

I. Background

Prefatory note: Much of the first part of this report is a duplication of the report in the *Agenda for Synod 2011*. The committee presents its report this way in order to provide readers with all necessary information about the committee's work without having to consult the previous report.

A. History

In 2003, Fleetwood CRC in Surrey, British Columbia (Classis B.C. South-East), overtured Synod 2004 to study the efficacy of the Form of Subscription (FOS) on the grounds that many churches in that classis no longer used the FOS because many individuals had difficulty signing it. Classis B.C. South-East wrote, "When a tool such as the Form of Subscription becomes ineffective in our culture and time, a study into the reasons and attempts to once again make it effective are justified" (*Agenda for Synod 2004*, p. 435).

Synod 2004 did not accede to the overture but, in response to it, instructed the Board of Trustees (BOT) to inquire regarding the methods by which the churches comply with the provisions of Church Order Article 5 and to refer the results of such inquiry to Synod 2005 for appropriate action.

In late 2004, the general secretary's office sent a survey to the CRC churches concerning the current use of the FOS. The BOT referred the results of the survey to Synod 2005, and, based on its review of the survey data, made several recommendations. In response to the BOT's report and recommendations, Synod 2005 adopted the following recommendations:

That synod adopt the following recommendations with reference to the Form of Subscription (BOT Supplement, section I, H):

1. That a revised edition of the Form of Subscription be presented to Synod 2007 for consideration and possible adoption, with the understanding that the purpose of the revision is to clarify the meaning of the Form of Subscription.
2. That the proposed revision of the Form of Subscription be drafted by a committee appointed by the Board of Trustees.
3. In their work, we encourage the committee to take note of the guidelines as to the meaning of subscription in the Church Order Supplements (2004 edition, p. 26).
4. That the draft of a proposed revision be sent to the churches no later than January 1, 2007. . . .

Grounds:

- a. The survey conducted among the churches indicates that a substantial number of churches believe that an update is desirable.
- b. The present Form of Subscription contains statements that are subject to misinterpretation.
- c. A more contemporary expression of agreement will make the requirements more meaningful.

(*Acts of Synod 2005*, p. 735)

In response to the recommendations adopted by Synod 2005, the BOT appointed a task force with the mandate of clarifying the FOS, articulating the meaning and significance of subscription, and proposing a possible replacement to the FOS. This study committee reported to Synod 2008.

The advisory committee of Synod 2008 responded to the Form of Subscription Revision Committee report (see *Acts of Synod 2008*, pp. 473-78) by commending the work of the study committee in several ways. First, the Form of Subscription Revision Committee understood that the mandated clarification of the FOS required a more thorough restatement rather than a minor update of the language. The proposed Doctrinal Covenant for Officebearers in the CRCNA was the study committee's contribution toward faithfully and thoroughly carrying out its assigned mandate. The Doctrinal Covenant for Officebearers in the CRCNA that the study committee proposed raised critical questions and produced vigorous conversations, not only about the FOS, but also about the role of the confessions in our denomination. The study committee correctly discerned that the foundational issue was not merely the re-writing of a document but the revitalization of confessional conversation within the church.

Second, the FOS Revision Committee observed that one of the issues at stake in clarifying the FOS was the issue of encouraging rather than discouraging significant theological discussion. In its report, the committee wrote that "any regulatory instrument that is adopted by the church ought to be regarded as an invitation to the officebearers of the church to participate in this ongoing reflection rather than a document that precludes or hinders such reflection" (*Agenda for Synod 2008*, p. 247). The advisory committee endorsed this view because it reflects both the will of previous synodical decisions (see *Acts of Synod 1976*, pp. 67-70, 550-91 and *Acts of Synod 2005*, p. 735) and the purpose of the FOS.

Third, the study committee's work highlighted the need to address how the FOS functions within our increasingly diverse church family. An FOS, no matter how well crafted, is useful only if it functions to enhance the faithful ministry of the local church. The FOS, in whatever form, must offer a clear and compelling statement of Reformed Christianity, to which officebearers can readily subscribe, as well as bridge barriers of language and ethnicity. This is an especially relevant concern for our emerging and ethnic minority churches and their leaders.

