

**English translation of the original Dutch:**

**1. Proposed Church Order for the uniting RCN and NRC churches June, 2019**

1969 - 2019

*We found each other as brothers and sisters, having the same longing:  
longing to be a community where God's greatness is celebrated in song;  
longing to be, like Israel, a living proof of His goodness;  
longing to be a welcoming home for everyone who seeks salvation in Christ.*

*We are ashamed about what tore us apart:  
our arrogance, our crazy desire for self-preservation;  
our pig-headed way of acting, our loveless condemnation of others;  
our thinking about our own opinions as if they were God's truth.*

*We confess our guilt to the little ones of our Lord,  
who were forced to make choices that they didn't want to make,  
who lost brothers and sisters whom they didn't want to make a break with,  
who didn't receive justice, but rather rejection.*

*We are eternally grateful to God  
that He did not let the broken churches crumble away further,  
but gave life to those on both sides of the church split.  
We discovered to our astonishment  
that those on the other side were not what we thought that they were,  
but that they had been demonstrably just as much laid hold of by the Spirit as ourselves.*

*We commit ourselves now to being a fellowship  
where we have no interest in pleasing mere human authorities,  
but, together, wholeheartedly seek to listen to the Word of our Lord.  
We want to be connected to what He has already built up  
both here in The Netherlands, and around the world,  
both recently and previously in the past.*

*We promise to give care to the weak in our midst  
whom Christ gave His life for.  
We will comfort and encourage them,  
and also warn them about all forms of evil.  
We want to give them justice, over against the strong,  
and support them where they need support.*

*We come together in local congregations  
around the living proclamation of the Gospel.  
We celebrate God's grace in baptism and the Lord's Supper  
in order to be, together, the body of Christ.  
We accept the leadership of our office-bearers,*

*so that we all, in our own particular places, can contribute to the whole.*

*We seek to find one another as brothers and sisters in the larger context of the world,  
for God's Words reach to the ends of the earth.*

*We want to contribute to common interests,  
and will be trustworthy when we make promises.*

*We will submit ourselves to the wisdom of others  
whenever there is a disagreement or conflict.*

*We are conscious of the fact that in all of this our weakness  
is just the same as that of previous generations.*

*We hope to be able to be zealous in the Lord's work, just as others have been zealous,  
and we know that we can fail, just as others have sometimes failed.*

*Therefore we pray to our God and Father  
that His Spirit will keep dwelling in us  
and that we will more and more be able to know the love of Christ.  
Then, one day, we will be able to welcome Him as Lord,  
He who bought us and bound us together  
to be one holy, universal, Christian church.*

## **A. THE CHURCHES**

### **A1 *One in faith***

A1.1 The [the name of the church federation still to be filled in] Churches exist by the grace of God. His Spirit binds the churches together in *one* faith: faith in Christ Jesus, the Son of God.

A1.2 In every local congregation this faith is to be lived and confessed.

A1.3 The members of the congregation are to express this faith in society through lives which reflect God's Kingdom.

### **A2 The Bible and the Confessions**

A2.1 The churches are to be obedient to the Word of God which has been written down in the Bible.

A2.2 They accept with the universal Christian church the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed as the verbal expression of their faith in God, Three-in-One.

A2.3 They accept as well, as the verbal expression of their faith, the Three Forms of Unity: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt.

### **A3 The Church Order**

A3.1 The churches make use of a common Church Order, as the description of what is proper and just in the churches and as the arrangement of how we are to work with each in practice.

A3.2 Where necessary, the Church Order is to be further expanded with general regulations.

A3.3 The Church Order and the general regulations are to be drawn up and officially approved by a General Synod, and, when needed, modified by a General Synod.

## **B. THE CHURCH OFFICES**

*The church is the work of Christ through His Spirit.*

*He is continuing to build His church through human beings.*

*Church office-bearers are to proclaim and spread His message to those around them, give thoughtful care to their congregational members, and stimulate everyone to a life of service.*

*Please, let's make good use of these precious gifts of the Lord!*

### **B1 The three offices**

B1.1 The churches recognize the offices of minister, elder, and deacon.

B1.2 The office-bearers, each with their own particular task, are to give leadership, on Christ's behalf, to their congregation, in order to faithfully preserve it for Him.

B1.3 None of the office-bearers are to have any kind of higher ranking above other office-bearers, as if they, as individuals, can tell their fellow office-bearers what to do.

B1.4 A calling which is according to the agreed-on procedures is needed to become an office-bearer.

### **B2 The church council**

B2.1 In every church there is to be a church council, which is to be the general governing body of the congregation. The church council is also authorized to carry out church discipline.

B2.2. The church council is formed by the joint ministers and elders. In dividing up their tasks, they can assign different responsibilities to different members.

B2.3 The church council is to have regular consultation with the deacons. The church council can decide to give the deacons a vote in deciding matters of general governance. This is always to be so when there are less than three elders in a congregation.

B2.4 The church council of a local congregation is to have its own written body of regulations for carrying out its affairs.

### **B3 The task of a minister**

B3.1 A minister is to proclaim the Word of God to the church and to the world. He or she is to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

B3.2 A minister is authorized to proclaim the Word and to administer the sacraments in all and any of the churches, when a local church council asks him or her to do so.

B3.3 A minister is to equip the congregation, through teaching, for its tasks in God's Kingdom.

B3.4 A minister is to support the elders and the deacons in their tasks. He is to visit the church members, in order to encourage them, and, where needed, warn them from the Word of God.

B3.5 When a church does not have a minister, the church council is to make sure that the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments are continuing in a faithful and fruitful way.

### **B4 The calling of a minister**

B4.1 The calling of a minister, according to the agreed-on procedures, consists in receiving a call from a congregation, this being approved by a regional church gathering, assent from the congregation involved, and finally being ordained as minister.

B4.2 A call from a congregation is to be extended by the church council, in consultation with the deacons, and with active cooperation from the congregation.

B4.3 To receive a call one must be approved by a regional gathering to be able to receive a call, or already be a minister serving a congregation.

B4.4 The call is to be extended via an official letter of invitation. The minister is then to accept the call via an official letter of response.

B4.5 The regional gathering is to express approval of a candidate if it is convinced that the stipulations of the Church Order have been met. If it concerns someone who is not yet a minister, then the regional gathering plans and carries out an exam of the candidate as to his or her qualifications.

B4.6 After the assent of the congregation has been received, the ordination is to take place in a church service.

### **B5 Training for the ministry**

B5.1 The churches are to maintain an academic theological institution for training their future ministers.

B5.2 Whoever wishes to be able to receive a call to the ministry, ought to have completed the full course at the theological institution which is maintained by the churches. The general regulation provides for special cases, where the candidate has not completed such an academic training.

B5.3 The churches stimulate members to desire to become a minister. If necessary, they offer financial support to individuals during the course of their studies.

### **B6 The life-long task of being a minister**

B6.1 The call of a minister is meant to last indefinitely. The general regulation provides for dealing with special cases.

B6.2 The churches are to enable ministers to be engaged in the ministry fulltime.

B6.3 When a minister receives a call to serve part-time, the regional gathering is to make sure that both the minister, personally, and his or her ministry are not negatively affected by the part-time arrangement.

### **B7 The official status of a minister**

B7.1 The official status of a minister, with its rights and obligations, has its own, special church character. The church council and the congregation are to welcome him or her as a servant of Christ.

B7.2 The church council is to take care that the minister fulfills his or her office in the way that Christ asks of a minister.

B7.3 The church council is, on behalf of the congregation, responsible for the financial support of the minister. This responsibility extends to supporting the minister's immediate family, including after his or her death.

### **B8 Ministers with special tasks**

B8.1 The churches can give a minister a special task to do, such as teaching at the theological institution, or special pastoral ministries, or serving in a missionary capacity.

B8.2 Where possible, the churches are to provide ministers to be engaged in spiritual care in non-church institutions.

B8.3 In the case of carrying out a special task, the minister is to be a member of a local church. The specific regulation of his or her official status requires the approval of a regional gathering, and, if applicable, a General Synod.

### **B9 Retirement (emeritus status)**

B9.1 The church council is to grant a minister emeritus status when he or she reaches the age specified in the general regulations.

B9.2 When a minister, due to illness or an accident, is permanently prevented from exercising his or her office, the church council is to grant him or her an emeritus status.

