

## **Report of the Committee to Update Forms and Confessions**

### **Mandate**

In response to our report to Synod 2005 the synod made the following decisions:

1. *To approve the revision of the forms presented by the committee for provisional use*
2. *To appoint a committee to update the range of Liturgical Forms available for use in worship services. Synod defeated a motion asking, "That in the interim Synod give approval for the use of the Liturgical Forms in use by the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia."*
3. *To reappoint the committee and charge it to continue its study of the Canadian Reformed Churches translations of the Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort, interacting with the churches and the Canadian Reformed Churches and bring final recommendations to the next Synod.*
4. *That our churches continue to use our current edition of the Westminster Confession of Faith.*
5. *That committee continue to search out and to evaluate updated versions of the WCF in consultation with our sister churches.*

The following members were appointed to this committee: Rev J Haverland (convenor), Rev P Archbald, Rev P Kloosterman, Dr S Davey. Our committee corresponded via email through the inter-synodical period and the three ministers met three times. Dr Sally Davey gave input to these meetings via email.

### **Liturgical Forms**

In May 2006 we wrote to all the sessions asking them to note any corrections or further suggestions for improving the provisional forms and to pass these on to us. We received comments from some of the sessions, considered them, and have recorded the ones we accepted.

We also asked the sessions to bring to our attention any other forms they wanted us to consider, and are searching ourselves for those used by our English-speaking sister churches and other Reformed and Presbyterian denominations. This is a large task and is taking some time.

*CRCA Forms:* Our committee made a careful study of the forms of the CRCA. We considered each form but have decided not to recommend any of them for use in our churches. The minutes of our meetings detail the reasons for each one, but in summary our reasons are as follows.

- A number of those forms are very close to what we have and we saw no merit in changing what we have for something very similar.
- Some were longer, but unnecessarily so, and in some cases, less precise.
- Others were shorter but, we believe, too brief with too little content.
- A number were responsive in structure and our committee did not favour this format. Most churches only use one responsive type of reading (Q & A 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism), and recite in unison the Apostle's and Nicene Creeds, and the Lord's Prayer. Responsive forms would be a change for us as a denomination and the synod gave us no direction in this matter. We are not opposed in principle to such forms but we are cautious about adopting them. It is our view that responsive forms are sometimes motivated by a misplaced desire for more congregational participation, that they can be distracting for the participant, and they can easily become a matter of rote.

*Prayers in the forms:* 14 ministers responded to a question asking if they wanted to see the prayers in the forms retained. Ten said yes, two said no, two were indifferent. Given this response we decided to retain the prayers, also bearing in mind some of the reasons cited:

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- The prayers are given for use by the pastor and/or for guidance for the content of prayer.
- Helpful biblical imagery and teaching are included in these prayers.
- Not all of us are good at making up prayers on the spot.
- The prayers are carefully crafted as a response to the form and dovetail with them.

*Marriages and funerals.* The 1967 Psalter Hymnal contains a Form for Marriage but no form for a funeral service. Our Church Order Art. 65 requires that “Christian marriages should be solemnised with the approved forms”. We wondered if this is a valid requirement as marriages are not part of a public worship service. We also questioned if a RCNZ synod has approved a particular form for marriage and have put this question to the Church Order Committee. We would recommend that our committee provide sample forms for marriages and funerals as guidance for pastors.

*Statements on discipline:* We saw no need to include statements on discipline in our forms beyond the Form for Excommunication. Disciplinary statements regarding baptised members are left to each individual session. In the case of the resignation of a communicant member, the RCNZ synod has already agreed on statements as guidelines for the sessions; these leave room for rewording in each particular case.

*A form for the reception of members from other churches* was presented to our committee but we believe that Art 62 of our Church Order allows sufficient flexibility for sessions and that there is no need for such a form.

*Brief Lord’s Supper forms* were presented to our committee but we considered that these are too light and brief to be suitable. They omitted any Scripture references. Form 3 in our book of Forms and Confessions is a brief form and our committee believes we should not reduce the content below this. We will recommend another form for the Lord’s Supper for those congregations who celebrate the Supper frequently (see below).

### Changes proposed by our committee

**Baptism Form 1:** Some have read the language of this form as favouring baptismal regeneration and the presumed regeneration of covenant children. We discussed adding in words at the end of this form to warn against these errors but were undecided about this. We decided to raise this in our report and seek feedback from the churches on this matter.

