party may for cause challenge the right of any member of the Session to sit in the trial of the case, and the issue shall be decided by the other members of the Session.

11. *Order of trial:* The following order of trial shall be observed:

- The Moderator shall charge the court.
- The witnesses for the prosecution shall be examined.
- The witnesses for the accused shall be examined.
- The parties shall be heard: first the prosecutor and then the accused. The prosecutor shall close.
- Members of the Session may express their opinion in the case, and they may privately retire to deliberate upon the case.
- The vote shall be taken, the verdict announced and the judgment entered in the record.

The Session shall determine the extent to which (if any) the results of the trial are communicated to the congregation of COTR.

12. *Appeals:* Any accused may appeal his conviction by filing a written appeal to the Session and to the next highest court in the CREC within thirty (30) days of his receipt of notice of his conviction. The appeal must be timely filed using certified mail, return receipt requested. The appeal is timely filed if it is mailed on last day to appeal. Untimely appeals shall not be considered. The Session shall provide the higher court and the accused once copy each of the record of the case.

5.3 Restoration of those excommunicated

The excommunicated party will be restored to the church when in the evaluation of the elders the one under discipline has repented. A confession of this repentance will be read to the

congregation on the Lord's Day, and the elders shall formally announce the restoration of fellowship.

In all matters of discipline, members of COTR are urged to remember the purposes of such discipline: the glory of God, whose honor is tarnished when the people who bear His name live scandalously; the restoration of the offender; and the prevention of similar falls on the part of other Christians.

5.4 Subjects of Discipline

Any communicant member may be disciplined by the Church. Non-member communicant Christians who attend Church regularly are subject to pastoral admonition, but not to formal excommunication (should the need for formal discipline arise, the session will contact the leadership of the church of which the individual is a member). Nevertheless, an attending non-member who is divisive, heretical, scandalous, or factious may be barred from the Eucharist and rejected after proper admonition. If another Church has disciplined one of its members, and that person subsequently comes to COTR desiring to join, then the session will honor the discipline of the other Church, unless after due consultation with the person concerned and after all appropriate information is considered, the session rejects or reverses such disciplinary action as out of accord with the government of Christ and the teaching of the Scriptures.

5.5 Appeals

Members of COTR may appeal the actions of the session to the presbytery and/or council of the CREC within 30 days of such action and in accord with any provisions of the CREC Constitution. Or appeals may be brought before an ad hoc court for binding arbitration. The composition of such ad hoc courts should be mature Christian men, agreed upon by both the accused and the accusers, and the specific procedures of arbitration may be established on a case-by-case basis, in accord with the principles of this Constitution and the Scriptures.

Chapter 6: DISSOLUTION

COTR may be dissolved by the unanimous vote of the session and two-thirds of the congregation. In the event of dissolution, all of the Church's debts shall be fully paid and any remaining assets and holdings designated by the session may be transferred to other such churches as are in general agreement with COTR's doctrinal outlook.

Chapter 7: REVISING AND AMENDING THE CONSTITUTION

We recognize that while God has given to His Church through His Word a plan of government, that form does not cover all necessary details. Thus, many aspects of this Constitution do not presume to be biblically mandated, but only consistent with biblical principles, guided by sanctified common sense and a desire to do all things prudently, decently, and in order. Thus, we recognize the limitations of this Constitution and its subordination to the higher standard of Scripture. We also recognize that the practice of Christian faithfulness and charity is the best way to compensate for constitutional and procedural deficiencies. The character of office-holders and members is vastly more important to the health of the Church than the details of the form of government.

The Constitution of COTR may be revised or amended at any time with the consent of a majority of the session and the approval of two-thirds of the congregation. Such votes require two weeks notice. The reasons for the proposed changes should be clearly explained to the congregation. The congregation should be given ample time to discuss the issue publicly in a congregational meeting prior to the vote.

As we confess that this Constitution is a fallible work of fallible men, it may be set aside without the process of amendment by the judgment of the session, if obedience to Scripture is found to require it. Under such circumstances, the congregation will be informed, and a congregational meeting shall be held with two weeks' notice for the purpose of voting to ratify or disapprove of the session's action. The session's action may be ratified by a majority vote of the congregation.