B9.3 When a minister has an emeritus status, the church council retains its care for the minister, and remains responsible for his or her financial livelihood.

B9.4 An emeritus minister retains the authorization to proclaim the Word and to administer the sacraments.

B9.5 A decision of a church council to grant an emeritus status needs to have the approval of a regional gathering.

### **B10 Giving a minister a non-active status**

B10.1 In cases of urgent necessity, a church council can decide, as a temporary measure, to give a minister a non-active status, either completely or partially.

B10.2 The decision of a church council to give a minister such a non-active status, needs the approval of the church council of the officially recognized neighboring church.

### **B11 Dissolving the relation of a minister to a local congregation**

B11.1 In the case a situation has arisen in which a minister can no longer serve a congregation in a fruitful way, the church council can decide to dissolve the relationship of the minister to the congregation.

B11.2 The decision of a church council to proceed to such a dissolving of such a relationship needs the approval of the regional gathering involved.

B11.3 A minister whose relationship with a congregation has been dissolved, retains the authorization to proclaim the Word and administer the sacraments in other churches.

B11.4 In this case, the church council maintains its care for the minister, as long as he or she is able to receive a call, but is not yet serving another congregation. At the request of the church council or the minister, the regional gathering can transfer the care for the minister to another church council.

### **B12 Discharging a minister**

B12.1 A church council is to discharge a minister from his or her office when, within two years after a dissolving a minister from serving its congregation, he or she has not received and accepted a call from another church, or when the regional gathering decides that the minister, after a dissolution of a relationship to a particular congregation, can no longer receive a call.

B12.2 In other cases, a discharge can take place only at the request of the minister concerned.

B12.3 The decision of the church council to proceed to a discharge needs the approval of the regional gathering.

B12.4 When a discharge takes place, the minister forfeits his or her church office, and the authorization to proclaim the Word and administer the sacraments is lost.

### **B13 Suspension and dismissal of a minister**

B13.1 The church council is to suspend a minister who: 1) commits a public sin, or a sin which is serious in another way, 2) neglects or misuses his or her office, 3) acts in conflict with the official commitment document signed at ordination, or 4) disregards official warnings.

B13.2 The decision of the church council to proceed to a suspension needs the approval of the church council of the officially recognized neighboring church.

B13.3 A suspension involves being relieved from all tasks in the local church as well as losing the authorization to proclaim the Word or administer the sacraments in other churches.

B13.4 A suspension is to be in effect for a maximum period of four months. If necessary, this period can be extended once.

B13.5 The church council is to judge if, after a suspension, a dismissal is to follow. The decision of the church council to dismiss a minister needs the approval of the regional gathering.

B13.6 In the case of a dismissal, the minister forfeits his or her church office, and the authorization to proclaim the Word and administer the sacraments is lost.

### **B14 The tasks of elders**

B14.1 The elders are to faithfully watch over the congregation of Christ. They are to make sure that the Word is faithfully proclaimed, and the sacraments are administered in a sanctified way.

B14.2 The elders are to watch over of the spiritual life of the members of the congregation. They are to visit them regularly and make sure that other church members are involved in this kind of pastoral care.

B14.3 The elders are to watch over of each other, other office-bearers, and other church workers in the congregation.

B14.4 When a local church has less than two elders, the regional gathering should decide about the consequences.

### **B15 The tasks of deacons**

B15.1 The deacons are to give an example to the congregation in giving practical help, motivated by the love of Christ.

B15.2 The deacons are to visit the members of the congregation who are experiencing illness, loneliness, or poverty. They are to give comfort and practical support.

B15.3 The deacons are to collect funds in order to distribute them to those in need, both within and outside the congregation. They are to give an account of their management of such funds to the church council and the congregation.

B15.4 The deacons are to stimulate the congregation to be involved in bringing about a just society.

B15.5 When a church does not have any deacons, the church council is to make sure that progress is made in giving practical help to needy church members and in stimulating service to society.

### **B16 The calling of elders and deacons**

B16.1 The calling of elders and deacons, according to the agreed-on procedures, consists in being nominated by the congregation, being appointed by the church council, the assent of the congregation, and the official installment to these offices.

B16.2 The church council is to ask the congregation to nominate professing members who can serve as elder or deacon. The local regulation can specify limits as to gender, age, the period of time between service as an office-bearer, and family relationships.

B16.3 In consultation with the deacons, the church council is to decide about the suitability of those nominated. When there are more suitable candidates than the number needed, the church council is to have the professing members of the congregation make a choice, or it makes the choice itself.

B16.4 The church council is to appoint elders and deacons for a certain number of years, dependent on the local regulation. As a rule, each year an equally proportionate number are to step down from their terms of service.

B16.5 After the congregation agrees to the appointments, the official installment is to take place in a church service.

### **B17 The discharge of elders or deacons**

B17.1 Whoever has been appointed or installed as elder or deacon, can, when good reasons are given, asked to be discharged.

B17.2 When the church council grants a discharge, it is to report about it to the congregation.

### **B18 Suspension and dismissal of elder and deacons**

B18.1 The church council is to suspend an elder or deacon who: 1) commits a public sin, or a sin which is serious in another way, 2) neglects or misuses his or her office, 3) acts in conflict with the official commitment document signed on being installed, or 4) disregards official warnings.

B18.2 The decision of the church council to proceed to a suspension needs the approval of the church council of the officially recognized neighboring church.

B18.3 A suspension is to be in effect for a maximum period of four months. If necessary, this period can be extended once.

B18.4 The church council is to judge if, after a suspension, a dismissal is to follow. The decision of the church council to proceed to a dismissal needs the approval of the regional gathering.

### **B19 Church workers who are not office-bearers**

B19.1 The church council can appoint one or more church workers in order to carry out tasks alongside the office-bearers.

B19.2 The regional gathering can authorize those who are not ministers to proclaim the Word in church services.

### **B20 Acting trustworthily**

B20.1 Ministers, elders, deacons, teachers at the church-connected theological institution for theological training, and all who are authorized to proclaim the Word in church services, are to bind themselves to the teaching of the Bible, as expressed in the confessions named in A2. They are to confirm this by signing the official commitment document.

B20.2 The office-bearers and the other church workers are to accept the code of behavior which is applicable to them.

B20.3 When someone makes a charge about sexual abuse coming from an office-bearer or other church worker, the person who is making the charge can ask for a pronouncement from



the official complaint board which has been designated to deal with such cases. The accused office-bearer or other church worker is to cooperate in full.

## **C. THE CONGREGATION**

*The heart of the church beats there where people come together in the name of Jesus.*

*In this body of Christ each member has his or her own special place, in order to receive and in order to give.*

*All of us should feel jointly responsible for this!*

### **C1 Church services**

C1.1 In every church the congregation comes together on Sunday in public church services. We appear together before God, with songs and prayers.

C1.2 In the church service the Word of God is proclaimed and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are administered.

C1.3 The church service offers room for growth in commitment to each other and in serving one another.

C1.4 On other days too, other than Sunday, the church council can call the congregation together for a church service, such as on days of the year with a special Christian character (Christmas, Good Friday, Easter (Sunday), Ascension Day, and Pentecost (Sunday)), or special occasions.

### **C2 Members of the congregation**

C2.1 Professing members, baptized members who have not yet made profession of faith, and guest members all belong to the congregation.

C2.2 Professing members are those who have made a public profession of faith. They have been baptized and are entitled to participate in the Lord's Supper.

C2.3 Baptized members is a term for those who have received baptism as children, but have not yet made a public profession of faith.

C2.4 Guest members are those who are professing members or baptized members of another congregation, and have good reasons to be involved in both congregations.

C2.5 The congregation is to give good care to those others who, for other reasons, participate in church life.

### **C3 The administration of baptism**

C3.1 Adults who have not yet been baptized, are to receive baptism after they have made a public profession of faith.

C3.2 The young children of professing members are likewise to be baptized. Their parents are to promise to instruct their children in the teachings of Christian faith, and to bring them up to live with trust in God.

C3.3 The churches are to accept the baptism of someone who received it in a Christian church fellowship, in a proper and valid way, and in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

### **C4 Public profession of faith**

C4.1 The church council and the congregation are to stimulate adults who are baptized members to make a public profession of faith, in order to participate in the Lord's Supper.

C4.2 In order for someone to make a public profession of faith, the church council needs to grant permission to do it, and the congregation needs to give its assent.