Despite these strengths of the Form of Subscription Revision Committee's work, the advisory committee noted concerns expressed about the clarity and accuracy of language and the need for broader engagement between the study committee and the churches.

Believing these challenges presented a unique opportunity to educate our denomination regarding the importance and usefulness of the confessions in the life of the church, the advisory committee advised a more comprehensive approach than was originally mandated to the Form of Subscription Revision Committee.

B. Committee composition and mandate

In order to address these concerns and to fulfill the original mandate of Synod 2005, the advisory committee recommended and Synod 2008 adopted the recommendation to recommit the original mandate and the work of the Form of Subscription Revision Committee to a reconfigured study committee. In addition, the new study committee was to present a revised version of the Form of Subscription to Synod 2011 and to communicate annually to synod prior to the study committee's report in 2011.

The new Form of Subscription Revision Committee II (FOSRC II) was given the mandate to continue the work of the original FOS study committee to revise the FOS and to present a revised FOS to synod for possible adoption. In addition, FOSRC II was mandated to engage a broad cross-section of the denomination in a process of discussion regarding the meaning of confessional subscription as well as to develop a process of communication and education regarding the FOS and the Reformed confessions, particularly in emerging and ethnic minority contexts, with the goal of clarifying the meaning of the FOS and increasing adherence to it, and encouraging robust engagement with the Reformed confessions.

II. The committee's work

The Form of Subscription Revision Committee II began its work with a meeting in October 2008. At that meeting the committee wrestled with some foundational issues with respect to its mandate, such as the purpose of a FOS and how the committee's work might best proceed in crafting a document to replace the present FOS. We committed ourselves to a process of engagement: first, with the confessions themselves and with significant questions about what it means to subscribe to them, and, second, to guide a conversation about the confessions and their vital place in the life of the church.

Throughout our meetings, through correspondence and in conversation with many classes, congregations, and individuals who honored synod and the church with their responses, it became clear that revising the FOS would be an extremely delicate undertaking. In that sense the new study committee's experience replicated that of the preceding committee, though with more responses as expected, given the larger number of study committee members and the expanded scope of denominational engagement.

Together the committee examined documents equivalent to the CRC's Form of Subscription from a number of other confessionally Reformed denominations to begin to immerse themselves in the nature and significance of confessional subscription in the Reformed tradition. The committee discovered that the position it found itself in was not entirely unique. Many of the concerns regarding confessional vitality and veracity of subscription were shared by denominations with confessional sensitivities similar to our own. The committee also grappled with what it means to subscribe, both theoretically and practically, to confessions, as well as how and to what degree one is bound to these confessions. The committee honestly engaged and weighed the concerns expressed and tried to discern how we can best live and minister together.

In preparation for Synod 2009, the committee developed a "working document" as a potential revision of the Form of Subscription, a background document that briefly explains the reasoning behind the potential revision, as well as a discussion guide designed to encourage reflection in large and small groups that may gather to discuss matters within the study committee's mandate. While at Synod 2009, members of the committee led a roundtable discussion of the proposed revision and background document over a meal in small groups. In addition, representatives of the study committee reported to advisory committees at both Synods 2009 and 2010 (*Acts of Synod 2009*, pp. 570, 593; and *Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 803-804), and the committee was encouraged to continue in its work, following the direction it was taking.

