

URCNA-OPC

Study Committee Report Referred to the churches by Synod Escondido of the United Reformed Churches in North America 2001

Esteemed brothers,

With gratitude to God we present to Synod Escondido 2001 this study of documents that form the official ecclesiastical identity of the United Reformed Churches in North America and of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Our study was conducted under the mandate issued by Synod St. Catharines 1997, namely,

That synod appoint a committee to study the Confessional Standards, Form of Government, Book of Discipline, and Directory of Worship of the OPC with regard to the similarities and differences between them and the Confessional Standards and Church Order of the URCNA in order to work toward ecclesiastical unity with the OPC. . . (*Minutes of Synod 1997*, pp. 10-11).

Our report contains, then, three sections. Section I (pages 55-62) analyzes the confessional standards, and Section II (pages 62-77) compares the polities. Section III (page 77) presents recommendations for your consideration.

The confessional standards and polities of both the URCNA and the OPC are comprehensive statements of the church's Reformed faith and practice. Because the churches belonging to both of these communions are the blessed heirs of the doctrine and life recovered at the Reformation, their respective standards and polities overlap extensively. At the outset of our study, we acknowledge the full commitment to the Scriptures on the part of both groups of churches, a commitment expressed in their confessions and polities.

Unfortunately, due to limitations of space our report cannot reflect this pervasive agreement. We assume that our readers have a general acquaintance with the Westminster Standards, so that we need not rehearse in detail this agreement in confessional commitment and ecclesiastical practice. Consequently the structure and content of our report may give some readers the mistaken impression—an impression we wish fervently to avoid—that the perceived difficulties or incompatibilities between confessional standards and polities are so severe and so intractable that any ecumenical conversation is doomed from the start to be fruitless. Such an impression is wrong. We in the URCNA have so much in common with our full brothers and sisters in the OPC!

In earlier decades and in various parts of the world, others have traveled the path we are walking. This report makes grateful use of their studies and conversations, their experience and testimony. One of these studies is the 1963 CRC synod report of the Committee on Closer Relationships with the OPC. Furthermore, a draft of this report was submitted to a number of individuals within both the URCNA and the OPC whose experience or training enabled them to provide helpful advice.

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Finally, we should mention that Mr. Dave Perron, who was appointed to serve with us on this committee, is not a member of a church in our federation, and therefore did not serve on this committee.

SECTION I. A COMPARISON OF THE CONFESSIONAL STANDARDS

1. MATERIALS

The creeds used for this study are the following:

BC *The Belgic Confession* (also called *Confession of Faith*) as printed in the *Psalter Hymnal*, 1976 edition

CD *The Canons of Dort* as printed in the *Psalter Hymnal*, 1976 edition

HC *The Heidelberg Catechism* as printed in the *Psalter Hymnal*, 1976 edition

WCF *The Westminster Confession of Faith* as published by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

WLC *The Larger Catechism* as published by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

WSC *The Shorter Catechism* as published by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

2. PERCEIVED DIFFICULTIES IN THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS

2.1 COVENANT OF WORKS (*WCF* 7.2 and 19.1 / *WLC* 30 and 97)

The difficulty: The *WCF* speaks in these articles about a “covenant of works” which God made with Adam. Some argue that it is unwise to include in a Confession language and terminology that are more philosophical/theological than scriptural.

The resolution: First, it must be acknowledged that the phrase “covenant of works” could be abused; but at the same time it must be argued that historically the phrase has not been abused.

Second, as regards terminology, everyone recognizes that the word “covenant” is not used of the relationship between God and Adam in the narrative of Genesis 1-3 or elsewhere, unless Hosea 6:7 is an exception.

Third, assuming nevertheless that the relationship between God and Adam is covenantal, some variety in preferred phraseology exists. The favored initial phrase from about 1580 seems to have been “covenant of *nature*,” while the 1615 *Irish Articles* expresses an embryonic federalism in its phrase “covenant of *the law*” (Art. 21). The *WCF* uses “covenant of *works*,” while both the *WLC* (Q./A. 20) and the *WSC* (Q./A. 12) speak of a “covenant of *life*.” More recent writers suggest “covenant of *creation*.” The real question is not the precise words, but whether the ideas behind them are biblical.