## **C5 Celebrating the Lord's Supper**

C5.1 The congregation is to celebrate regularly the Lord's Supper, a sanctified event, as instituted by Christ.

C5.2 Professing members and professing guest members of the congregation are to be invited to participate in the Lord's Supper.

C5.3 The church council can also decide to allow to the Lord's Supper those baptized members who, because of their young age or their limited development, are not yet mature enough to make a public profession of faith, but yet show themselves to be sincere believers. This decision needs the assent of the congregation.

C5.4 The congregation can receive as guests to the Lord's Supper those who somewhere else have, in a similar fashion, been admitted to the Lord's Supper, and who share the faith of the congregation.

## **C6 The calling to be a missionary**

C6.1 The congregation is to seek, by word and deed, and motivated by the Gospel of Christ, those who do not know God, or are estranged from Him.

C6.2 The congregation is to support church-related missionary activities at home and abroad by prayer, gifts, and personal involvement.

## **C7 Training and education**

C7.1 Baptized members and those who come to faith outside the congregation, are to receive catechetical training as a preparation to making public profession of faith.

C7.2 Church members are to dedicate themselves to prayer, personally and jointly, to gain deeper insight in the Bible, and to a life lived for the Lord.

## **C8 Financial contributions**

C8.1 Church members are to contribute, as they are able, to the financial support of the church.

C8.2 The church council is to report annually about its fiscal plans concerning finances, and how those plans were or were not realized in the past year.

C8.3 Regarding decisions with far-reaching financial consequences, the church council is to consult the congregation.

## **C9 Confirmation of marriages**

C9.1 The church council is to make sure that members of the congregation who want to get married, and so become husband and wife, have their marriages confirmed by the church after the official, civil ceremony has taken place (as is the custom in The Netherlands).

C9.2 The church marriage confirmation is to take place in a church service, and needs the assent of the congregation.

C9.3 The church council is to make the necessary decisions regarding the confirmation of marriages of baptized members who have not yet made a public profession of faith, and of marriages in which the husband or the wife does not belong to one of the churches.

## **C10 Care for those about to die**

C10.1 The congregation is to give appropriate care, by word and deed, to those who are about to die, and to their families.

C10.2 The church is to provide for the Gospel of Christ's death and resurrection to be heard in connection with the death of a church member.

### **C11 Church registration**

C11.1 The church council is to make sure that there is a proper registration of those who belong to the church.

C11.2 The registered information is to be carefully taken care of, and only used for church purposes.

### **C12 When members move away or move close by**

C12.1 Church members who move to another location, are to receive, at their request, and after an announcement to the congregation, a written letter of recommendation meant for the church council of the congregation they intend to join.

C12.2 Whoever has left a sister-church and wants to join the congregation, is to be welcomed and introduced as a member to the congregation by the church council, on the basis of such a letter of recommendation.

C12.3 In other cases, the church council is to make the necessary decisions about welcoming new members into the congregation.

### **C13 When members withdraw their membership**

C13.1 When a church member: 1) makes known that he or she no longer wants to remain a member of the congregation, or 2) without making it known, becomes a member of a church from another denomination, or 3) in the case of moving away, does not request a letter of recommendation, and 4) in all these cases, in spite of the efforts of the elders and the congregation, does not change his or her mind about it, 5) then the church council is to acquiesce to the situation, and make known the termination of the person's membership to the congregation.

C13.2 When a church member makes contact with the elders impossible over a long period of time, the church council, after receiving the assent of the congregation, is to declare his or her membership terminated.

## **D CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

*Our God is holy and His love is endless.*

*That's why it is so serious when members of the congregation oppose Him.*

*In these cases, we must warn them:*

*Come back to Christ, we implore you, before it's too late!*

### **D1 The character of church discipline**

D1.1 The church is to give special care to those members of the congregation who, due to their beliefs or life-style, do not honor God the way they should, and thereby threaten their own salvation and that of the congregation.

D1.2 The church is to make all efforts to reconcile the sinner with God and with the congregation.

### **D2 Exhortation**

D2.1 Ministers, by the proclamation of the Word, are to make God's promises known regarding those who turn to Christ in faith, but they are also to make known how real God's judgment is on those who persevere in sin.

D2.2 The elders are to exhort the members of the congregation to live a Christian lifestyle.

D2.3 The members of the congregation are to support each other in the struggle against sin. They are to warn each other in a loving way according to the path which Christ in Matthew 18 has given us.

D2.4 If the mutual warnings among church members do not lead to repentance and faith, then the church council is to be informed, as Christ tells us in Matthew 18.

### **D3 Opportunities to give a defense of one's beliefs and actions**

D3.1 When there are objections to a church member's beliefs or lifestyle, the church council is to give him or her the opportunity to give a defense, based on the Bible.

D3.2 When a church member's beliefs deviate from the teaching of the church, the church council can decide to tolerate his or her beliefs, if he or she is prepared to be taught from the Bible, is not going to make propaganda for these beliefs, and will follow the instructions which the church council may communicate.

D3.3 When it becomes evident that a church member has committed a sin and does not want to repent of it, or when he or she refuses to give an account of his or her actions, then the church council is to proceed with church discipline.

### **D4 The means of church discipline**

D4.1 As the various means of church discipline, the church council is to make use of official warnings, eventually deny the opportunity of participating in the Lord's Supper, and call in the help of the congregation,

D4.2 As the last means of church discipline, the church council is to proceed to the excommunication of the church member involved, excluding him or her from the fellowship of the church.

### **D5 Official warnings**

D5.1 In the case of giving official warnings, the church council is to confront the sinning church member with the Word of God. Through repeated contacts they are to attempt to bring him or her to repentance.

D5.2 When the sinning church member hearkens to the Word of God and shows that he or she wants to live according to that Word, the church council is to accept his or her repentance as genuine, and support him or her in being reconciled to God and to the congregation.

### **D6 Denying participation in the Lord's Supper**

D6.1 When a professing member rejects the warnings of the church council, or is guilty of a serious sin which threatens to infect the congregation, the church council is to deny him or her participation in the Lord's Supper.

D6.2 Further, when participation in the Lord's Supper is denied to a church member, his or her children may not be baptized, nor may he or she vote in the election of office-bearers.

### **D7 Calling in the help of the congregation**

D7.1 When a professing member, or baptized member who has not yet made public profession of faith, perseveres in sin, in spite being warned, the church council can decide to make this known to the congregation.

D7.2 Such a decision of the church council needs the approval of the regional gathering. The regional gathering is to give the person involved the opportunity of a defense.

D7.3 When the church council makes an official announcement about the situation, the church member involved and his or her refusal to repent are to be named, with an appeal to pray for him or her, and to exhort him or her to repentance. The church council can repeat this announcement.

D7.4 When the sinning church member gives heed to such exhortations, and repents, the church council is to announce this, with thanksgiving, to the congregation.

### **D8 Excommunication**

D8.1 When a sinning church member does not show any sign of repentance, but is rather indifferent or hostile to the Gospel, the church council is to proceed to excommunication, excluding him or her from the fellowship of the church.

D8.2 Such a decision needs the approval of the regional gathering and the assent of the congregation.

D8.3 The official excommunication is to take place in a church service.

### **D9 Returning to serve the Lord**

D9.1 When a professing church member is excommunicated, but then, with contrition toward God and toward the congregation, returns to serve the Lord, desiring to participate in church life, he or she is to be once again welcomed into the fellowship of the church, through a public confession of guilt. For this to take place, the assent of the congregation is needed.

D9.2 When a baptized member who has not yet made public profession of faith returns to serve the Lord, he or she is to be welcomed into the fellowship of the church, through a public profession of faith.

## **E. CHURCH LIFE AS A FEDERATION OF CHURCHES**

*A congregation cannot live on its own.*

*Christ binds the churches to each other.*

*That entails responsibilities toward each other: giving mutual support, watching over each other, agreeing about tasks, doing things together.*

*We desire to broaden this cooperation, including other churches.*

### **E1 The church federation**

E1.1 The [here the name of the church federation is to be filled in] Churches are to meet each other at regional gatherings and at the General Synods.

E1.2 In these gatherings, the churches are not to lord it over each other, but serve each other.

E1.3 Those delegated to a regional gathering or a General Synod are qualified to act on behalf the churches which have sent them, as long as they hold to the Bible, the confessions of the churches, and the church order.