Leading up to and following Synod 2009, members of the committee met with various groups within the denomination, making presentations to the Black and Reformed Conference, the Multiethnic Conference, and nearly all of the classes within the denomination. From these presentations, the committee received many positive responses as well as suggestions and constructive criticism for improving the proposed revision of the FOS. In order to facilitate positive interactions and widespread engagement across a broad spectrum of congregations within the denomination, the committee has translated the proposed revision into Korean and Spanish for those whose first language is not English. A significant component of Synod 2008's mandate to the study committee was to craft a document in language that is easily transportable across cultural and linguistic barriers and will "function well across the various constituencies within the denomination" (*Acts of Synod 2008*, p. 476). Native Korean and Spanish speakers, including those who have participated in the committee's work, have confirmed that the language of the proposed revision of the Form of Subscription indeed travels well across linguistic and cultural barriers. In addition, we have received numerous responses from individuals and have appreciated the depth of engagement obvious in many of these reflections.

In preparation for Synod 2010, members of the study committee engaged numerous classes in discussions of the committee's work and about the nature of confessional subscription, soliciting responses from the classes. From these encounters, we received several helpful recommended revisions as well as a good deal of positive feedback for the winsome tone of the proposed revision, the explicit inclusion of Scripture and ecumenical creeds, and the simplicity of the language in the document. From these discussions and its own ongoing reflection, the committee then prepared a proposed revision of the FOS and submitted it, along with a brief background report, to the churches through the Office of Synodical Services and requested feedback from the churches.

Although it is impossible and inadvisable in the body of a report to catalogue exhaustively the responses received, we can highlight some major issues recurring in the correspondence and conversations held at various venues. The committee is grateful for each response received, and even more so for the renewed engagement with the confessions that these discussions have prompted in many churches. We wish to assure all those who took the time to engage the committee's work that although we have not adopted every recommendation, each one was received in a spirit of openness and sincerity and was thoughtfully and critically considered.

As is often the case when a committee must present its work apart from the context of shared discussion among the members, the understanding of certain word choices is not immediately clear to the reader. Nevertheless, in discussions at classis meetings and in correspondence with councils and individuals, the committee was often able to reach strong consensus regarding the definition and nuance of much of the language in question.

We often noticed that many of the concerns, appreciations, and even dissonances raised from throughout the denomination were also those expressed by committee members. Thus the committee appears to be broadly representative of the denomination as a whole.

We thank God for the confessions and pray that our denomination's attentiveness to them and to our attempts to engage them faithfully will continue to bear fruit. To that end the committee presented the following Covenant for Officebearers to Synod 2011 as the revised Form of Subscription in fulfillment of the mandate given by Synod 2008.

Covenant for Officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church (2011)

We, [the undersigned], believe the inspired Word of God as received in the Old and New Testaments of Holy Scripture, which proclaims the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ and the reconciliation of all things in him. Acknowledging the authority of God's Word, we submit to it in all matters of life and faith.

We affirm three creeds—the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed—as ecumenical expressions of the Christian faith. In doing so, we confess our faith in unity with followers of Jesus Christ throughout all ages and among all nations.

We also affirm three confessions—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—as historic Reformed expressions of the Christian faith. These confessions continue to define the way we understand Scripture, direct the way we live in response to the gospel, and locate us within the larger body of Christ.

Grateful for these expressions of faith, we promise to be formed and governed by them, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them.

Along with these historic creeds and confessions, we also affirm the witness of *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* as a current Reformed expression of the Christian faith that forms and guides us in our present context.

We also promise to present or receive confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel. Should we at any time come to believe that a teaching in the confessional documents is irreconcilable with God's Word, we will communicate our views to the church, according to the procedures prescribed by the Church Order and its supplements. Further, we promise to submit to the church's judgment and authority.

We honor this covenant for the well-being of the church to the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

At Synod 2011, following a unanimous endorsement by the advisory committee, concerns regarding some of the language of the Covenant for Officebearers rose from the floor, expressed by both advisers and delegates to synod. In response, synod voted to

continue the work of the Form of Subscription Revision Committee II for one more year so that it can consult with representatives of Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary and propose a revised version of the "Covenant for Officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church" to Synod 2012, addressing the following concerns:

1. The need for positive, declarative commitments to teach, defend, and actively promote the confessions and Reformed doctrine of the CRCNA.
2. The need to strengthen the scope and binding nature of the commitment.
3. The need to include a provision for accountability for those who sign this covenant, requiring them to answer requests for explanation of their views.
4. The need to reword the description of the gospel in a way that avoids the impression of universalism.