The Genesis narrative certainly shows the elements of a covenant even if the word is not used, for it describes a sovereign disposition by God involving promises, requiring response, and threatening a penalty. However, while some statements (e.g., the *Irish Articles*) give the distinct impression that the covenant was to be kept by man’s own strength so that he might merit eternal life, the *WCF* (7.1) is very careful in the balance of its statement. The *WCF* emphasizes that there was divine kindness, in the sense of condescension, in the making of the covenant, and also implies that the reward of obedience would not be of debt but of God’s free favor. Man was never in a merely legal relationship with his Maker, a position where God owed him something. The relationship was covenantal—one of personal communion in righteousness. In this connection, note the compound name which speaks of creative power with that which is

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the personal name of God. Further, Adam's original righteousness was God's gift and he was dependent upon God that he might fulfill the covenant demands. If he had stood the test, Adam could not have praised himself but only glorified God.

In summary, the Westminster Standards themselves provide every safeguard against the unwarranted fear that the phrase "covenant of works" could be misinterpreted to mean a covenant of meritorious works.

2.2 **REGENERATED INFANTS** (*WCF* 10.3)

The difficulty: The *WCF* reads: "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word."

Two difficulties have arisen. First, some would argue that while this statement is scriptural, it does not provide the abundant comfort by which godly parents are to be encouraged concerning their children dying in infancy as stated, for example, in the *CD* 1.17: "Since we are to judge of the will of God from His Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature, but in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they together with the parents are comprehended, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom it pleases God to call out of this life in their infancy (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39; 1 Cor. 7:14)."

Second, some assume that this section of the *WCF* implies that there are other infants belonging to true believers, who, dying in infancy, are not elect and therefore not regenerated and saved.

The resolution: First, to argue that the statement of the *WCF* is scriptural should be sufficient to lead us to accept it.

Second, the *WCF* does not contradict the *CD*, but rather says something the latter omits, namely, its positive affirmation that elect infants who die in infancy are undoubtedly regenerated and saved by the sovereign Holy Spirit.

Third, the second difficulty identified above is answered by recalling that this section of the *WCF* is dealing with effectual calling. The whole purpose of this section is to show that persons who are "incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word" are not thereby excluded from salvation.

This section of the *WCF* does not attempt to decide whether or not all infants dying in infancy (whether children of believers or not) are saved.

2.3 **ASSURANCE AND FAITH** (*WCF* 14.3, 18.1-4 / *WLC* 80-81 / *HC* LD 7)

The difficulty: Both the *WCF* and the *WLC* teach that the "infallible assurance" of salvation in Christ Jesus "does not so belong to the essence of faith," but should be understood as the product of saving faith. By way of contrast, the *HC*, LD 7, Q./A. 21, defines true faith as a "firm confidence" that "everlasting righteousness and salvation are freely given by God. . . ."

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The resolution: In evaluating the definitions of saving faith given by the Westminster standards and the *HC*, particularly with respect to the personal assurance of salvation, some would assert that the *HC* follows the teaching of John Calvin, who insisted that faith includes a firm conviction and confidence (*Institutes* II.2.xvi). This view of saving faith must be understood, however, in light of the official position taught by the Roman Catholic Church and defended at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which argued that no one can know with a certainty of faith that he has obtained divine grace, and which anathematized anyone holding to the possibility of personal assurance of divine election.

We should understand that the language of the *HC*, LD 7, Q./A. 21, emphasizes the believer's *standing in Christ* before the judgment seat of God, reminding us that the basis of Christian assurance lies not with the believer himself, but with the power and sufficiency of Christ's mediatorial work, which is imputed to us by grace.