### **E2 The regional gatherings**

E2.1 The churches in a region are to come together in a gathering at least three times per year.

E2.2 Each church is to delegate two office-bearers to the gathering, if possible one minister and one elder.

E2.3 In the regional gatherings the churches are to meet each other for mutual support, advice, and to watch over one another.

E2.4 The churches are to support each other, including, when necessary, with financial support.

E2.5 The regional gathering is qualified to act on matters concerning which the churches in the region involved have previously decided to be jointly dedicated to.

### **E3 Relating to churches with which there is an affinity**

E3.1 A regional gathering can start a relation of affinity with a church with which there are special bonds, but which does not accept our common church order, or with which, for other reasons, church unity is not possible.

E3.2 A church with which there is affinity can be welcomed to a regional gathering, but does not have the right to vote.

### **E4 Church visitation**

E4.1 The regional gathering is to appoint a visitation committee whose members are to bring an official visitation to all the churches in the region.

E4.2 Those who carry out the official visitation of a congregation are to talk with the office-bearers about how the congregation is spiritually being built up, and about peace and harmony between the churches.

E4.3 When they are asked to do so, visitation team members are to offer help when there are difficulties or conflicts in a congregation.

### **E5 An official neighboring church**

E5.1 For each church in the region the regional gathering is to appoint another church as the official neighboring church, in order to give help in special situations.

### **E6 Dealing with church changes in a region**

E6.1 The decision of a church council to officially open a new church, to effectuate a split, to dissolve the church of which it is the governing body, or to join another church, needs the approval of the regional gathering.

### **E7 The General Synod**

E7.1 The churches are to come together once every three years in a General Synod.

E7.2 Every regional gathering is to send two delegates: one minister and one elder or former elder.

E7.3 The General Synod is qualified to act concerning matters which the churches have previously decided to be jointly dedicated to, and concerning matters which were not able to be settled by a regional gathering.

E7.4 The General Synod is to appoint committees which are to carry out the decisions of the General Synod, and prepare for new decisions to be made.

### **E8 Proposals for the General Synod**

E8.1 A committee of the General Synod is qualified to make proposals concerning matters which it has been appointed to deal with.

E8.2 A church council or regional gathering is qualified to make proposals to the General Synod concerning matters which the churches have previously decided to be jointly dedicated to. If it is appropriate, the church council or regional gathering is to consult the relevant General Assembly committee before making such proposals.

E8.3 Proposals regarding a new matter can only be brought to the General Assembly by a regional gathering or by at least seven churches.

E8.4 An individual church member can only make an official response to a decision of the General Assembly concerning a matter that concerns him or her personally.

### **E9 Special church organizations and church institutions**

E9.1 The churches can work together through special church organizations for special purposes, such as missionary work or the management of church affairs.

E9.2 In order to carry out its tasks, or for the sake of the activities in the churches, the General Synod can create a church organization for those purposes.

### **E10 Other churches in The Netherlands**

E10.1 The churches are to seek unity with other churches in The Netherlands which hold to God's Word and recognize themselves in the teaching of the Reformed confessions.

E10.2 The General Synod can start a relationship of affinity with church federations with which there are special ties, but with which church unity is not yet possible.

E10.3 A church council is to make sure, when there is contact and cooperation with a congregation of another federation, that there is good communication with its own congregation and with the regional gathering. When important decisions are made, the assent of the congregation and the approval of the regional gathering are needed.



E10.4 When a congregation makes an arrangement to cooperate with a congregation of another federation, the church councils involved are to specify in writing which local regulations of the two congregations are to be followed.

E10.5 The churches can participate in other national church federations, organizations, and institutions.

### **E11 Churches outside The Netherlands**

E11.1 The churches are to maintain contact with churches abroad holding to the Reformed confessions. Hereby, they are to respect the particular history and context of each such church.

E11.2 Contact is to be focused on spiritual fellowship and mutual encouragement and help.

E11.3 The General Synod can start a relationship of affinity with those churches with which special ties exist.

E11.4 The churches can participate in international church federations, organizations, and institutions.

E11.5 Where churches have the opportunity of proclaiming the Gospel in other places in the world, this should take place as much as possible in cooperation with existing churches there.

## **F. DECISIONS AND OBJECTIONS**

*In the church we are one in Christ, but we don't always agree about everything. In order to maintain peace, we have rules about how decisions can still be made together, when we have disagreements, and where church members can go with their objections when they cannot agree with particular decisions.*

### **F1 The process of making decisions**

- F1.1 The church gatherings are to seek genuine, Christian peace in their decision making.
- F1.2 In the process of making decisions, the church gatherings are to do justice to previous decisions.
- F1.3 The church gatherings are to aim to achieve a consensus. If a consensus is not possible, then a decision is to be taken by means of a majority of votes.
- F1.4 Those who stand to benefit personally in the case of a certain decision, are not to be allowed to vote.
- F1.5 The church gatherings are to make sure that there is a careful record of the proceedings, that there is good communication about the proceedings, and a good archival system.

### **F2 The assent of the congregation**

- F2.1 The church council is to consult the congregation about the chief features of its vision and plans.
- F2.2 A decision of the church council which, according to the Church Order, needs the assent of the congregation, is to be announced on two successive Sundays.
- F2.3 The assent of the congregation is to be regarded as a fact, when, within fourteen days after the first announcement, no well-founded objection has been raised.

### **F3 Objections**

- F3.1 A church member or someone who is personally involved in a particular situation, can make an objection to a decision of the church council.
- F3.2 A church or someone who is personally involved in a particular situation, can make an objection to a decision of the regional gathering.
- F3.3 Submitting an objection does not mean that the decision is to be put on hold. When a request to put a decision on hold is made, the church council or the regional gathering should make a decision as soon as possible. A direct appeal against the latter decision can be made, following the procedure described in art. F4.
- F3.4 The church council or the regional gathering is to reconsider the decision objected to, and is to make a written decision regarding the objection.

### **F4 Appeals**

- F4.1 If an objection has been rejected by the church council or the regional gathering, an appeal can be made to the general committee for appeals.
- F4.2 Such an appeal, in writing, should demonstrate that the decision of the church council or the regional gathering is 1) in conflict with the Word of God or proper church procedure, or 2) is damaging to the spiritual edification of the congregation, or 3) does injustice to the person making the objection.

F4.3 Such an appeal must be submitted in writing within six weeks after the communication of the rejection of the objection involved. The appeal does not mean that the rejection is to be put on hold. The chairman of the committee for appeals can, on request, make a temporary arrangement fitting the situation.

### **F5 Higher appeals**

F5.1 When the church council, or the regional gathering, or the person appealing to the committee for appeals, cannot go along with the pronouncement of the committee, a higher appeal can be made to the General Assembly.

F5.2 The higher appeal is to be made in writing within six weeks after the communication of the pronouncement of the committee for appeals. Such a higher appeal does not mean that the pronouncement is to be put on hold.

### **F6 Continuing objections**

F6.1 The implementation of a decision or pronouncement cannot be asked of someone if this would bring him or her, according to his or her conscience, in conflict with the Word of God.

F6.2 When a church council is convinced that a decision or pronouncement of the General Synod is in conflict with the Word of God or with proper church procedure, or is damaging to the spiritual edification of the congregation, and the church council, for one of these reasons, does not implement the decision or pronouncement, it is to present its objections to the regional gathering for an evaluation.

## **G. THE RELATION OF THE CHURCH ORDER TO THE LAWS OF THE NETHERLANDS**

*We are a church in a country and society where laws and rules apply.  
It is fitting, as part of our obedience to Christ, to respect such laws and rules.*

### **G1 Church and civil government**

G1.1 The churches seek, by means of consultation and written communication, to be on good terms with civil government, which, in service to God, exercises its authority in society.

G1.2 In particular cases, the churches are to point out to the government its duty to protect the freedom of public worship services and the freedom of religion.

### **G2 Official statutes**

G2.1 The manner in which the churches carry on their activities, as expressed in the Church Order, as well as in the local, regional, and general church rules and decisions, forms the "governing statutes" of the churches in the sense in which the Dutch civil law describes them.

### **G3 The status of "legal person" in The Netherlands**

G3.1 In accordance with Dutch civil law, the status of "legal person" is to be given to the local churches, the regions in which the churches are united, and the joint [here the name is to be filled in] Churches.

G3.2 Special church organizations and church institutions, as meant in article E9, possess the status of "legal person" in accordance with Dutch law.