5. The need for a provision that those who sign this covenant will communicate their views to the church if they believe that a doctrine is not the teaching of God's Word (instead of saying that a teaching is irreconcilable with God's Word).

(Acts of Synod 2011, p. 871)

With this expansion and further articulation of its mandate given by Synod 2011, the committee met again in September 2011. In keeping with synod's recommendations, additional representatives of Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary were present to further address concerns and to engage in dialogue with the study committee. At this meeting the study committee addressed the above mandate and revised the Covenant for Officebearers. To that end the committee offers the following revision in faithfulness to our mandate and the directives of Synod 2011:

Covenant for Officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church (2012)

We, [the undersigned], believe the inspired Word of God as received in the Old and New Testaments of Holy Scripture, which proclaims the good news of God's creation and redemption through Jesus Christ. Acknowledging the authority of God's Word, we submit to it in all matters of life and faith.

We affirm three creeds—the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed—as ecumenical expressions of the Christian faith. In doing so, we confess our faith in unity with followers of Jesus Christ throughout all ages and among all nations.

We also affirm three confessions—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—as historic Reformed expressions of the Christian faith. These confessions continue to define the way we understand Scripture, direct the way we live in response to the gospel, and locate us within the larger body of Christ.

Grateful for these expressions of faith, we promise to be formed and governed by them. We heartily believe and will promote their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them.

Along with these historic creeds and confessions, we also affirm the witness of *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* as a current Reformed expression of the Christian faith that forms and guides us in our present context.

We also promise to present or receive confessional difficulties in a spirit of love and fellowship with our brothers and sisters as together we seek a fuller understanding of the gospel. Should we come to believe that a teaching in the confessional documents is irreconcilable with God's Word, we will communicate our views to the church, according to the procedures prescribed by the Church Order and its supplements. Further, we promise to submit to the church's judgment and authority.

We honor this covenant for the well-being of the church to the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We are honored by the confidence and trust granted to us by synod, and we are heartened by the continuing vitality of confessional conversations within our denomination. The study committee considered the recommendations of synod and made a number of changes to the Covenant for Officebearers. Paragraph 4 has been revised to address the “need for positive declarative commitments to teach, defend, and actively promote the confessions and Reformed doctrine of the CRCNA” (*Acts of Synod 2011*, p. 871). In addition, the reworded language of paragraph 4, along with paragraphs 1 and 6, “strengthen the scope and the binding nature of commitment” (*Acts of Synod 2011*, p. 871). Finally, the description of the gospel in paragraph 1 has been reworded in such a way that it “avoids the impression of universalism” (*Acts of Synod 2011*, p. 871).

The committee also considered the request of synod to “include a provision for accountability for those who sign this covenant, requiring them to answer requests for explanation of their views,” as well as “a provision that those who sign this covenant will communicate their views to the church if they believe that a doctrine is not the teaching of God’s Word (instead of saying that a teaching is irreconcilable with God’s Word)” (*Acts of Synod 2011*, p. 871).

After lengthy consideration and discussion of synod’s requests, the study committee concluded that such provisions are adequately articulated in paragraph 6 of the Covenant for Officebearers (both the 2011 and 2012 drafts). Further, the Covenant for Officebearers clearly directs the signatory to the appropriate articles of the Church Order and its supplements, which specify the procedures for requesting explanation of a signatory’s views and for appropriately communicating confessional questions to the various ecclesiastical assemblies (consistory, classis, and synod). A document such as the Covenant for Officebearers, by its nature, is not designed to nor can it articulate such details to the degree of specificity seemingly requested by Synod 2011. Such detailed points are best dealt with on the occasion when they arise through the channels articulated in Church Order and according to the processes for the disposition of such matters as articulated in Church Order.