By the same token, we can readily admit that Christians may at times lack this assurance. Certainty tinged with doubt, assurance assailed by anxiety—these phrases describe the believer who lives in perpetual conflict with unbelief. This spiritual conflict is clearly identified in the *CD* 1.16:

Those in whom a living faith in Christ, an assured confidence of soul, peace of conscience, and earnest endeavor after filial obedience, a glorying in God through Christ, is not as yet strongly felt, and who nevertheless make use of the means which God has appointed for working these graces in us, ought not to be alarmed at the mention of reprobation, nor to rank themselves among the reprobate, but diligently to persevere in the use of means, and with ardent desires devoutly and humbly to wait for a season of richer grace. . . .

With others who have studied this matter, we may observe that the apparent tension between the *WCF* and the *HC* is no greater than that between the *HC* and the *CD*.

For our purposes it may prove useful to view the differences between the *WCF* and the *HC* in terms of their *respective historical settings and concerns*. The *HC* was composed to address the doctrines espoused by the church of Rome, which may explain why it emphasizes the Christian's standing as that relates to his assurance of salvation. The *WCF*, on the other hand, addresses specific pastoral concerns related to Christian assurance, and therefore emphasizes saving faith in terms of Christian experience.

An appreciation of these respective historical contexts helps us affirm a fundamental continuity between the first generation of reformers and subsequent generations of Reformed believers.

2.4 **THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT** (*WCF* 21.7-8 / *WLC* 117 / *HC* LD 38)

The difficulty: We read in the *WLC* (Q./A. 117): "The sabbath or Lord's day is to be sanctified by an holy resting all the day, not only from such works as are at all times sinful, but even from such worldly employments and recreations as are on other days lawful; and making it our delight to spend the whole time (except so much of it as is to be taken up in works of necessity and mercy) in the public and private exercises of God's worship: and, to that end, we are to prepare our hearts, and with such foresight, diligence, and moderation, to dispose and

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seasonably dispatch our worldly business, that we may be the more free and fit for the duties of that day.”

The *HC*, LD 38, explains the requirements of the Fourth Commandment this way: “First, that the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained, and that, especially on the festive day of rest, I regularly attend the assembly of God’s people to learn what God’s Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to God publicly, and to bring Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that every day of my life, I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and so begin already in this life the eternal Sabbath.”

The *WLC* focuses on resting from our daily work, even as the text of the Fourth Commandment does. The *HC* is silent concerning this physical resting, but rather focuses attention on something that must occur each day: the “spiritual” resting, namely, from our evil works. What lies at the center of the *HC* is not resting from ordinary labor (even though that rest is covered by the phrase “the day of rest,” which explains the word “sabbath”), but going to church.

The difference could be summarized this way: the *WLC* devotes attention to both rest and exercises of worship, while the *HC* directs its attention to Sunday church attendance and our “spiritual” rest.

The resolution: Throughout European, British and American Protestantism, rather sharp polemics have been waged about the sabbath question, so sharp that at times a church split appeared inevitable. Many followed the English Puritan stream (for example, the Dutch theologians Walaeus and Voetius). They believed sabbath rest continued in Sunday rest. Others (like Gomarus and later Cocceius, with even more vehemence) emphasized the Jewish and provisional character of the sabbath, whereby sabbath rest came to be viewed differently than Sunday rest.

Nevertheless, ecclesiastical divisions were avoided, in large part because the various viewpoints approached one another more closely than would appear from the discussions, especially when it came to the practice of Sunday observance. Arranging Sunday church services was difficult apart from resting on Sunday, no matter which theological view one adopted. Even those who did not agree that both rest and worship were principled extensions of the Fourth Commandment nevertheless found rest and worship united in practice. Where people set aside a day for worship (in church and at home), ordinary labor had to be interrupted.