APPENDIX: Church of the Redeemer’s Declarations on CREC Memorials

The session of COTR accepts the memorials of the CREC (as of October 2009), as a constitutional requirement, with the following reservations, and/or caveats, and/or explanations. Though we acknowledge the right of the church to make declarations regarding contemporary issues and cultural concerns, we have reservations regarding the helpfulness and the wisdom of passing memorials that address secondary or tertiary issues that are not absolutely necessary to preserve the peace and purity of the church. We hold these reservations in spite of the fact that we are in substantial agreement with the memorials that have been passed by the CREC thus far.

Though the memorials are not to function as tests of orthodoxy, and in spite of the fact that properly understood, they only represent the views of the particular assembly that adopts them, it is quite easy for them practically to become authoritative standards of doctrine and practice and to be placed on a level with the Scriptures and our confessions. The danger of establishing extra-Scriptural standards of orthodoxy is real though not intentional. Further, memorials are often problematic not only because the issues they address are secondary and not fundamental to the faith, but also because such statements often lack the necessary nuance and balance necessary for the pastoral leadership and the mission of the Church.

We do accept the memorials in substance but wish to make the following clarifications regarding our particular stand on these issues as a congregation in the CREC on the following memorials (other memorials not addressed here are accepted without exception):

[The memorials referenced here may be found in the CREC’s “Book of Memorials”]

Memorial “A” on Church Incorporation:

We heartily agree with the substance of this memorial. Christ alone is the head of the Church; the Church is not a creature of the State; the State has no right to interfere with the work and mission of the Church or to claim authority over the Church as an institution. We acknowledge that there is no necessity for seeking “corporate” standing in the eyes of the State and agree that being “incorporated” brings with it potential liabilities and dangers (depending upon the integrity of our civil magistrates and their understanding of the respective roles of Church and State).

Acknowledging all this, however, we do not see that seeking incorporation (or being incorporated) is necessarily unwise or sinful in every case. There are certain advantages at present that incorporation gives and as long as a particular congregation is aware of the potential dangers and willing to protect the integrity and appropriate independency of the Church from the State, we do not believe that it is sinful or always unwise for a congregation to avail themselves of these advantages.

2. Memorial “C” on Ministerial Training

We fully agree with the problems of an overly academic, credentialed approach to the ministry, which often sets aside biblical qualifications for educational degrees. We agree that ministerial training ideally is best conducted under the oversight of a local session, and should include an intense apprenticeship in a local body to test and develop the gifts, skills, and knowledge of the candidate. At the same time, it is very difficult for many local congregations, with limited resources, to provide a candidate with a form of theological training that upholds high academic standards, equips the candidate in original languages, and so forth. Thus, we see a place for churches to send men to seminaries, while still overseeing and facilitating their training in other ways. In an ideal scenario, seminaries would function as educational extensions of the Church, and seminary learning would be integrated into a comprehensive program of ministerial apprenticeship.

Memorial “G” on Terrorism

We agree in substance with this memorial: God is sovereign, so that all events, including great disasters, are part of His perfect plan, and thus serve His ultimate glory and the ultimate good of His people; God often uses calamity to judge the wicked or chasten His people, in anticipation of the Last Day; the modern American and Canadian cultures are suffused with individual and corporate idolatry; it is not ordinarily lawful to muster women for combat service; and disasters such as “9/11” are occasions suited for warnings, confession of sin, and repentance. We also affirm the right of America to defend herself against terror attacks, though we do not presume competency to evaluate whether or not America’s response in this particular case meets the traditional Christian criteria of a just war.

Acknowledging these things, however, we urge caution in the practice of evaluating the meaning of local or national disasters or linking them to specific sins. God’s ways are inscrutable, and often the righteous are mixed with the wicked when such disasters befall a nation. Muslim terrorists might have attacked our nation for any number of reasons; God could use the event in any number of ways. Providence is often full of perplexities. Many times the righteous suffer persecution, or undergo trials for the strengthening of their faith, just as many times the wicked are allowed to prosper, as a way of intensifying their blameworthiness before God. For these reasons, we believe it is unwise to make a particular theological interpretation of “9/11” a test of orthodoxy in any form or fashion, given the complexities involved.