### **G4 Representation**

G4.1 For the sake of legal contacts and transactions with the Dutch government, a church, a region, or the joint [here the name is to be filled in] Churches are to be represented by a committee of at least two persons who have been designated, with full empowerment, by a church council, a regional gathering, or the General Synod, by means of instructions or a written decision.

G4.2 The representation of special church organizations and church institutions, as meant in article E9, in legal contacts and transactions with the Dutch government, is to be regulated in their statutes.

*Almost seventy articles, rules, and stipulations:  
they are meant to provide no more than support for the sake of peace and justice.  
For the real life of the church comes from its unique source, Jesus Christ,  
and the aim of all of this is: to give God alone the glory!*

## **2. Explanation of the Church Order, as a means to help in the process of bringing union between the Reformed Churches (Liberated) and the Netherlands Reformed Churches**

First public rough draft

June, 2019

### **I. GENERAL**

#### **Moving toward unity**

On November 11, 2017, the General Synod (GS) of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (Liberated) (RCN) and the National Gathering (NG) of the Netherlands Reformed Churches (NRC) jointly expressed their desire to become one church federation. For the sake of this becoming one, a working committee was formed (the Working Committee for the Future Church Order, WCCO), with the charge to draw up a common church order.

The working committee was able to build on the basis of the first exploratory discussions which took place from 2015 to 2017, the results of which were published under the title, "Perspectives." This report, and the first reactions to it, made clear that the differences regarding church order of the two church federations were considered easy to be overcome. That is not surprising: both are part of a tradition stemming from the so-called "Dordt Church Order" (DCO) of 1619, formulated at the great Synod of Dordt.

It was at the same time clear that both church federations, since the break in the 1960's, had experienced their own individual developments.

#### **An Understandable Aversion**

When the NRC agreed to an "Agreement to Live Together as Churches" (ALTC) in 1982, they avoided calling the 40 articles of this Agreement a "church order." The executive committee of the Breukelen National Gathering of 1982 refers to the term "church order" in a negative way in its "Preface": "...that the Agreement to Live Together may not be made into a law in obedience to which we are to 'live,' in the meantime ignoring what the Scripture teaches--as was the case before the Separation of 1969, when in many cases we were supposed to 'live' through being a church federation or 'bound to the Church Order.'"

Thirty years later there is less the aversion to the term "church order." For example, the executive committee of the Zeewolde NG of 2013 in its "Preface" in the ALTC edition of 2015: "The Agreement to Live Together as Churches" (ALTC) is the basis of our mutual commitments and promises, and thereby constitutes our version of a church order."

However, that does not mean that the fear of a dominating church order has disappeared. The ALTC is still introduced by a "Clarification" (in the meantime better known as a "preamble"), in which the churches declare "that accepting this or another Agreement to Live Together as Churches may not be allowed to be the cause of a break or becoming estranged from one another as churches which are one in faith and confession." If faith unites, then a church order may not be allowed to divide.

As well, in the reactions to the document "Longing for a new church," which the working committee earlier had made public, we hear more than once a call for a sober, minimally prescriptive church order. Churches cherish their freedom. That is increasingly the case for the churches in the RCN. Many long for a church federation which does not feel like a straitjacket, but as a gift, not top-heavy, but light of foot, open, and inviting.

The aversion to a dominating church order has justification. See art. 32 of the Belgic Confession: "Therefore we reject all human inventions and laws introduced into the worship of God which bind and compel the consciences in any way. We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God."

A church order is certainly useful, the same article says. In the Bible we hear festival music accompanying the structuring of Israel in the desert, the organization of the worship services in the temple, and the work of office-bearers in building up the church after Pentecost.

Certainly there is here good reason for the warning about people who want to misuse this structure for their own profit, their own position, and their own power. A good church order won't provide any opportunity for repressive domination, but rather oppose such abuses.

The solution is therefore not that the churches should be satisfied with a minimum of, or even no church order at all. It is precisely anarchy which breeds dictators. The NRC realize that too, as we see in their ALTC. It is better to make rules, via the church order, which oppose corruption in the church and prevent pig-headed individuals from trying to impose their wills on others. That's why the church order gives expression to what Jesus says in Matthew 23:8: "you have one teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters." Jointly accepting a good church order is an expression of the same awareness we hear in the last question of the classic form for making a profession of faith: do you acknowledge that you need others to remain faithful to Christ? It is an awareness, inspired by faith, of their own limitations when churches say in advance: when needed, we want to allow ourselves to be corrected by our sister-churches in the Lord.

### **A Living Church**

However, a church order is not only meant to oppose the misuse of power or false teaching. The broader purpose is to contribute to a healthy church life.

A church order is a practical description of the way in which churches meet each other and relate to each other. It specifies the elements which the churches see as being important for a church of Christ, and which we therefore desire to see manifested in every local church and in the church gatherings. It offers a basic structure within which local churches certainly can be different, but are also always able to fall back on. It gives church councils solid direction about what to do in all kinds of situations.

A good church order also gives assurance to church members of justice being done. Happily, it is not an everyday occurrence, but when needed it's good to have the proper instruments to make sure justice is done, carefully and well. The clearer the path to achieve justice is described, the more effective it will be to deal with the substance of an issue. And, as well, it helps avoid a civil judge having to interfere.

Further, a church order gives clarity to external parties, in particular the government and civil legal bodies. The churches in The Netherlands have many privileges. We owe it to our society that, from our side, we have our house in order. Of course it is not the case that a church order gives life to the church. But it is true that a living church federation can profit from a well thought-out church order.

### **The RCN Church Order of 2014**

The RCN had modernized their Church Order in 1978. In 2002 they decided to examine it once more. It became of project of 12 years. In 2014 a completely new Church Order was made public.

This Church Order of 2014 deviates from the design of church orders stemming from the original DCO. So, for example, the number of chapters has been doubled, and the themes have been distributed across the chapters in a different way. There is more attention given to the responsibilities of the local congregation and of the church members. As well, the churches are more prominently positioned within society than previously. The application of church discipline has been newly thought through. The possibilities of making objections, or of making appeals, have been more broadly worked out. As well, there is a separate chapter on "material matters."

All in all, the RCN Church Order of 2014 is the most up-to-date one which we have available. The Working Committee on the Future Church Order (WCCO) has therefore chosen it as its starting point for a new church order which may delineate the union of the RCN and the NRC.

### **Working out a new Church Order**

However, the WCCO did not want to simply copy the RCN Church Order of 2014 or merely make marginal changes to it. The idea has been to formulate a joint church order, belonging to the RCN and the NRC together.

We believe that that which has been valuable within the NRC should be able to continue, after the union. This concerns particularly the room which the NRC gives the local church to operate in. National regulations ought to give harmony and further our mutual recognition of each other, but not lead to a forced uniformity.

Furthermore, the developments in the church and society do not stand still. The ALTC of the NRC and the Church Order of 2014 of the RCN stipulate, for example, that as a rule two church services are to be held on Sunday. However, in a growing number of places this has been reduced to one church service per Sunday. A new church order does not have to follow such developments blindly, but cannot ignore them either. Involved with formulating a church order means to think continually about all kinds of themes which are to be treated in it. It is a challenge to formulate again and again what is substantive to each theme, and what would be useful to be regulated in the churches.

Therefore we would like to express our special thanks to the twenty or so experts from the breadth of the Dutch church landscape, who in January, 2019, gave their comments regarding a previous rough draft of the new church order. Their remarks have stimulated the WCCO to make a great number of adjustments. It is a process which, as it were, could go on forever! For the church order which has now been produced will undoubtedly evoke a lot of reactions, which in turn will lead to new adjustments.

### **No Revolutionary Innovations**

Thinking about the church and a church order was a stimulus to some to think of ways to "do it completely differently." Some of these ideas are certainly cogent. However, it seemed to the WCCO that it would not be right to weigh down the unifying process with proposals which so significantly deviate from the current practice.

The study of church order matters follows, for the most part, what is happening: it establishes what the developments are which are taking place in the churches. Let the discussion about new forms of being the church or of church government be carried on in the churches themselves. When that discussion leads to clear results, which are broadly supported, they can then be worked out in a new church order. But as long as the reflections are continuing, we should be hesitant to formulate a whole new church order.

This is in particular the case with respect to two subjects: the binding force of the confessions, and the official, legal status of the minister.

