

Advisory Committee 1, Synodical Services and Structure I, Rev. Joseph VandenAkker reporting, presents the following:

I. Response to Overture 73 (Deferred from 2021) Minority

A. Materials

Overture 73, pp. 401-02

B. Background:

Synod 1975 received a report on “the use and function of synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters, and their relation to the confessions.” The report researched past synodical pronouncements and identified six main categories into which synodical pronouncements have tended to fall (Cf. *Acts of Synod 1975*, Article 46, p. 44). One of the six is “pastoral advice.”

Noting recent confusion in churches with respect to what “settled and binding” entails, specifically in the case of synodical pronouncement identified as “pastoral advice,” Classis Chatham overtured Synod 2021 to provide clarification on the meaning of settled and binding with respect to the confessions and various synodical pronouncements.

C. Recommendations:

1. That synod provide the desired clarification without further delay.

Grounds:

- a. Classes and churches have desired and requested this clarification going back at least as far as 1995, yet it has not been provided.
 - b. It is understandable but lamentable that Overture 73 has been deferred since 2021. Some of the decisions Synod 2024 is being asked to make this year directly relate to the manner and extent to which confessions and various types of synodical pronouncements will be considered “binding” in the future. The delegates to Synod 2024 should begin with a clear understanding of the statements adopted by Synod 1975 (which are currently “settled and binding”) before considering requested changes.
2. That synod clarify that synodical pronouncements, deliverances and decisions (synonymous terms) are “settled and binding” by Church Order Article 29, but the complete contents of study committee reports are not “settled and binding.” Only the study committee recommendations that synod adopts and other statements from within the report that synod adopts are considered to be “settled and binding” synodical pronouncements.

3. That synod accept the following explanation as resolving the apparent tension between three assertions that were adopted in a single recommendation by Synod 1975 (cf. *Acts of Synod 1975*, Article 46, 2b and 2c).
 - a. The first assertion is: “Synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters ... shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order (Church Order, Article 29).”
 - b. A second assertion is: “The confessions and synodical pronouncements have nuances of differences. They differ ... in **the measure of agreement** expected.” (*Acts of 1975*, Article 46, 2c) (emphasis added).

Explanation:

- 1) The Covenant of Officebearers defines the measure of agreement required for a *confession* as full and unreserved *agreement* with its teachings and a commitment to *abide by* them, as expressed in the commitment to “promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them.”
 - 2) *Synodical pronouncements* (with the exception, per Synod 2022, of interpretations of confessions) require a lesser measure of agreement than confessions in that they are subordinate in authority to the confessions, no subscription (i.e. signed statement of agreement) is required for synodical pronouncements, and officebearers are permitted to disagree with a synodical pronouncement (as indicated by permission to register a negative vote) (*Agenda for Synod 1975*, Report 47, p. 602). Officebearers are permitted to disagree so long as they **acquiesce** to the decision and (as discussed in 3c below) commit to “**abide by**” the decision.
 - 3) Synodical pronouncements remain binding (though more loosely) in the sense that officebearers and members have a responsibility (i.e. they are duty-bound) to respectfully receive synodical pronouncements as bearing the weighty authority of synod, to seriously reconsider their initial position of disagreement in light of the weighty authority of synod, and to recognize that “the well-being of the church is fostered when there is substantial unity with respect to all the decisions of synod” (*Agenda for Synod 1975*, Report 47, p. 602).
- c. A third assertion states: “All office-bearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances” (emphasis added). This assertion further explains how synodical pronouncements are “settled and

binding” in that synodical pronouncements require officebearers and members to **abide by** these pronouncements, i.e. to conform their teaching, preaching, writing, serving and living to these pronouncements.

- d. In conclusion, to declare that synodical pronouncements are “settled and binding” means that officebearers and members are expected 1) to acquiesce to these decisions even when not fully agreeing with them, and 2) to abide by these pronouncements by conforming their teaching, preaching, writing, serving and living to these pronouncements.
4. That synod declare that the nature and extent to which synodical statements of pastoral advice are “binding” on officebearers and members goes well beyond the common characterization of advice as merely “strong recommendation” in the following ways:
 - a. Comprehensive synodical deliverances presented under the umbrella heading of “pastoral advice” frequently include the biblical/confessional basis for the advice given.
 - b. Some synodical pronouncements presented as “pastoral advice” have not have provided “wise suggestions for providing pastoral care” but rather addressed a pastoral concern to avert “the crises and divisive tendencies” arising out of unbiblical teachings that have been circulating. This “pastoral advice” provided strong, authoritative statements of scriptural and confessional teaching out of pastoral concern (Cf. *Agenda for Synod 1972*, Report 44, The Nature and Extent of Scriptural Authority and the “points of pastoral advice” adopted.)
 - c. Pastoral advice that serves the churches with recommendations for providing pastoral care (for example, in cases of marital divorce or regarding appropriate treatment of members who are same-sex attracted) also should not be received merely as “strong recommendations.” Pastoral advice from synod “binds” councils and members to receive the advice presented with weighty respect as supported by the teaching of Scripture and the confessions, and clothed with synodical authority. Therefore, churches and members are to act in conformity to it, or to ask synod to revise its pastoral advice for the Scriptural reasons that they believe compel making this change.

Scott Chandler

Joshua Christoffels

Jason Chung

Jeffrey Cutter

BooHwan Kwak

Kurt Monroe

Herbert Schreur

Ren Tubergen, chair

Joshua Van Engen

Joseph VandenAkker, reporter

Adrian VandenBout

MINORITY