III. Clarifications

Through the years of its activity and by way of its discussions and engagement with various groups, the committee has been able to clarify its mandate in significant ways. The committee realized that the task before it was enormously demanding and complicated. Further, the committee also recognized that the FOS or any proposed revision of it was not the real issue. Rather, the deeper issue was that we begin what we hope will become an ongoing process of discussion and reflection on the confessions, the nature of confessional subscription, and the renewal of confessional vitality.

As the committee carried out its work, it reached agreement that the purpose of any revision should be unity with a secondary concern for purity. Though the concern for unity was primary, it was not to be achieved at the expense of purity. The committee also agreed that the FOS revision should be written in clear, compelling language that is easily transportable across cultural and linguistic barriers. We are grateful for the confirmation we have received that the Covenant for Officebearers indeed meets such a standard. The committee was concerned to write a document in language that “sings”

rather than “plods along.” Any document that calls people to covenant together should be stated in simple yet profound language so that it might be widely understood and embraced. The committee further desired that the tone of the language be understood as encouraging open, honest, respectful dialogue over questions that arise. Besides using language easily transportable across cultural and linguistic barriers, the committee also aimed to use language meaningful to those who did not grow up in the Reformed tradition (or in any Christian tradition) and who may not be familiar with our particular theological dialect or accent.

There are a number of significant matters to highlight with regard to the proposed revision of the FOS. First, the committee chose to use the word *covenant* within the title (Covenant for Officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church) because of the obvious biblical and theological weight the word *covenant* carries.

The language of *covenant* is communal rather than individualistic. Further, it suggests that the document is not just an affirmation of one’s personal beliefs but an agreement on how we are called to live together as sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ. Such language also implies a reciprocal understanding of obligations. There is a commitment on the part of an individual to the broader community, but also from the church to the individual, to approach questions in a spirit of mutual love and commitment. The language of *covenant* conveys a promise to work through disagreements and to openly and honestly deal with questions that arise, rather than to have the first reaction be to stifle dissent. The committee was concerned to propose a document that encourages discussion and an ongoing process of deeper understanding and discernment, as well as more faithful living. *Covenant* suggests promise-making and a binding together of parties. A covenant is binding and therefore not to be taken lightly. The language in both the 2011 and 2012 drafts holds signatories tightly to the doctrines of the creeds and confessions while also providing strong community tools to keep thoughts, conversations, publications, and teaching within mutually agreeable boundaries. Covenantal language implies a concern with the ethical as well as the doctrinal. It suggests depth as well as periodic renewal. Covenantal language draws us into the work of God in the world. *Covenant* is a liturgical and even missional concept.

In summary, the committee has taken a significant step away from the mere signing of a fixed document—as some have claimed that signing the current Form of Subscription has become. Instead, signatories promise to engage in committed, candid, and loving conversation as a community about the doctrines we hold dear and their confessional articulations.

Most who responded were pleased with the new suggested name “Covenant for Officebearers” for the document the committee was mandated to present. The deep resonance of covenantal language, thought, and action, both with the Bible and with the Reformed tradition, appealed to many respondents. Included in *covenant*, of course, is not only first responsibility to God for initiating covenants, but also the communal responsibility incumbent on individuals and institutions to hold each other accountable to commitments and doctrines.

Second, the committee wanted to make clear the logical flow of authority in the document from Scripture to creeds to confessions and finally to *Our*

World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony. The committee agreed that the FOS revision should be precise in identifying the relationship of Scripture, creeds, confessions, and other documents which many affirm as useful contemporary expressions of Reformed Christianity, but have not been granted confessional status (i.e., *Our World Belongs to God*).

The committee chose to explicitly include the ecumenical creeds in recognition of the changed cultural context in which the church finds itself in the 21st century. We increasingly realize that we are part of a broader body of Christ and are working toward greater unity with our brothers and sisters in various places and that our common creedal heritage connects us to a deep historical reality that gives strength and breadth to our witness of Jesus Christ in the world.