As far as the binding force of the confessions, with respect both to normativity and practice, the situation in both the RCN and the NRC is comparable. It is expected of office-bearers that by signing the document of commitment they bind themselves to the "Three Forms of Unity." That is the norm and the practice of this moment.

But in both the RCN and the NRC there are churches which have difficulty maintaining this binding force. First of all, because beginning office-bearers scarcely know what they are signing on to. What value does this then have? Further, because office-bearers who do investigate the teaching of the confessions in more detail can be rather critical of certain concepts which are used there. Where can they go for answers to their questions? Are they, because of their critical questions, unfit for serving in their offices? Is there genuine space for discussion about these points in the church?

The WCCO believes that the churches have a lot of homework to do on this subject in the coming period. Not in order to make the commitment to the confessions looser, or even to allow it to disappear, but just because we ought to take the confessions serious and have them function in a real way in the churches.

However, the new church order does not have to run ahead of this discussion. It is not a matter of a difference of opinion between the RCN on the one hand, and the NRC on the other, but concerns a common challenge. The discussion about this point can thereby best be carried out in a joint fashion. For the moment, the proposed Church Order maintains the existing situation. That will be unsatisfying to some, but it is the best way to go.

As far as the official, legal status of the minister is concerned, the general tendency is that the minister more and more looks like an employee, with the church council as employer. That is not always a bad thing. It gives both the minister and the congregation more room, and it sometimes gives more clarity. But it does clash with the way in which, traditionally, things were regulated by the church order. To give an example: can a minister still be a member of the church council when the church council is at the same times his employer? And how do we continue to maintain that possible measures taken against the minister are not subject to the Dutch laws of the land, or juridical evaluation, but only to church decision making, in the case that his or her status more and more resembles a "normal" work relationship?

Another aspect of this is the exclusive qualification of a minister as a theologian, trained academically at a university, and with a Master's degree. Can people with only a BA from a junior college also become ministers? Is it still tenable that only ministers can administer the sacraments? Wouldn't it be better if there were more freedom for churches to allow those to lead services whom they wish to, even when the person involved does not have official permission to preach? Do we actually need a separate order of ministers anyway?

The discussion on this topic is continuing to receive a lot of attention. The WCCO tried to see if in the new Church Order steps could be taken in a certain direction in this area, but in



gatherings with experts it became clear that there is not yet enough ground support in the churches for changing the status and the qualifications of the minister. That's why in the new Church Order the existing practice is followed.

### **Spirituality**

In both the ALTC (NRC) and the Church Order of 2014 (RCN) we hear that they are church, and therefore spiritual documents. The new Church Order wants to maintain that conviction by continuing to find its starting point in what the Lord thinks is important for His church. That does not make the Church Order a confession or a theological treatise. The Church Order will not mention all aspects of the church or church life, but can limit itself to an arrangement of the relevant subjects.

Nevertheless, the new Church Order is provided with an introduction which places the whole in an historical and spiritual setting, somewhat comparable to the "Clarification" (the "preamble") which accompanies the ALTC.

### **Regulations for implementation**

Both the RCN and the NRC have, next to their church orders, a collection of regulations describing how things are to be implemented. In the RCN, these are called "general regulations," and in the NRC, summarily, "regulations." In the new Church Order, too, such regulations will be necessary. The complexity of modern society is undeniably experienced in our church life, and this has consequences for a church order.

The RCN Church Order of 2014 wanted to mention the relevant regulations explicitly in the text of the document. But, finally, in 2017 there were more regulations than were mentioned in the Church Order. The proposed new Church Order guarantees the applicability of the regulations in art. A3.2 and G2, but does not mention them in the text itself, except where the regulations stipulate exceptions to the basic regulation which is named in the Church Order. See, for example, B5.2.

The regulations intended have till now not yet been written. On the other hand, the existing regulations of the RCN and the NRC continue to exist. In the coming years these will have to be worked out to form a common whole, which is in tune with the new Church Order.

The intention of the general regulations is not, by means of a detour, to again curtail the freedom which the Church Order offers. The intention is rather to make the stipulations in the Church Order manageable, so that they can be applied effectively.

### **Terminology**

We saw, above, that the NRC gave their church order another name: it is called an "Agreement to Live Together as Churches." This title is essentially correct, but it is rather long, and, in its abbreviated form (the ALTC), is only recognizable to insiders. That's why the WCCO has chosen to go back to the commonly used term, "Church Order." The NRC chose to call their General Assembly, the gathering where all the churches are represented, a "National Gathering," abbreviated as "NG." Here too the WCCO has chosen to return to the terminology of "General Synod," abbreviated as "Synod," as a term which is recognized in wider circles.

On the other hand, the WCCO has chosen to go along with some of the modernizations which the NRC had applied. The term "classis" has been replaced with "regional gathering," abbreviated as "region." For the term "classis" has proven to be a word which even for actively engaged church members needed to be explained.

As well, the term "deputies" has disappeared. Within the RCN a new term had emerged, the rather unwieldy expression, the "deputyship." For individual deputies are specified, but do not get instructions individually. The instructions are given to a contingent of deputies, called a "deputyship." The NRC called such a contingent simply a "committee." The latter term has been chosen for the new Church Order.

The new church federation will also have to choose a common name, as a substitute for the names abbreviated now by the acronyms RCN and the NRC. It is not the responsibility of the WCCO to make a decision in this matter. That's why in the places in the proposed new Church Order where the name of the church federation should occur, we have put the words: "The [the name of the church federation still to be filled in]."

The rest of the terminology choices made have been explained in the clarifications found with each separate article.

### **Lay-out**

Except for chapter A, all the chapters have an introductory heading which in a few sentences describes what the chapter deals with.

These intro's do not belong to the actual text of the Church Order itself, but are meant as helpful material for the readers.

Both the ALTC (40 articles) and the Church Order of 2014 (86 articles) number all the articles consecutively. The proposed new Church Order does not do this. The reason is that it can still be worked on, for example, by bringing articles together or splitting them. It will be handy when the results of such adjustments can be limited to one chapter.

When the Church Order reaches its definitive form, a consecutive numbering can still be applied. For the rest, for those interested: when numbered totally, the proposed Church Order has 66 articles.

### **It's the churches' move**

The WCCO is now presenting its proposal to the churches. The latter are the responsible bodies which have to appropriate this Church Order and in the course of time put it into practice. It's therefore very important that the new Church Order receives a positive response from the churches.

The proposed Church Order is therefore certainly not meant as a final product. The WCCO hopes and expects that the churches will be able to respond energetically, so that an improved proposal can be presented to the General Synod and the National Gathering in 2020.

The WCCO hopes to receive your reactions at the email address: [kerkorde@ngk.gkv.nl](mailto:kerkorde@ngk.gkv.nl). Please submit your reactions before January 1, 2020.

## II. EXPLANATIONS PER ARTICLE

### A. THE CHURCHES

#### A1 *One in faith*

A1.1 The [the name of the church federation still to be filled in] Churches exist by the grace of God. His Spirit binds the churches together in *one* faith: faith in Christ Jesus, the Son of God.

A1.2 In every local congregation this faith is to be lived and confessed.

A1.3 The members of the congregation are to express this faith in society through lives which reflect God's Kingdom.

The Church Order gives shape to church unity. But that unity itself rests on a harmonious fellowship of the Spirit, through one *faith in Christ Jesus* (Ef. 4:3-6). Therefore the church thanks its existence to *God's grace* in Christ Jesus. See the way the Heidelberg Catechism speaks about this faith in Lord's Day 21.

A1.2 is also a statement which defines the path ahead. While it is true that this is a church order which belongs to a national church federation, the heart of church life beats where things are happening at the local level, there where the *congregation* comes together to honor God and where believers seek to live in the power of the Gospel.

The terms "church" and "congregation" are near synonyms. In the new Church Order the term "church" emphasizes recognizable unity, while the term "congregation" indicates the plurality of persons, the "church members."

In A1.3 the church members are mentioned separately. When Sunday has passed, and the church building empty, the church still exists. The members of the congregation *express this faith in society*, by words, but also through their actions. In this way they present themselves of service to *God's Kingdom*, God's rule over this world.

#### A2 *The Bible and the Confessions*

A2.1 The churches are to be obedient to the Word of God which has been written down in the Bible.

A2.2 They accept with the universal Christian church the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed as the verbal expression of their faith in God, Three-in-One.