Church divisions in the Netherlands were avoided because the Synod of Dort made a moderating decision about this issue. The English theologians at this synod had complained about the neglect of the Sunday, even as they could witness with their own eyes in the city of Dordrecht. Still, the synod did not come up with a strict Puritan pronouncement. Actually, it made no pronouncement, but agreed to a compromise statement forged with the help of professors attending the synod from churches in the province of Zeeland who were arguing the matter at the time. The six points of this statement read as follows:

1. In the fourth commandment of God’s law there is a ceremonial and a moral element.
2. The rest on the seventh day after the creation, and the strict observance of this day with which the Jewish people were charged particularly, was ceremonial.
3. That a definite and appointed day has been set aside to the service of God, and that for this purpose as much rest is required as is necessary for the service of God and for hallowed contemplation, this element is moral.

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4. The Sabbath of the Jews having been set aside, Christians are in duty bound to hallow the Day of the Lord solemnly.
5. This day has always been kept in the Early Church since the time of the apostles.
6. This day must be so consecrated unto the service of God that upon it men rest from all servile labors, except those required by charity and present necessities, and likewise from all such recreations as prevent the service of God.

These six points were adopted by the Synod of Dort (1618-1619), and later by the Christian Reformed synod of 1881. The Christian Reformed synod of 1926 insisted that they must be considered doctrinal in nature, and hence binding and fully compatible with LD 38. (For this information, consult *The Revised Church Order Commentary*, by Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967], p. 199.)

An ecclesiastical division at the Synod of Dort was thwarted even more by the wording of *HC* LD 38. For both parties could properly appeal to it! Those who, in the spirit of the Puritans, fought for Sunday rest could point to the reference to Sunday as sabbath and day of rest; those defending strongly the ceremonial character of the rest required by the Fourth Commandment could with similar justification quote the passage about the New Testament “resting” from our evil works.

Educated by the past, we must be careful today to avoid exaggerating the differences involving sabbath and Sunday. One might hold the view that the *HC* evidences a certain gap at this point, because its formulation echoes the Fourth Commandment too weakly. In this particular Lord’s Day the “ceremonial” stands out more sharply than the “moral.” It does not speak directly about resting from daily labor. On the other hand, the *WLC* also shows weaknesses. This catechism is in fact quite negative toward activities of relaxation, because the whole day must be used for public and private worship, with the exception of time needed for works of necessity and mercy. In this way the day is certainly “spiritually” full, so much so that there is little opportunity left for doing what is also characteristic for Sunday: catching our breath through genuine physical rest.

Nevertheless, there is no incompatible difference between these two confessional traditions. Both start with the abiding validity of the Fourth Commandment. The matter becomes much more serious as soon as people declare the Fourth Commandment to have been *set aside*, severing the connection between Sunday and the Fourth Commandment. Never has a struggle broken out over the differences between these two catechisms. These differences were far too small for that to happen, involving no more than variety in emphasis in their interpretations of the Fourth Commandment.

2.5 **MARRIAGE AND PERMISSIBLE DIVORCE** (*WCF* 24.1-6)

The difficulty: In this chapter the *WCF* deals with marriage and divorce. Some wonder whether this chapter belongs in a Confession, whether it would be better in a book of church polity or a church order. In addition, others have objections with respect to statements in articles 4, 5 and 6. Third, others question whether it is biblical to permit divorce not only for adultery, but also for “such wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate” (*WCF* 24.6).

The resolution: First, such material properly belongs in a Confession because it belongs to the teaching of the Word of God. In God’s dealings with men in the covenant of grace, the institution of the family is very important, inasmuch as the institution of the family is basic to both church

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and state. We believe there is good reason to include a summary of the teaching of Scripture for each of the three basic divine institutions of human life: the family, the church, and the state.

Second, in reply to the question whether wilful desertion is a biblically valid ground for permissible divorce, Scripture teaches clearly in 1 Cor. 7:15 that it is. Here the apostle Paul is dealing specifically with the case of desertion of a Christian by an unbeliever. Yet, when the *WCF* speaks of “such wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate” (*WCF* 24.6), it is clearly recognizing this fact. It is precisely desertion of a believer by an unbeliever that is not only wilful, but often beyond remedy by the power of church discipline and by existing civil law.

