

Christ Church of Livingston County

Our Constitution

(revised, February 2009)

PREAMBLE

Of the Church

We believe that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church (Matt. 16:18). We believe in the communion of saints and in the holy catholic Church. Thus, we acknowledge that the church of God, purchased with Christ's blood is manifested in diverse particular congregations in all the earth. We believe that it is the duty of each Christian in the holy catholic Church to be committed to and connected with a Biblically ordered particular congregation located in their geographical area. Christ Church of Livingston County has been so constituted by Christ through His duly ordained representatives as a particular congregation of the Body of Christ. Because we believe that churches are to be connected with one another through representative presbyters (elders) for the purpose of shepherding, oversight, accountability, and discipline, our presbytery affiliation is the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC).

MEMBERSHIP

Household Membership

In Christ Church of Livingston County, membership is normally reckoned by household. A household may be eligible for membership when the head of that household, ordinarily the husband and/or father, has been lawfully baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19) and does not contradict his profession through his manner of life (Matt. 7:22-23). Membership begins when covenant membership vows have been taken (Philemon 2; Heb. 13:7,17). The Session (of elders) oversees a membership list, which includes names, baptisms, and communicant status of each person in a member household. As circumstances warrant, individuals from non-member households may join the church. Independent unmarried members are considered a household for purposes of voting. Otherwise, when such a person becomes a member, such an individual's capacity to be an elector will be determined on a case by case basis. Individuals may also come under our pastoral care without coming into formal membership or voting membership as denoted by an action of the Session.

Release or Transfer of Membership

If any member requests to be released to the care of another Christian church, the Session will release him with a blessing, except as noted below. If any member requests a release after committing a disciplinable offense, the Session will delay acting on the request until the disciplinary matter is resolved. If members move from our geographical area, they are charged to find a new church home within six months. This time may be extended at the Session's discretion. After this time is expired, they are released from membership. Members of this church who shall willfully, without plausible reason or excuse, consistently absent themselves from the Lord's Day worship shall be subject to the steps of church discipline.

Electors

Those members who vote in church elections are called electors. Electors are the heads of member households (whether men or women) and those granted voting capacity by the Session. Moreover, electors also provide input to the elders and deacons at a regular heads of households meeting (usually monthly). New business brought to the attention of the elders and deacons by the electors will be appropriately considered in their respective meetings. At least three weeks prior to any church election, a ballot will be provided. Voting will take place by electors in the a) elections of elders and deacons, b) the calling and, if warranted, dismissal of pastors, c) the amending of this Constitution and our Book of Confessions, and d) the Session may determine that a vote is necessary at other times.

LEADERSHIP

Election of Elders and Deacons

The Session (of elders) will examine any potential candidate for elder or deacon 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 Book of Confessions, or this Constitution, then he must inform the Session of it. All candidates must meet the qualifications for the office set down in Scripture (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:2-4; 1 Tim. 3:8-13). Nominations may be received from any elector or officer at any time, provided that it is delivered to the pastor or chairman of the Session in writing. Willing nominated individuals that are approved with unanimous consent of the Session will normally undergo some training, instruction, and examination. This will be carried out with the oversight of the pastor. The Session, after considerations arise in the time of training, instruction, and examination, may approve the nominee, or not, for election by unanimous consent.

After candidates are approved for election, the voting ballot will provide the option of voting yes, no, or abstain. If the candidate receives the unanimous support of the church (Phil. 2:1-4), the elders will ordain him through laying on hands and prayer. The requirement for congregational unanimity may only be set aside by the unanimous consent of the Session, and only if they have determined that the objections are unscriptural or unwarranted. This process is referred to as "qualified unanimity." Once ordained, the elder or deacon will serve for life, unless he resigns or is removed. Leaves of absence and Sabbaticals from service in these offices may be granted by unanimous consent of the Session.

Elder Leadership and Session

Christ is the head of the Church (Eph. 5:23) and according to His Word, the form of local congregation government is a plurality of qualified men exercising leadership in the local congregation of believers (1 Pet. 5:1; Phil. 1:1). The office designated for ruling and shepherding the church is the office of elder or presbyter (1 Tim. 5:17; Tit. 1:5-9). Therefore, under Christ, the ordained authority within the local church is the presbyters or elders in Session. (For a description of the Presbytery's authority over the local church, see the Constitution of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches.) The Session is the called meeting of the elders in which they act corporately to rule in the church of God (1 Tim. 5:17).