A2.3 They accept as well, as the verbal expression of their faith, the Three Forms of Unity: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt.

In A2.1 is heard the sound of the Belgic Confession, Art. 3: "God commanded his servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit his revealed Word to writing..." The RCN Church Order of 2014 and the NRC ALTC therefore use the term "Holy Scripture." However, this expression has become so unusual outside official church documents (and therefore become unintelligible to many) that it's better to use a word, the "Bible," which is recognizable to all. Both expressions, "Bible" and "Word of God," occur frequently later on in the Church Order, each with its own accent: the "Word of God" as the content of the proclamation, and the "Bible" as the verifiable source of that proclamation.

The confessions show us how the church, down through the ages, has desired to express its deepest convictions. That provided clarity, both internally and externally. Further, these documents began to function as an internal norm. It was in particular expected of those who gave leadership in the church that they would assent to this confessing of the church. For this aspect, see art. B20.1.

A request has been made to remove the Canons of Dordt from this list. For it is the case that few in the church know this document well. Those who do know its contents often experience a feeling of estrangement as to the way the Canons of Dordt systematize the material. Would it not then be better to no longer list this document as one of "our" confessions?

In answer to this query, we think that there are a number of good reasons to retain it as a confessional statement:

- a. In the years that the RCN and the NRC have been seeking contact with each other, they found unanimity with each other in a common appreciation of the church confessions, traditionally called the "Three Forms of Unity." The Canons of Dordt are part and parcel of the Three Forms of Unity.
- b. Whoever gets to know the Canons of Dordt better, and takes the time to study their historical background, will also better be able to come to an appreciation for what is written there--and for what is *not* written there. The framers of the Canons of Dordt did not lose themselves in mere logical reasoning, but, instead, sought to offer lasting comfort to uncertain sinners.
- c. It is true that the Canons of Dordt show traces of the way in which theology was carried on in the 17th century. That can indeed be the cause of a feeling of estrangement. A comparable example is the way the Athanasian Creed can cause estrangement, for this creed is scarcely known in the churches. Nevertheless, that has never been a reason to reject the Athanasian Creed. We respect that ancient confession not only because of its trustworthy contents, but also in order preserve our connection with the universal Christian church. In the same way we maintain the Canons of Dordt as a sign of our solidarity with the other churches which have emerged from the Reformation.

The suggestion has also been made that the list of confessions could be supplemented with a confession oriented to our current situation. That possibility is certainly open to us. However, the WCCO doesn't see its task as that of drafting such a confession or to make proposals in that direction.

### **A3 The Church Order**

A3.1 The churches make use of a common Church Order, as the description of what is proper and just in the churches and as the arrangement of how we are to work with each in practice.

A3.2 Where necessary, the Church Order is to be further expanded with general regulations.

A3.3 The Church Order and the general regulations are to be drawn up and officially approved by a General Synod, and, when needed, modified by a General Synod.

A3.1 speaks of two focal points which define the content and the authority of the Church Order. On the one hand, the church order stipulations have something arbitrary about them: we make practical choices in order to regulate our relationships and communication with each other. Just as in the case of traffic regulations, you could choose to have all traffic

drive on the "right," but you could also choose to have all traffic drive on the "left." However, it is not very handy if half the motor vehicles drive on the right and the other half on the left, as they choose. This defines the usefulness and the moral authority of many church stipulations: we could choose for something else, but if everyone chooses what everyone thinks is best, without coordinating things, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to work together.

On the other hand the church order stipulations point to Biblical principles which are not free-floating or arbitrary. The tasks of office-bearers, for example, have been derived from Biblical directives. Whoever neglects these directives is being unfaithful to Christ. As well, the Church Order contains many demands for the sake of being careful, demands which remind everyone that we may never forget the other person's rights.

This is the way the churches understand what is "proper and just" in church life. And it is important that they maintain this way of doing things, both outwardly, in Dutch society, and inwardly, as a church federation. Living as churches in the "peace of God" means that we don't abandon the churches to anarchy or dominant leaders, but that we constantly ask of each other to do what is "right" in the eyes of the Lord.

The *general regulations* are meant, above all, as means by which we can facilitate making further use of the Church Order. They have the same two focal points as the Church Order: on the one hand they give the churches a handy guide, and on the other hand they formulate the necessary demands concerning being careful. It is certainly the case that in problematic situations both of these aspects are demonstrably very important.

The Church Order and the general regulations can be *changed* when that is needed. The need for modifications can be found in changed circumstances, but also in changes of insight. In order to prevent an arbitrary majority at the General Synod from suddenly making big changes in the Church Order, a general regulation has been provided which will describe the preparatory steps to making such changes.

The RCN Church Order of 2014 also had a stipulation (A3.2) that everyone had to uphold the Church Order and the church regulations and decisions. The new Church Order has not adopted this stipulation (and other comparable stipulations in chapter F).

Of course following the Church Order is not a mere optional choice. That's why the words *make use of* are used in A3.1: a church order does not exist as a nice ornament for the church archives, but to be used.

And, just as a church order contributes to a healthy church life (see the general introduction), not following it brings the risk of enormous damage, not only to mutual relationships, but especially to the weaker parties in the church, as well. That is something which cannot be allowed to happen in a fellowship which calls itself a fellowship of Christ.

At the same time it's good to recognize that following a church order is not a matter of enforcing behavior. When a local church finds a certain rule to be superfluous, and therefore doesn't follow it, there is no authority which, for example, could penalize this church. It is certainly the case, as F6 indicates, that such a church should communicate its views on this matter to the regional gathering. But that gathering, too, will first try to arrive at an accommodating measure, rather than try to force churches into submission. Finally, there is only one sanction available to the churches: breaking off relations with a particular congregation in the federation. It is obvious that something like this will not take place

quickly. However, that is no reason for letting churches blatantly ignore the church order regulations. It is precisely Christ Jesus who has taught us to be trustworthy, and to have an eye for the rights of the other person. That is the way we found each other as brothers and sisters, and that is the way we want to approach each other still. That is the way we desire to make use of our common Church Order.

## **B20 Acting trustworthily**

B20.1 Ministers, elders, deacons, teachers at the church-connected theological institution for theological training, and all who are authorized to proclaim the Word in church services, are to bind themselves to the teaching of the Bible, as expressed in the confessions named in A2. They are to confirm this by signing the official commitment document.

B20.2 The office-bearers and the other church workers are to accept the code of behavior which is applicable to them.

B20.3 When someone makes a charge about sexual abuse coming from an office-bearer or other church worker, the person who is making the charge can ask for a pronouncement from the official complaint board which has been designated to deal with such cases. The accused office-bearer or other church worker is to cooperate in full.

The churches are bond together through faith in our one Lord (A1.1), and accept the confessions as the expression of this faith (A2). Because office-bearers and leaders of church services are to preserve the congregational members in this faith, they are asked if they promise to remain committed to these confessions in their duties. Asking this emphatic commitment gives the congregation extra protection: the members know what they can expect. It also directs those who sign the document of commitment to adopt a good attitude: they pledge themselves to being correctable on the basis of the common confessions. The old form of signing on to the authority of the confessions remains valuable in our day through signing the document of commitment. (The term "document of being bound (to the confessions)" of the RCN Church Order of 2014 has been replaced by a "document of commitment," which puts the emphasis on the act of the person who signs, who thus binds him- or herself to this confessional teaching.)

The proper and just character of this stipulation can also be clarified by the distinction mentioned in D3.2. Someone who has views which deviate on certain points from the confessions, can certainly have a place in the congregation. But those who are entrusted with a leading role in the church can be expected to be loyal in supporting the confessions of the church.

The NRC ALTC, in art. 17, mentions the possibility of someone who refuses to bind him- or herself to the confessions of the church, through signing a document of commitment, or of someone who, after a period of time, makes known that he or she can no longer support the confessions. For a long time this was an important point of difference with the RCN, where signing a binding commitment to the confessions was not optional: no signing, no church office! However, art. 17 of the ACL does not intend to legitimize a refusal to sign a document of commitment, but rather indicates a path to follow when someone makes his or her difficulties concerning something in the confessions known. In the RCN, too, church councils are faced with similar situations. The WCCO believes that it is precisely in connection with signing such a document that it is appropriate to describe in writing what should happen when someone has difficulties with (parts of) the confessions of the church. That was long ago the case in signing the "document binding oneself to the confessions." Here such matters can be described at more length and with more nuances than in the Church Order, for example, as is the case in the current "binding document" of the RCN: *When we experience a difference between the teaching of the Bible and the contents of the aforementioned confessions, and our difficulty is not resolved, we will present our objections to the church gatherings to be evaluated. When questions arise concerning about other of our beliefs or activities, we are*

*likewise willing to present our case to the church gatherings.* The Church Order can limit itself to prescribing the signing of the document.