The Covenant for Officebearers intentionally places the creeds and confessions in their respective positions in order to acknowledge their primacy and to distinguish them from *Our World Belongs to God*.

We struggled to define the status of *Our World Belongs to God* because while it has a comparatively short history within the denomination, it enjoys a certain level of official recognition as well as widespread acceptance and much contemporary relevance. Further, the committee wondered about the continuing veracity of the reasoning that has thus far prevented *Our World Belongs to God* from becoming a fully recognized confessional statement of the church.

Questions about the status of *Our World Belongs to God* may be particularly pertinent at this time in light of Synod 2009's commendation of the Belhar Confession to the churches for reflection and study at the same time that the Form of Subscription is being revised.

The committee has concluded that *Our World Belongs to God* has the potential to revitalize confessional identity and engagement within the Christian Reformed Church. Thus, we strongly urge synod to consider what implications the adoption of *Our World Belongs to God* as a confession might have toward helping the Christian Reformed Church to be and to remain a confessional denomination.

The committee received many responses—both critical and affirmative—commenting on our decision to mention and include *Our World Belongs to God* within a document that addresses subscription to official creedal and confessional documents recognized as such within our communion. Our own committee engaged in energized, committed discussions regarding this very point. In the end we were unanimous that in order to honor the continuing liveliness of confessional discussion, it was not only fitting, but necessary, to include *Our World Belongs to God*.

Some respondents argued that *Our World Belongs to God* should not be included at all in a revised FOS, for various reasons. Some consider it to be not of the same character, depth, or weight as the doctrinal standards. Others believe that as a *contemporary testimony* it is by nature malleable and open to regular review and revision (as occurred as recently as 2008). To include it, thus, would be to bind signatories to a document that can change again and again.

In this regard, our committee reiterates that *Our World Belongs to God* finds an appropriate place in the Covenant for Officebearers simply because it speaks with confessional language while not being acknowledged as a con-

fessional standard. It is a fitting contribution to our denomination's conviction to be a Reformed church that is always reforming.

Third, the committee wishes to highlight some of its deliberations regarding the nature of the language of conformity in the proposed revision. Within the document itself, the strength of the word *irreconcilable* in paragraph 6 is significant (see the proposed 2012 Covenant for Officebearers). It implies previous, long-term discussion about a matter in dispute. Its application is also limited to the doctrine under dispute. The supplement to Church Order Article 5 already grants that one does not subscribe to the particular formulation of a doctrine as that formulation is expressed in the confessions, but only to the doctrine itself. We do not envision frequent cases of this nature but wish to provide the means necessary to communicate such difficulties in the event they could arise and to articulate that there remain clear doctrinal boundaries with regard to confessional commitment.

Throughout history the Form of Subscription has been perceived as unduly intimidating for individuals who presented gravamina. The committee and many respondents considered that *covenant* both encouraged discussion and respected the honest confessional questions raised by those who might otherwise have been discouraged by the thought of facing a council, classis, or synod in a long process. Mutually entering into a *covenant* promises respect and also subscribing to the document, whereas merely signing a *form* of subscription appears to be affixing a signature to a static document and leaving little recourse for discussion.

As the committee wrestled with the challenge of holding officebearers accountable to abide by the doctrines articulated in the confessions, it desired to affirm the necessity of such boundaries but also wished to balance that necessity with the freedom to engage in candid discussion of matters in question. Some respondents held that the draft covenant did not hold officebearers to sufficiently defined boundaries. With the recommendations of Synod 2011 in mind, the committee revised the Covenant for Officebearers to strengthen perceived weaknesses with regard to strength of confessional commitment and the degree of accountability expected of signatories.

The language of submitting to Scripture in paragraph 1 and of conforming to the confessions in paragraph 4 of the Covenant for Officebearers by definition includes not contradicting the doctrines contained in the confessions. Further, paragraph 6 commits the signatory to submit to the church's judgment and authority in such matters. Some respondents wished to have procedures for accountability clearly articulated in the Covenant for Officebearers. The committee weighed these concerns and seriously considered the requests, but ultimately concluded that procedures for the discipline of an officebearer based on deviation from sound doctrine are provided for by Church Order Article 83, to which all officebearers agree to submit. Thus to include these in an explicit way in the proposed revision to the FOS would be redundant.