The Duties of Elders

The elders are collectively responsible for ruling/shepherding (1 Pet. 5:1-2);

equipping (Eph. 4:11-12); prayer/fasting (Acts 6:4; 13:1-3); teaching/preaching (1 Tim. 5:17); leading and ordering worship (1 Tim. 4:13; 1 Cor. 14:40); administering the sacraments which are Baptism and the Eucharist (Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26); administering church discipline and restoration (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-5), and prayer for the healing of the sick (Jas. 5:14-15).

The elders are responsible to delegate responsibilities to the deacons, obtain and oversee necessary ministry assistants, define responsibilities for those administering subordinate ministries, and approve the annual financial plan in consultation with the heads of households. The Session may also commission or license ministerial students, and oversee the course of their training for the eldership. Under the guidance and oversight of the elders, such men may perform all the various ministerial functions of elders, participation in the rule of the church excepted.

Elder business will be conducted in Session, that is, at regularly scheduled meetings or at special meetings called for the purpose. The Session will record accurate minutes of the actions taken in their meetings. In all meetings of the Session of presbyters, each elder has one vote.

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 chairman of the session for consideration by the Session.

Pastors: Elders who are Ministers of the Word

The New Testament uses the term "elder" synonymously with "bishop" and "pastor" to refer to the same class of officers (Acts 20:17-28). Yet, distinctions in the "ruling" and "teaching" ministry of elders are made in Scripture (1 Tim. 5:17-18; 2 Tim. 3:17-4:2). Hence, we distinguish "ruling elders" and those elders that are lawfully ordained to be Ministers of the Word. These are commonly called, "pastors." Ministers of the Word represent the Lord in proclaiming His will in the public preaching of the Word and in leading in the administration of the sacraments (baptism and communion). The title of "pastor" is recognized in our church to specify persons who have such a calling to the work of the ministry and have been recognized by the Session and the congregation to serve in this capacity. Pastors and "Ruling Elders" co-labor together in shepherding the flock (1 Pet. 5:2-4). Yet, pastors and elders differ in respect to personal calling, labor in ministry and remuneration. Each elder has the same formal authority (as in voting on the Session) in the church as each pastor.

Calling and Ordination of Pastors

Pastors called to minister to Christ Church of Livingston County must be unanimously called by the Session and affirmed by the electors by qualified unanimity. Each pastor called to labor in the congregation must also be subject to follow the ordination and examination procedures of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches. The terms of a pastoral call, including the meeting of the pastor's material needs, shall be determined by the Session and reviewed annually, or more frequently if circumstances warrant.

Dismissal and Termination of a Pastoral Call

While Christ Church of Livingston County 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 from the office follows that which is discussed below for all elders. Changes in the calling of a pastor so as to be dismissed from service at Christ Church of Livingston County for reasons other than for disciplinary action (below) is as follows: a) When a pastor desires to terminate his tenure in office, he shall duly inform the Session of his desire. b) In the case of the involuntary termination of a pastoral call, a pastor may be recommended for dismissal from service at Christ Church of Livingston County by a unanimous vote of the Session (excluding said pastor). In such a case, the pastor may call for a vote of the electors to sustain his call or not. If the electors sustain his call by a two-thirds majority vote, the other elders may afterwards either concede to the call or refer the matter to presbytery for binding arbitration.

Duties of Deacons

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 financial plan approved by the Session, building maintenance, fellowship meals, administrative review of subordinate ministries, office support, and administration of the deacons' fund.

The business of the deacons will be conducted at regular meetings or with meetings in conjunction with the Session. Accurate minutes of such meetings will be kept and the deacons will give regular reports to the Session and to the heads of households, as well as an annual financial report.

Resignation of Elders or Deacons

If an elder or deacon desires to resign or take a leave of absence, he will present a letter to the Session. The Session will notify the church through the heads of households meeting. 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.

Removal of Elders or Deacons

If two or three witnesses believe an elder or deacon to be morally or doctrinally unfit for office, then they will present charges to the Session (1 Tim. 5:19). If the Session (excluding the accused, in such a case) unanimously decides that the question merits an investigation and/or hearing, at their discretion they may inform the heads of households of the charges, announce the date(s) of the scheduled investigation and/or hearing, and encourage the heads of households to attend. If the charges are unanimously sustained by the other elders, then the accused elder or deacon, depending on the gravity of the charges and his response to correction, may be rebuked at the heads of households meeting (1 Tim. 5:20), or may be removed from the office of elder or deacon (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9), or both.

Church Discipline

The ordinary course of discipline is informal. Members are encouraged to self-discipline, overlooking the failings of others in love (1 Pet. 4:8), and encouraging other members to covenant faithfulness (Matt. 18:15).