In summary, the teachings of *WCF* 24.1-6 accord fully with Scripture and with the historical position of the Reformers themselves (cf. the views of Calvin and Bucer on permissible divorce).

2.6 **VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE CHURCH** (*WCF* 25.1-4)

The difficulty: This chapter is alleged to be based upon the distinction between the visible and invisible church, which distinction appears to originate from practice rather than from Scripture. Moreover, this distinction has been misapplied in church history in order to escape the obligation of church unity, or as an excuse for failure to address doctrinal or moral error within a particular denomination.

The resolution: First, Scripture clearly teaches that there is a sense in which the church is visible to us and a sense in which the church is not visible to us. It is therefore quite proper to speak of the church as both visible (in terms of one aspect) and invisible (in terms of another aspect). There is a sense in which the church is invisible, for, as Paul says, “The Lord knows those who are His” (2 Tim. 2:19). What man in this life has seen the “church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven” (Heb. 12:23)? And there is a sense in which the church is visible, for assuredly it was seen by men in those days (Acts 2:41-47) when “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (cf. Rom. 16:5, etc.).

Second, this distinction between these two aspects of the church is made in the *HC* (LD 21, Q./A. 54 and 55) and the *BC* (Art. 27, 28 and 29) and is virtually the same as the *WCF* as to the matter in question. When the *BC* speaks of “one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation of true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit,” it is certainly describing the church in a sense which can only be called “invisible” to the human eye. Again, when the *BC* says that this church “sometimes for a while appears very small, and in the eyes of men to be reduced to nothing; as during the perilous reign of Ahab,” we have no other teaching than that of the *WCF*, which says that “This catholic church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible.” And when the *BC* teaches that “Furthermore, this holy Church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed over the whole world; and yet is joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same Spirit,” we have no other doctrine than that taught in the *WCF* when it speaks of the church as it appears visible to the human eye. The *BC* also defines “the marks of the true church, and wherein it differs from the false church” (Art. 29). This article obviously describes the visible church, since it speaks of hypocrites who are externally in it, and of the visible marks by which it can actually be discerned in the world. The very purpose of this article is to tell us how to

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discern the visible church. And in this description we have no other doctrine than that taught in the *WCF* 25.2-5.

Third, the Reformers (and here we include Calvin, Ursinus and the rest) employed the idea of the church as invisible to emphasize that the church's life depends on divine election and the operation of the Spirit which are not infallibly discerned by men. It does not mean that there are two churches, but that the one church may be viewed in two ways, and that the church as we see it is not to be thought of apart from its nature as a congregation of true Christian believers.

2.7 **POWER TO DEPOSE** (*WCF* 31.1-4)

The difficulty: Some argue that *WCF* 31 asserts the power of synods to depose office-bearers in local churches.

The resolution: In one denomination subscribing to the *WCF*, namely, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, deposition of elders is normally imposed by the local session. The deposition of ministers is imposed ordinarily by presbytery (in part because the membership of the minister is held by presbytery). But there are unavoidable exceptions. An exception would arise in cases of appeal and complaint, where a session declines to depose an elder guilty of heresy. If members of the church appealed to presbytery and if the facts warranted, the presbytery would then refuse to admit delegates from that session. Even in the history of continental Reformed churches, synods and classes exercised the power to depose.

What needs to be stressed is that as long as the principles enunciated in *WCF* 31 are followed, there can be no tyranny of local churches by broader assemblies.

Notice, first, that the words "it belongeth to the overseers and other rulers of the particular churches, by virtue of their office, and the power which Christ hath given them for edification and not for destruction, to appoint such assemblies; and to convene together in them, as often as they shall judge it expedient for the good of the church" (*WCF* 31.1) clearly establish the principle that original authority rests with the local office-bearers.

Second, when the *WCF* states that "It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same," several important principles are being enunciated. One is that these assemblies act ministerially, in service to the church, for her edification and unity. Moreover, these assemblies act decisively in cases of dispute, appeal and complaint.