Regarding the matter of whether current officebearers would be obligated to sign the new Covenant for Officebearers, the committee looks forward to the day when, in keeping with the biblical character of *covenant*, officebearers eagerly recommit themselves by signing the Covenant for Officebearers.

IV. Recommendations

A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Rev. James C. Dekker, chair; Rev. Michael Borgert, reporter; and Rev. Mark A. Davies, committee member, when the report of the Form of Subscription Revision Committee II is discussed.

B. That synod adopt the revised Covenant for Officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church and commend it to the churches as a means to encourage ongoing, vital engagement of officebearers with the ecumenical creeds and Reformed confessions.

C. That synod adopt the recommended changes to Church Order Articles 5 and 83 and Church Order Supplement, Article 5 to reflect the adoption of the Covenant for Officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church (see Appendix).

D. That synod set aside time during a plenary session prior to the address of the report recommendations for representatives of the study committee to make a presentation to the delegates.

E. That synod dismiss the committee.

Form of Subscription Revision Committee II (2012)

Michael Borgert, reporter

Mark A. Davies

James C. Dekker, chair

Eduardo A. Gonzalez

Sheila Holmes

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

Kristen Van Engen

John Van Schepen

Wilma Vander Leek

Uko Zylstra

Appendix

Proposed Changes to the Church Order and Its Supplements

Article 5

All officebearers, on occasions stipulated by council, classical, and synodical regulations, shall signify their agreement with the doctrine of the church by signing the ~~Form of Subscription~~ Covenant for Officebearers.

—Cf. Supplement, Article 5

Supplement, Article 5

Form of Subscription* (document to be replaced by text of the Covenant for Officebearers)

We, the undersigned,
servants of the divine Word
in the _____ Christian Reformed Church
in Classis _____,
by means of our signatures
declare truthfully and in good conscience before the Lord
that we sincerely believe
that all the articles and points of doctrine
set forth in the Belgic Confession,
the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort
fully agree with the Word of God.

We promise therefore to teach these doctrines diligently,
to defend them faithfully, and not to contradict them, publicly or
privately,
directly or indirectly, in our preaching, teaching, or writing.

We pledge moreover not only to reject all errors that conflict with
these doctrines but also to refute them, and to do everything we
can to keep the church free from them.

We promise further that if in the future we come to have any
difficulty with these doctrines or reach views differing from
them, we will not propose, defend, preach, or teach such views,
either publicly or privately, until we have first disclosed them to
the council, classis, or synod for examination.

We are prepared moreover to submit to the judgment of the council,
classis, or synod, realizing that the consequence of refusal to do
so is suspension from office.

We promise in addition that if, to maintain unity and purity in
doctrine, the council, classis, or synod considers it proper at
any time—on sufficient grounds of concern—to require a fuller
explanation of our views concerning any article in the three
confessions mentioned above, we are always willing and ready
to comply with such a request, realizing here also that the
consequence of refusal to do so is suspension from office. Should
we consider ourselves wronged, however, by the judgment of the
council or classis, we reserve for ourselves the right of appeal;
but until a decision is made on such an appeal, we will acquiesce
in the determination and judgment already made.

*To be signed by professors, ministers, ministry associates, elders, and
deacons when ordained and/or installed in office.

(Acts of Synod 1988, pp. 530-31)

Guidelines and Regulations re Gravamina

Synod declares that gravamina fall into at least two basic types:

1. A *confessional-difficulty gravamen*: a gravamen in which a subscriber expresses personal difficulty with the confession but does not call for a revision of the confessions, and
2. A *confessional-revision gravamen*: a gravamen in which a subscriber makes a specific recommendation for revision of the confessions.