See for of all of this the general introduction: "No Revolutionary Innovations."

A matter of a different category is accepting the *code of behavior*. Someone may consider parts of the code to be superfluous, or even believe that something prescribed there may lead to a damaging result in certain situations. The intention of the code is, namely, not a matter of blindly following protocol, but of calling for a loyal and full acceptance of it. Precisely in the case of a code of behavior this is important.

The code of behavior we are referring to can be an elaboration of the existing codes which the Christian Reformed Churches (CRC), the RCN, and the NRC currently use (see the website for information about this: [meldpuntmisbruik.nl](http://meldpuntmisbruik.nl)).

Next to *sexual abuse* there are other forms of unacceptable behavior possible in the church, such as manipulative abuse of power, slander campaigns, or financial profiteering. However, it is questionable if combatting such behavior is best served by means of a team to be reached by telephone or internet, or a special complaint board. In any case, the complaint board regarding sexual abuse is currently the only one extant in the area of dealing with the possible misbehavior of office-bearers or other workers in the church, and thus is the only one mentioned in the Church Order.



### **E11 Churches outside The Netherlands**

E11.1 The churches are to maintain contact with churches abroad holding to the Reformed confessions. Hereby, they are to respect the particular history and context of each such church.

E11.2 Contact is to be focused on spiritual fellowship and mutual encouragement and help.

E11.3 The General Synod can start a relationship of affinity with those churches with which special ties exist.

E11.4 The churches can participate in international church federations, organizations, and institutions.

E11.5 Where churches have the opportunity of proclaiming the Gospel in other places in the world, this should take place as much as possible in cooperation with existing churches there.

Here too (see E3 and E10.2) the *relationship of affinity* is used as a comprehensive term, which can be filled in differently from case to case. It is certainly not feasible, and also not necessary, to have the same, intensive contacts with all the churches in the world, even if one were to restrict the contacts to churches with a *Reformed confession*.

*International church federations, etc.* (E11.4) can here be a good substitute for or supplement to bilateral contacts.

The mutuality encouraged in E11.2 is worked out in E11.5: don't pass by the *existing churches* in a certain country or area when involved in mission activity!

## **F6 Continuing objections**

F6.1 The implementation of a decision or pronouncement cannot be asked of someone if this would bring him or her, according to his or her conscience, in conflict with the Word of God.

F6.2 When a church council is convinced that a decision or pronouncement of the General Synod is in conflict with the Word of God or with proper church procedure, or is damaging to the spiritual edification of the congregation, and the church council, for one of these reasons, does not implement the decision or pronouncement, it is to present its objections to the regional gathering for an evaluation.

It was the big issue at stake at the "Liberation" (in Dutch: "Vrijmaking"), 75 years ago: a General Synod may not force churches, office-bearers, or church members to do or to say things which, according to their convictions, would bring them in conflict with the revealed Word of God.

The RCN and the NRC have, each in their own way, worked this principle out in their own church orders. The NRC ALTC in art. 34, and summarily in art. 35; the RCN Church Order of 2014 in art. F72.4 and F72.5 (after the modification in 2017).

The church culture after the Liberation developed its own phenomenon: that of the "ratification." The idea was that Synod decisions could only be carried out when a church council first had studied the decisions and had accepted them as valid. "Ratifying" is the task of a church council, says art. 34 of the ACL.

The positive effect of this ratification culture was that church councils gave intense attention of the decisions made by the federation. The negative effect was that the church councils were sometimes put under pressure by their own church members with objections, to the effect that their church council should, above all, not "ratify" certain decisions. As if that were sufficient to distance oneself from those decisions! As well, sometimes there arose a lack of clarity about the "legal force" of decisions: are they in force from the moment they are made, or are they in force from the moment the church council has studied them and approved them? And how long could a church council wait to take action about "ratification"?

In order to put an end to this lack of clarity, the RCN Church Order of 2014 formulated art. F72, with a number of stipulations about the "legal force" of decisions, about the moment when decisions were actually "in force," and about how decisions were to be put into practice (F72.1, F72.2, and F72.3). What we read there speaks for itself: a decision has "legal force" as soon as it has been made, it is actually "in force" at that moment as well, with direct consequences (unless a decision stipulates another time frame), and church councils may be expected to carry out the decision.

Within the NRC a similar development can be seen: whereas the ideal was that all the church councils would take the time to consider the decisions of the LG, the reality was that church councils acknowledged the decisions made (or merely acknowledged the existence of these decisions), and in practice conformed themselves to them. Actually, quite a normal way to do things!

That is why in the new Church Order there are no special stipulations concerning how to regard decisions and any "ratification" process. Everyone can understand that a decision is "in force" and to be carried out from the moment it has been made. And further, no one can ignore such decisions either.

More important is what is to do with real objections to such a decision. That is regulated in this article.

F6.1 specifies the fundamental principle involved, especially with regard to its being worked out for individual persons. It is formulated in a general way: it also applies to the levels of decisions made by a church council or a region. The RCN Church Order of 2014 says in art. F72.5 that someone must be willing to submit a formal objection, and willing to make an appeal or even a higher appeal. The new Church Order does not adopt this stipulation. It is without doubt the case that not everyone is capable of following all the (sometimes intensive) church steps involved. But that's not necessary. A church council must be satisfied, in some cases, when a church member says, "Don't ask that of me, before God I honestly can't take responsibility for that." Don't force him or her to begin with all kinds of church procedures. Eventually, for example, it should be possible for a church council to relieve him or her from a certain task, because the person involved says that it is just not possible to do what the church council is asking. And in serious cases the church council can start applying church discipline. But then it must be very clear that the church member, by the refusal to conform to the decision, is clearly in conflict with God's Word, even though perhaps claiming that he or she wants to follow it.

F6.2 focuses on objections which are coming not just from one person, but which are shared by an entire church council, objections which are so serious that a church council says, "We can really not do this."

The RCN Church Order of 2014, in art. F72.4, limits this to situations in which the church council sees a conflict with the Bible or the Church Order. Now, F6.2 specifies as well a situation in which a church council does not directly see a conflict with the Bible or the Church Order, but does believe that it would do too much damage to the congregation. The NRC ALTC has something like this in art. 34. Further it is true that the RCN Church Order of 2014 is certainly aware of this aspect: see the list in art. F73.1.

When it's a matter of a decision of the region, the church council can make an appeal, and after that even make a higher appeal. When it concerns a decision of the General Synod, or a pronouncement of the General Synod responding to a higher appeal, then a higher appeal is not possible. What can be done? Naturally there is still the possibility of asking for a change of the decision at the following General Synod. In the case of a pronouncement responding to a higher appeal, even the previously mentioned possibility is not possible. But even if it concerns proposing a new decision at the following General Synod (reversing the first decision), it's highly probable that there simply will be a repetition of the discussion which led to the original decision. The requirement of art F72.4 of the RCN Church Order of 2014, calling for a proceeding leading to a possible revision of the decision, therefore is no longer to be found in the new Church Order.

It is on the other hand so that F62 directs a church council, in such a case, to the regional gathering. The RCN Church Order of 2014 simply lets the church council "make this known" to the classis (due to the demand for a revision request made to the following General Synod). The NRC ALTC says that the church council must "explain" its difficulty with a particular decision. The new Church Order goes further: the idea is now that the regional gathering should make a response to the church council's objections. That response can be that a *modus vivendi* is sought for, in spite of the objections, so that it's possible to go forward together. The reaction can also be that the regional gathering actually finds the objections to be justified. In that case, the idea is that the church council in question and the regional gathering together go

to the next General Synod with their plea. That is a stronger way of doing things than merely one church going forward with its objections. But the response of the regional gathering can also be that it finds it necessary to reject the church council's arguments, because they are found to be unnecessarily cantankerous. The response can even be one whereby the regional gathering sees reasons to break off relations with the congregation in question. But then we have an extreme situation: it must be seen as break for the sake of Christ's will. See the explanation in A3.