But, third, the *WCF* immediately adds: ". . . which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his Word." Two reasons are given for submitting to decisions, reasons of unequal weight. First, only decisions consonant to the Word of God are to be obeyed, and they are to be obeyed because they agree with the Word of God. Second, and subordinate, decisions are obeyed because they were made by procedures of church government which are themselves consonant with the Word of God.

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Fourth, the *WCF* wisely warns us against placing undue confidence in ecclesiastical assemblies, when it states: “All synods or councils, since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both.” The decisions of assemblies are not to be accorded the esteem due only to Scripture, and they are always to be evaluated in terms of Scripture itself.

2.8 **PRAYER AS A MEANS OF GRACE** (*WLC* 154 / *WSC* 88)

The difficulty: Both of these Confessions identify prayer as a means whereby “Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation.”

The resolution: This formulation is not without difficulty. Perhaps it may satisfy objectors to distinguish between official means of grace (the preaching of the Word and the sacraments), and personal means of grace (Bible reading, meditation, prayer and fasting).

3. **PERCEIVED DIFFICULTIES IN THE THREE FORMS OF UNITY**

3.1 **TRUE AND FALSE CHURCHES EASILY DISTINGUISHED** (*BC* 29)

The difficulty: It appears to be a bit of overstatement for the *BC* to conclude its discussion of the true church and the false church with the claim that “These two Churches are easily known and distinguished from each other.”

The resolution: We must recognize that when the *BC* was written, there were far fewer church groups and denominations than we have today. In fact, at that time it was easy to distinguish the true church from the false church. Moreover, the fact should be acknowledged that those who subscribe to *BC* 29 function in terms of the conviction of *WCF* 25.5, which states: “The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will.”

SECTION II. **A COMPARISON OF THE POLITIES**

1. **MATERIALS**

The documents containing polity directives used for this study are the following:

- BCO* The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2000 edition
- BD* The Book of Discipline
- CO* *Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America*, 2nd edition (1997)
- DPW* The Directory for the Public Worship of God
- FG* The Form of Government

The *BCO* of the OPC contains, in sequence, the *FG*, the *BD*, and the *DPW*. Each of these three documents contains Chapters that are enumerated with Roman numerals. When a Chapter contains numbered sections, an Arabic numeral is used. Hence, *FG* XXI:6 refers to The Form of Government, Chapter XXI, section 6.

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These documents are available online at the following websites:

URCNA CO www.urchna.org

OPC BCO www.opc.org

To assist our readers, we provide the Chapter headings which comprise the Table of Contents of the *BCO*.

THE FORM OF GOVERNMENT

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3. The Nature and Exercise of Church Power
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6. Ministers or Teaching Elders
7. Evangelists
8. Pastors
9. Teachers
10. Ruling Elders
11. Deacons
12. Governing Assemblies
13. The Local Church and its Session
14. The Regional Church and its Presbytery
15. The Whole Church and its General Assembly
16. Congregational Meetings
17. Congregations without Pastors
18. Moderators
19. Clerks
20. Ordination and Installation
21. Licensing Candidates to Preach the Gospel
22. Calling a Minister
23. Dissolving Ministerial Relationships
24. Electing, Ordaining, and Installing Ruling Elders and Deacons
25. Divesting from Office
26. Missions
27. Ministers Laboring outside the Church
28. Organizing and Receiving Congregations
29. Organizing of Members of the Church
30. Incorporation and Corporations
31. The Constitution and Its Amendment

THE BOOK OF DISCIPLINE

1. The Nature and Purposes of Discipline
2. Jurisdiction
3. Steps in the Institution of Judicial Process
4. The Trial of Judicial Cases
5. Cases without Full Process
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7. Appeals
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DIRECTORY FOR THE PUBLIC WORSHIP OF GOD