A. Guidelines as to the meaning of subscription to affirming the confessions by means of the Form of Subscription Covenant for Officebearers:

1. The person signing the Form of Subscription Covenant for Officebearers subscribes affirms without reservation to all the doctrines contained in the standards of the church, as being doctrines that are taught in the Word of God.
2. The subscriber signatory does not by subscription affirming to the confessions declare that these doctrines are all stated in the best possible manner, or that the standards of our church cover all that the Scriptures teach on the matters confessed. Nor does the subscriber signatory declare that every teaching of the Scriptures is set forth in our confessions, or that every heresy is rejected and refuted by them.
3. A subscriber signatory is only bound by subscription to those doctrines that are confessed, and is not bound to the references, allusions, and remarks that are incidental to the formulation of these doctrines, nor to the theological deductions that some may draw from the doctrines set forth in the confessions. However, no one is free to decide for one's self oneself or for the church what is and what is not a doctrine confessed in the standards. In the event that such a question should arise, the decision of the assemblies of the church shall be sought and acquiesced in.

B. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-difficulty gravamen:

1. Ministers (whether missionaries, professors, or others not serving congregations as pastors), elders, or deacons shall submit their "difficulties and different sentiments" to their councils for examination and judgment. Should a council decide that it is not able to judge the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. If the classis, after examination, judges that it is unable to decide the matter, it may submit it to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b.
2. In all instances of confessional-difficulty gravamina, the matter shall not be open for discussion by the whole church since this type of gravamen is a personal request for information and/or clarification of the confession. Hence this type of gravamen should be dealt with pastorally and personally by the assembly addressed.

C. Regulations concerning the procedure to be followed in the submission of a confessional-revision gravamen:

1. The basic assumption of the church in requiring ~~subscription to affirmation~~ of the Form of Subscription Covenant for Officebearers is that ~~“all the articles and points of doctrine”~~ the doctrines contained in the confessions of the church ~~“do fully agree with the Word of God.”~~ are faithful reflections of the Word of God. The burden of proof, therefore, rests upon the subscriber who calls upon the church to justify or revise ~~her~~ its confessions.
2. Ministers (including missionaries, professors, or all others not serving congregations as pastors), elders, or deacons shall submit their gravamina calling for revision of the confessions to their councils for examination and judgment. Should the council decide that it is not able to judge the gravamen submitted to it, it shall submit the matter to classis for examination and judgment. If the classis, after examination, judges that it is unable to decide the matter, classis may submit it to synod, in accordance with the principles of Church Order Article 28-b.
3. If the gravamen is adopted by the council and the classis as its own, it becomes an overture to the broader assemblies and therefore it is open for discussion in the whole church.
4. If the gravamen is rejected by the classis, it may be appealed to synod; and when the constituted synod declares the matter to be legally before it for action, all the signers of the Form of Subscription Covenant for Officebearers shall be free to discuss it together with the whole church until adjudicated by synod.
5. Since the subscriber has the right of appeal from the judgment of a council to classis and from classis to synod, the mere fact that the matter is being appealed shall not be a reason for suspending or otherwise disciplining an officebearer, provided other provisions of ~~the Form of Subscription~~ and the Church Order are observed.
6. A revision of the confessions shall not be adopted by synod until the whole church membership has had adequate opportunity to consider it.

Grounds:

- a. The history of the functioning of the Form of Subscription shows that if such guidelines and regulations had been available and followed, considerable delay and confusion might have been avoided.
- b. These guidelines and regulations will make the signing of the Form of Subscription more meaningful and will remove some common misunderstandings that now exist on the part of many officebearers.
- c. These guidelines and regulations will prove helpful to council, classis, and synod in dealing with matters submitted to them for examination in accordance with the Form of Subscription.

(Acts of Synod 1976, pp. 68-70)

Article 83

Special discipline shall be applied to officebearers if they violate the ~~Form of Subscription Covenant for Officebearers~~, are guilty of neglect or abuse of office, or in any way seriously deviate from sound doctrine and godly conduct.