Further, it is not absolutely necessary to interpret “9/11” as a special act of divine judgment against prevailing American sins in order for us to summon our fellow Americans to repentance from clear violations of God’s Word. “9/11” should also serve as a call to the Church to deepen her understanding of Islam and her compassion for the Muslim community, so that we can more effectively reach them with the triumphant gospel of Christ.

Adopted by the Session September 1, 2009

BOOK OF CONFESSIONS

On Creeds and Confessions

The “Book of Confessions” is part of our Constitution, confessing what we believe the Scriptures to teach. It is our desire to contend earnestly for this faith, standing against all corruptions and distortions of the biblical gospel. It is also our desire to use these confessions as a platform from which we can proclaim the whole counsel of God and build unity with Christians in a variety of other denominations and traditions. Finally, this Book of Confessions declares to the world what we believe, as a Christian Church, and thus serves to undergird our mission.

In this Book, we define and position ourselves as a “Reformed catholic” congregation – upholding the distinctives of the Reformation while seeking unity with all Christians who fall within the parameters of the ecumenical creeds of antiquity. We lament many of the divisions within Christendom and find them unnecessary to sustain. We hope to use this Book to begin the project of restoring the visible unity of the Church.

The Word of God is our only infallible and inerrant rule of faith and life. Yet, in Scripture there is abundant proof attesting to the value of the use of extra-biblical, uninspired creeds, confessions, and catechisms. Creed is a term from the Latin, *credo*, “I believe.” Confession is based on the Greek, *homologeō*, “I confess.” The term catechism is also from a Greek word, *katacheō*, “to answer, to echo.” In these documents, God’s people seek to replicate God’s revealed truth in their own words.

In the grand expanse of the church’s history, the affirmations of our faith have been as simple as “Jesus is Lord” (Acts 10:36, 1 Cor. 12:3, Phil. 2:11), in the face of those who would require the confession, “Caesar is Lord;” they have been as detailed, technical, and complex as the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, with their unparalleled exhaustiveness, summarizing and crystallizing the insights of the Reformation; and they have been as warm, beautiful, and pastoral as the Apostle’s Creed and the Heidelberg Catechism.

A strong biblical basis may be given for creedal statements and confessions of faith. Such declarations of faith function to summarize biblical truths (1 Tim. 3:16) and to enable us to “hold fast to the pattern of sound words” (2 Tim. 1:13). They are traditionally used as a means of confessing a person’s faith in the gospel in a formal way at baptism, ordination, and similar times of ecclesiastical and Spiritual significance (1 Tim. 4:14, 6:12; Acts 8:12). Creeds and confessions have been used to publicly express the true faith of the Church, especially in gathered worship, as we seek to follow and hold fast to Christ (Heb. 4:14, 10:23, 13:15), in the face of false religions and philosophies (Col. 2:8-10). The catechetical (questions and answer) method of oral instruction was used by Jews in providing instruction in the Law (Rom. 2:18; cf. Ex. 12:26-27;

Deut. 6). Likewise, the New Covenant Church has often taught in this way, with a view toward achieving fuller understanding of God's Word in Christ.

The doctrinal symbols included in our Book of Confessions are not the only way to summarize God's truth, but they are faithful to the system of doctrine contained in the Scriptures. As such, they function in our congregation to test the soundness of our teaching; they serve as useful pedagogical tools in forming children and new converts in the faith, as well as edifying and maturing the rest of the brethren; and they act to inspire us towards an ever stronger grasp of our faith in historically and theologically informed language, so that we can be conversant in the speech of Christendom. We do not view any of these confessions as the "last word," as though the Church had nothing more to learn, and no future confessions to write. We look forward to seeing God continue to mature His Church's grasp of the truth, so that she learns to "tell the grand story" in ever more faithful, precise, and powerful ways.