1. The Sanctification of the Lord's Day
2. The Principles of Public Worship
3. The Usual Parts of Public Worship
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SUGGESTED FORMS FOR USE IN CONNECTION WITH THE BOOK OF DISCIPLINE

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2. Citation of Accused
3. Citation of Witness
4. Notice of Intention to Appeal (in Judicial Cases)
5. Appeal (in Judicial Cases)
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SUGGESTED FORMS FOR PARTICULAR SERVICES

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THE RECOMMENDED CURRICULUM FOR MINISTERIAL PREPARATION IN THE ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2. COMPARISON AND EVALUATION OF RESPECTIVE POLITIES

We are using the URCNA Church Order as the basis for our comparison and evaluation, arranging our analysis in terms of the divisions as follows:

Ecclesiastical Offices (Articles 1-15)
Ecclesiastical Assemblies (Articles 16-36)
Ecclesiastical Functions and Tasks (Articles 37-50)
Ecclesiastical Discipline (Articles 51-66)

2.1 ECCLESIASTICAL OFFICES (Articles 1-15)

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Article 1: Christ has instituted three offices in the church.

The offices of elder, deacon, and minister are recognized, but elders are distinguished as ruling and teaching elders (*FG V:3*).

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<i>Article 2:</i> The duties of a minister are listed.	There is no difference (<i>FG VI:2; VIII</i>).
<i>Article 3:</i> The Consistory supervises the candidacy process for a man who aspires to the ministry.	The presbytery supervises the candidacy process (<i>FG XXI:2</i>).
<i>Article 4:</i> The candidacy examination is requested by the Consistory and conducted by a classis. The Consistory, with the concurring advice of a classis, declares the man a candidate for the ministry.	The candidacy examination is conducted by a presbytery, which declares the man a candidate for the ministry (<i>FG XXIII:3</i>).
<i>Article 5:</i> A man who is not a member of the federation but who aspires to the ministry must be under the supervision of a Consistory.	A man who is not a member of the denomination but aspires to the ministry must be under the supervision of the presbytery (<i>FG XIII:12</i>).
<i>Article 6:</i> The process for calling/ordaining a man to the office of a minister is outlined. This process is supervised by the Consistory with the concurring advice of classis with respect to the ordination examination.	The call is formulated by the session but is issued to the person called by the presbytery. A call can be issued by a presbytery or the general assembly (<i>FG XII:10-11</i>).
<i>Article 7:</i> Calling a minister from one congregation to another occur with the consent of a minister's present council.	A minister's call to another church is supervised by the presbytery (<i>FG XII:12</i>).
<i>Article 8:</i> The call of a minister from outside the federation is to be via a colloquium doctum, which is sponsored by a Consistory.	The call of a minister from outside the denomination is done by the presbytery (<i>FG XXII:13</i>).
<i>Article 9:</i> A minister may change his vocation only upon weighty reason which must be approved by his council with the concurring advice of a classis.	A minister desiring a change in vocation must receive concurrence from the body that he serves as well as from his presbytery (<i>FG XXIV:3</i>).
<i>Article 10:</i> Provisions for the minister, including retirement, are listed.	Provisions for the minister are promised and set forth in a letter of call. A minister's credentials remain with his presbytery through retirement (<i>FG XXII:9</i>).
<i>Article 11:</i> Provisions for a separation of a minister from his congregation due to non-disciplinary reasons are described. This separation is to be implemented only with the concurring advice of a classis.	The separation of a minister from a congregation is initiated by the session but must be carried out by the presbytery (<i>FG XXIV:2-3</i>).

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<i>Article 12:</i> Provisions for nomination of qualified elders and deacons are described. They are chosen by the congregation.	The nomination process is similar (<i>FG XXV:2-4</i>).
<i>Article 13:</i> The term of office is specified by the Consistory.	The term of office may be for life time or a limited period; although the term maybe varied, a man usually remains in office permanently (<i>FG XXV:2</i>).
<i>Article 14:</i> The duties of an elder are set forth.	The duties of an elder are similar (<i>FG X:3</i>).
<i>Article 15:</i> The duties of a deacon are set forth.	The duties of a deacon are similar.