**Baptism Form 2:** Some have raised questions about the question to the congregation, objecting that it is too far-reaching and obligates members to make a vow they might not be able to keep. We decided to propose to alter the question to read: Do you, *the members of this church, as the Lord gives you opportunity*, promise to receive this child in love....(Addition in italics)

**Baptism Form 3:** We recommend the addition of the Scripture reference – Gen 17:7 – after the Scripture quote.

**Profession of Faith Form 1:** We recommend a change to Question 1 to make this question similar to the second question in Form 2 for profession of Faith in order to remove the ambiguity in the phrase “the articles of the Christian faith”. Some have interpreted this phrase to refer only to the articles of the Apostles Creed whereas Form 2 calls for agreement with the confessions of the church. Proposed change: “Do you heartily believe the doctrine *of the Word of God summarized in the confessions* and taught here in this Christian church to be the true and complete doctrine of salvation, and do you promise by the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this profession?”

**Form for Excommunication:** We propose that the following paragraph be deleted: “Further we exhort you, beloved Christians, to keep no company with him/her, so that he/she may be ashamed; yet count him/her not as an enemy, but at times admonish him/her as you would a brother.” Ground: This paragraph is based on passages of Scripture about which there are varying interpretations.

*As we have not completed our work on the forms we are only signaling these proposed changes and inviting written responses to our committee from the churches.*

## **Forms from Other denominations**

**Orthodox Presbyterian Church:** We found nothing to add to what we already have although we are aware that this denomination is doing work in the area of liturgy and we will keep an eye on what comes up.

**Christian Reformed Church of North America:** We did not consider these forms.

**Reformed Church of the US:** Their forms provide alternative readings from the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism that might be worth considering. We will take a closer look at these. They also have forms for marriage and for a funeral that could be included as guidance for ministers in our churches and we will consider these.

**Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia:** We have yet to look at their forms.

**United Reformed Churches:** This denomination appointed a committee to revise their forms and confessions. The initial committee consisted of Dr. M Horton, Rev P Ipema, Rev R Stevens, Dr R Godfrey, Dr. K Riddlebarger. They began their work in September 2004. Their first task was to revise the “Christian Prayers” section in the 1976 Psalter Hymnal and then to begin a revision of the liturgical forms in that same book. They have completed the prayers, and a Form for Lord’s Supper for those congregations who celebrate the Supper frequently. We recommend this Lord’s Supper Form be adopted for use in our denomination.

We propose that we delay a final decision on the revision of our forms until our committee has had opportunity to consider the work of this URC committee. The grounds for this proposal are as follows: this denomination is larger than ours; we are moving towards a sister church relationship with them; their committee has very able members and is likely to produce good work we could take advantage of.

As our work is ongoing we have not yet incorporated all the changes our committee has agreed on following feedback from the churches, nor have we included a final revision of the forms in this report.

## **Confessions**

### **The Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort**

In May 2006 we wrote to all the sessions asking them to forward to us their comments regarding the proposed translations of the Belgic confession and the Canons of Dort. A few sessions responded and we evaluated their responses and forwarded some proposed changes to the appropriate committee in the Canadian Reformed Churches. They responded by noting that our proposed changes were based on the ‘original’ version of these confessions. Their committee is in the process of revising those documents to render all the Scripture quotations from the NIV. This may well address most of the changes we proposed. They hoped to conclude their work early in 2008. At the time of writing our report we were unable to make any further recommendations on these confessions as we had not seen their final revision. Our committee will recommend that we evaluate this revision of their forms that renders all the Scripture quotations from the NIV with a view to adopting this at our next synod (2011). (We recognize this may depend on what the Committee on Bible translations comes up with in their report to Synod 2008.)

### **Westminster Confession of Faith**

We have begun an examination of a Modern English Study Version (MESV) of the WCF approved by the OPC in their sixtieth General Assembly in 1993. Our study is not finished but present indications are positive.

The MESV had its roots in an initiative by the 1971 synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America which proposed that the language of the confession be modernized without changing its meaning. A joint committee of the RPCNA, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical

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Synod, and the OPC worked on this project for several years, completing a version of the confession in 1980.

In 1989 the Committee on Christian Education of the OPC sent copies of this version to all ministers and sessions of their denomination for study and comments. In the light of comments received this version was carefully reviewed and revised. In 1991 this revision was sent to the ministers and sessions of the OPC, and in response to their suggestions the version was further refined. This work was completed in 1993, approved by the Committee on Christian Education, and authorized for publication by the OPC General Assembly.