Formal church discipline is applied through the formal action and unanimous judgment of the Session. Except in cases of scandal requiring immediate action, the

pattern of church discipline will generally include formal private admonishment by two or three (Matt. 18:16; Gal. 6:1), formal public admonishment and suspension from the Eucharist (2 Thess. 3:14-15), and a formal hearing which may result in excommunication (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Cor. 13:1).

Any communicant member of a member household may be disciplined by the church. Un-baptized members of member households are subject to pastoral admonishment from the church, but not excommunication since they are not communicant members. Non-member communicant Christians who attend church regularly are subject to pastoral admonition, but not to formal excommunication. Nevertheless, a non-member who is divisive, heretical, scandalous, or factious may be barred from the Eucharist and rejected after proper admonition (Tit. 3:10). If another church has disciplined one of its members, and that person subsequently comes to Christ Church of Livingston County, 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 unanimously rejects such disciplinary actions as out of accord with the government of Christ.

Excommunication will end when the Session unanimously affirms that the one under discipline has repented. A confession of this repentance will be presented to the congregation on the Lord's Day, and the Session shall formally announce the restoration.

Appeals to Presbytery

Members of Christ Church of Livingston County may appeal the actions of the Session to the presbytery and/or council of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches. Any appeals to presbytery will be conducted in accordance with the Constitution of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches.

WORSHIP

The Covenantal Form of Worship

The Lord's Day worship service of Christ Church of Livingston County is understood to be a service of renewing the covenantal relationship between God and His people. Thus, we celebrate the feast of the Eucharist weekly and enjoin all baptized members of the covenant to participate. Thus, the order of our worship follows the robustly Biblical pattern of Call, Confession, Consecration, Communion, and Commission.

The Schedule of Worship and Church Meetings

Worship services shall be held as often as the Session determine, but the regular schedule of meetings shall always include the Lord's Day service. Other ministries shall be scheduled according to the needs of the congregation at the discretion of the Session in accordance with God's Word, such as biblical and theological classes for further ministry training, special conferences and seminars, fellowship activities, and outreach ministries.

The Nature of Baptism

Baptism is a blessed sacrament of the New Testament instituted by our Lord as a sign and seal of salvation. The sacramental washing with water in the name of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit officially admits a person into the visible

church, 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 (Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 2:11-12; Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:3-5; Tit. 3:5; Mark 1:4).

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 participation in the covenant, church, and kingdom of our Savior. And to them no less than to adults do the benefits of Christ and His redemption accomplished apply (Acts 2:39; Matt. 18:1-6; Eph. 6:4). That which is signified and conferred in baptism, therefore, is applicable to infants promised to be in covenant, as well as to adults who profess salvation.

Baptismal candidates, whether children or adults, must 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 covenantal duties and covenantal inclusion (Acts 16:31-34). However, for those that differ with this view, the Session shall defer to the view of the head of each household.

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper or Eucharist is a blessed sacrament of the New Testament instituted by our Lord as a sign and seal of His redemptive work. By eating the bread and drinking the cup in a worthy manner believers spiritually feed upon Christ, renew their union and communion with Him, acknowledge His redemptive work on their behalf, and renew their thankfulness for His saving work, as well as spiritually commune with other believers (Luke 22:17-20; Matt. 26:26-28; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; 1 Cor. 10:14-21).

Recipients of the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper or Eucharist is for all the Lord's people. Hence, we practice "open communion" as defined in the following way: We encourage all baptized Christians (not censured under church discipline) to celebrate the feast of the Eucharist and so commune with Christ in His body. The Lord's Supper is integral to the act of confession, repentance, renewal, and abiding in Christ. Moreover, it is our conviction that the Eucharist should be received by all baptized covenant members who are able to physically eat and drink the elements, including young children being raised in the discipline and admonition of the Lord. Under the headship of Christ, the responsibility for administering the sacraments remains with the Session. However, for those that differ with this view, the Session shall defer to the view of the head of each household.

Amending the Constitution or Book of Confessions

The Constitution and/or Book of Confessions may be amended through unanimous consent of the Session, after approval is indicated by a majority vote of the heads of households. The amendment process requires that notice of the vote be scheduled at least three weeks in advance of each elector receiving the proposed revisions.

We confess that this Constitution is a fallible work of fallible men and, if obedience to Scripture requires it, may be set aside without the process of amendment by the

unanimous judgment of the Session. Under such circumstances, the heads of households will be informed, and the Constitution amended at the first opportunity.