The Proper Use and the Abuse of Creeds and Confessions

We wish to qualify our use of extra-biblical confessional documents. There are two extremes to evade. On the one hand the Church must avoid an anti-creedal spirit which tends to be ignorant of and ungrateful for the Church's history of defending the truth by the use of creeds. Throughout the history of the Church many have claimed to submit to the "literal" words of the Bible, while they were yet unable to submit to a statement of faith that accurately reflects the doctrine clearly taught in the written Word of God. Heretics have often cloaked their falsehoods in the language of Scripture, and confessional statements have proved useful in exposing them. Creeds and confessions are a way for the Church to put God's truth in her own words.

This anti-creedal spirit turns out to be prideful as well. This is evident when one arrogantly stands on his own, and reads Scripture independently of the Church's teachers from past ages. When we disregard the teaching gifts God has bestowed upon the Church through the centuries, we inevitably fall into error. We should not pretend as though we were first to read the Bible, or that we could read the Bible in a presuppositional vacuum, or that we could interpret the Scriptures apart from consultation with the Church's tradition. Private judgment must be protected within certain bounds, but the Bible was never intended to function apart from the tradition and communal life of the Church body.

On the other hand, the Church must avoid an overly strict, overly scrupulous use of creeds and confessions. This stance has a practical tendency of functionally setting the confessional documents in the place of the Scriptures, even if it denies doing so. Such an approach sadly locks the Church into a past era; by essentially putting the man-made confessions on par with the Word of God, it closes off any new light the Spirit may be seeking to break forth from the Scriptures. This overly rigid use of confessions actually impedes diligent study of the Word and the Church's doctrinal maturation (Eph. 4:11-16). It makes it difficult for the Church to apply the Word to changing cultural situations, hinders the Church's missional efforts, and inevitably leads

to infighting among Christians. Confessional subscription should not blind us to the fact that God's truth is so rich, it can be stated in a variety of formulations. Further, no man-made confession can comprehensively reproduce God's system of truth since we are both finite and fallible. At best, we hope for our confessions to approximate the system of Scripture. We believe the church's confessional diversity can actually be used as a great strength, provided we focus on the truths the confessions share, and avoid over-emphasizing distinctives.

We confess that none of the confessions can be absolutely identified with Scripture and none represent God's final word to the Church. We still have more to learn – and COTR looks forward to the day when God's people are unified and mature enough to once again undertake the task of writing confessional summaries of Scripture, as a way of confessing our faith before God and the world, and drawing Christians together around all that we hold in common, so that we can get on with the mission of the Church, the discipling of the nations under Christ.

Our Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms

COTR accepts the following list of creeds, confessions, and catechisms as, in general, representing and summarizing our own doctrinal commitments. We take these documents as historic, authentic, and reliable summaries of what Scripture teaches. (The texts of these documents, being commonly available, are not included here.)

The Ecumenical Creeds

The ecumenical creeds of the early Church have always served as the doctrinal boundaries of orthodoxy. They have stood the test of time, and serve as the foundation of all our doctrinal commitments. Thus, these are the most authoritative and un-revisable of all ecclesiastical documents. These ancient documents should be the touchstone of true faith, in propositional form, and the basis of healing the fractures that afflict the catholic Church in our time.

The Apostles' Creed (ca. 200)

The Nicene Creed (325; revised, 381)

Definition of Chalcedon (451)

The Reformational Confessions and Catechisms

The Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation era represent a quantum leap forward in the Church's understanding of Scripture in both breadth and depth. They crystallize what it means to be a "protesting catholic." While the documents vary from one another in details, they stand together in affirming the gospel of God's sovereign grace in Christ. We adopt the following Reformation confessions as our primary confessions of faith:

The French Confession (1559)

The Scots Confession (1560)

The Second Helvetic Confession (1562)

The Three Forms of Unity (including The Belgic Confession [1561], The Heidelberg Catechism [1563], The Canons of Dort [1619])

The Westminster Standards (including the Confession of Faith and [1646] the Shorter and Larger Catechisms [1647]; American revision [1789])

Our Book of Confessions is not intended to be totally comprehensive. That is to say, there are certainly other creeds and confessions that would be worthy of inclusion that have been left out. But our collection is sufficient to connect us with all the major branches of the Church.