The MESV does not have any constitutional authority in the OPC and it not intended to take the place of the 1647 WCF in its form adopted by the OPC in 1956.

The WCF and the MESV are available in parallel columns from the OPC website – [www.opc.org](http://www.opc.org) (look under “Standards”). We recommend that our synod approve the use of the MESV for study and evaluation until the next synod.

We regret that we have not been able to present completed forms and confessions to this synod for approval. As mentioned earlier it is a large task and one we want to do carefully. We are also waiting on work being done by the Canadian Reformed Churches and the United Reformed Churches.

## **Recommendations**

- 1. That synod receive this report.*
- 2. That synod approve the URC Form for Lord’s Supper for those congregations who celebrate the Supper frequently.*
- 3. That this committee be re-appointed to continue its work of updating the range of liturgical forms available for use in worship services, paying particular attention to the work being done by the URC.*
- 4. That this committee provide sample forms for marriages and funerals as guidance for pastors.*
- 5. That this committee continue its study of the Canadian Reformed Churches translations of the Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort, interacting with that denomination, and bring recommendations to the next Synod.*
- 6. That synod approve the Modern English Study Version (MESV) of the WCF for study and use in our churches until the next synod.*

## **Appendix 1**

### **Form for the Frequent Celebration of the Lord's Supper**

#### **The Preparation**

To all of you who have confessed your sins and affirmed your faith in Christ, the promise of Jesus is sure: "Whoever eats my body and drinks my blood has eternal life and will not come into condemnation." For on the night in which our Lord was betrayed, he took bread; and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "Take eat; this is my body, which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of me."

After the same manner also he took the cup, saying, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." While remaining bread and wine, these sacred elements nevertheless become so united to the reality they signify that we do not doubt but joyfully believe that we receive in this meal nothing less than the crucified body and shed blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For all who live in rebellion against God and unbelief, this holy food and drink will bring you only further condemnation. If you do not yet confess Jesus Christ and seek to live under his gracious reign, we ask you to abstain. But all who repent and believe are invited to this sacred meal not because you are worthy in yourself, but because you are clothed in Christ's perfect righteousness.

Do not allow the weakness of your faith or your failures in the Christian life to keep you from this table. For it is given to us because of our weakness and because of our failures, in order to increase our faith by feeding us with the body and blood of Jesus Christ. As the Word has promised us God's favor, so also our Heavenly Father has added this confirmation of his unchangeable promise. So come, believing sinners, for the table is ready. "Taste and see that the Lord is good."

#### **The Consecration**

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who by the blood of your only begotten Son has secured for us a new and living way into the Holy of Holies, cleanse our minds and hearts by your Word and Spirit that we, your redeemed people, drawing close to you through this holy sacrament, may enjoy fellowship with the Holy Trinity through the body and blood of Christ our Savior. We know that our Ascended Savior does not live in temples made by hands, but is in heaven where he continues to intercede on our behalf. Through this sacrament, by Your own Word and Spirit, may these common elements be now set apart from ordinary use and through them may we be nourished with the body and blood of Christ.

#### **Apostles Creed (optional)**

##### **Sursum Corda**

Let us now go to our Heavenly Table and receive the gift of God for our souls. By the promise of God this bread and wine are for us the body and blood of Christ.

Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord.

**Communion:** (The elements are distributed, and the minister may use the formula)

The bread which we break is a communion of the body of Christ. Take, eat, remember, and believe that the body of our Lord Jesus Christ was broken for a complete remission of all our sins.

The cup of blessing which we bless is a communion of the blood of Christ. Take, drink all of it, remember, and believe that the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ was shed for a complete remission of all our sins.

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**Thanksgiving Prayer**

Our Gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for the blessing of this holy feast. Although we are unworthy to share this meal with you, it is by your invitation and dressed in Christ's righteousness that we have come boldly into the Holy of Holies. Instead of wrath, we have received your pardon; in the place of fear we have been given hope. Our High Priest and Mediator of the New Covenant has reconciled us to you and even now intercedes for us at your right hand. Please strengthen us by these gifts so that, relying only on your promise to save sinners who call on Jesus' name, we may, by your Spirit, honor you with our souls and bodies, to the honor and glory of your holy name. Amen.