By adopting a variety of confessional statements, it is not our desire to create a confused cacophony. Rather, we believe that this procedure respects the breadth of the Spirit's work in the Church over the last two thousand years. The ecumenical creeds are foundational to everything else, but the later developments in doctrine cannot be safely ignored. While the Church has fragmented, the Spirit has continued to work in her various segments; and insofar as these documents represent the fruit of the Spirit's work, they should be compatible with one another, even if they employ various vocabularies and have different emphases. Just as we confess our sector of the Church is not to be identified with the catholic Church, neither can we identify any one denomination's confession as the sole standard of truth. We may differ in some convictions, but that should not overshadow vast areas of agreement.

Taken together, the Reformed confessions represent what is commonly known as "the Reformed faith" in all its fullness. And yet not even these glorious statements of truth can be absolutized; the Reformed Church must be ever reforming. But the Church can never move forward without simultaneously looking backward. In this body of creeds and confessions, we show substantial doctrinal unity with all faithful Protestants, and in respect to basic doctrines, even Romanist, and Eastern communions (while still desiring to bear witness against their serious errors from which we have justly separated). By embracing this confessional tradition we show our high appraisal of the various traditions of the countries of Europe, the British Isles, and America as well as our desire for unity with those who stand in that venerable line of doctrinal formation today.

We believe that all the Reformed confessions and catechisms each have their own strengths and weaknesses, so that by including them all, we are sure to be able to avail ourselves of the Reformed tradition at its best. We think that by putting the various traditions and historical periods represented by our Book of Confessions into conversation with one another, our overall

understanding of biblical truth can be strengthened and enriched. We do not want to fall into an overly narrow, sectarian approach to the faith, which would leave us talking to no one but ourselves. We recognize that while the Reformed tradition is the purest and most developed doctrinal tradition within Christendom, we have much to learn from interaction with brethren outside the Reformed tradition, both from the past and from the contemporary Church. We also recognize that the Reformed tradition itself has quite a bit of diversity and that by appreciating and interacting with that diversity, we can strengthen our understanding of what the Reformers stood for, and thus better take our stand with them.

We believe that the Three forms of Unity and Westminster Standards (1646-7) are among the clearest and most definitive statements of biblical doctrine yet produced by the Church. We have committed to using these confessions and catechisms as our basic doctrinal standards for officers. COTR members do not have to subscribe to these standards; the membership vows (or the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed) are sufficient to constitute a profession of orthodox faith.

However, as a Reformed Church, our officers are expected to subscribe to a Reformed confession. Thus, candidates for office at COTR should make a detailed study of the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards. When candidates are entered into office at COTR, they must state exceptions to these standards for evaluation. (They do not have to cite exceptions to other documents in the Book of Confessions, though those documents may be consulted and cited as the officer candidate undergoes examination.) The Church court examining the candidate will determine if the exceptions are acceptable.

Of course, some exceptions to these standards have already been incorporated into the COTR Constitution and are therefore already judged as acceptable implicitly. All cases of doctrinal dispute with an officer should be tried against these standards, taking into account the officer's approved exceptions.

Our Hope

Even though these creeds and confessions carry a measure of authority and have an important role to play, we resist idolizing them or resting in them. We do not use creeds and confessions as a way of trusting in our own wisdom and understanding, or as a way of creating a "theological legalism," in which we save ourselves by figuring out right theology. Rather, we see the creeds and confessions as God's gift to the Church. The creeds are wonderful tools for pastoral and missional work and should inform every aspect of Church life. But we also see them as the fallible work of uninspired men. They are always subordinate to the Bible. Our ultimate hope is not having a perfect creedal statement; rather our hope is in the grace of God, manifested to us in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the gift of His Holy Spirit, who promises to lead us into all truth and into life everlasting.