Comparison and Evaluation of Ecclesiastical Offices (Articles 1-15):

Similarities:

This section deals with the offices of the church along with their respective duties. It also deals with candidates (from both inside and outside of the denomination) for ministry with respect to their training, calling, and ordination. A minister's call to another congregation or vocation is covered. Finally, separation of a minister from his congregation is treated.

With respect to substance of the above areas, there are few differences between the two polities. Procedures are followed that seek to maintain and protect the purity of these offices. The local church is well served by both polities.

Differences:

Terminology

One may note a difference in terminology at several minor points. This is the case with respect to the number of offices in the church. The minister in OPC is an elder, more particularly, a teaching elder. In this way the minister and elders enjoy parity in the government of the church. This is also stressed and maintained in our CO even though there is a distinction between the office of elder and minister. Quite significant is the fact that in the OPC, the minister is, in addition to being minister of Word and Sacraments, also an elder and a deacon. An elder, though not a minister of the Word and Sacraments, joins with the ministers in the rule of the church; and elder is also a deacon.

Supervisory Assembly

What may be more of a difference is the identity of the supervisory body which oversees and implements the various procedures covered in this section. In the URCNA, candidates for the ministry both inside and outside the federation are under the supervision of the Consistory. In the OPC the presbytery exercises such supervision. In the URCNA, the Consistory is the only continuing ecclesiastical body, and initiates both examinations for candidacy and for ordination,

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with the classis providing concurring advice. In the OPC, the presbytery is the primary ecclesiastical assembly relating to matters of candidacy and ordination, with the session participating through its delegates to the presbytery. The office of minister is supervised by the presbytery. This is seen in the supervision that the presbytery provides over all phases of the candidate's examination, ordination, and installation, as well as his ministerial status. In fact, the presbytery itself is able to call and hire a minister. Though a local session may inquire into various aspects of the minister's work, any kind of disciplinary action must come before the presbytery. The above procedure is different than that of the URCNA.

In the OPC a minister is essentially a member of the presbytery (regional church) and has communicant fellowship in any local congregation of that regional church. The URCNA is not accustomed to this, since a minister is a member of a local church and his credentials are held locally. In the OPC the office of minister may be exercised outside the setting of a local church. For the URCNA, the phrase "communicant fellowship" refers to membership in a local congregation, something different than a minister being in communicant fellowship with every congregation of a regional church.

Elders are distinguished into two kinds. Unlike teaching elders, ruling elders do not have communicant fellowship with all churches within the regional church. Though ruling elders are members of the regional church they do not have communicant fellowship with all congregations in the region. This raises a question regarding the parity of office, and perhaps reveals a more substantial difference in viewpoint. Further discussion with the OPC may lead to better a understanding or even an agreement on this issue.

2.2 ECCLESIASTICAL ASSEMBLIES (Articles 16-36)

<i>URCNA</i>	<i>OPC</i>
<i>Article 16:</i> Three assemblies are recognized, with the Consistory being the only continuing body.	Three assemblies are recognized, with all but the general assembly having continuing existence (<i>FG XII:1</i>).
<i>Article 17:</i> All assemblies address ecclesiastical matters in ecclesiastical manner.	The provisions are similar (<i>FG XIII:7; XIV:5; XV:7-8</i>).
<i>Article 18:</i> All meeting of the assemblies begin and close with prayer.	The provisions are similar (<i>FG XII:1</i>).
<i>Article 19:</i> The duties of chairman and vice-chairman are listed.	The provisions are similar. Moderators preside for one year, or less if the assembly so decides (<i>FG XIII:4; XIV:4; XV:3; XVIII:1-3</i>).
<i>Article 20:</i> The duties of the clerk are listed. The clerk is supervised by the next convening Consistory.	The clerk is chosen for a term (<i>FG XIX</i>).
<i>Article 21:</i> The composition of the Consistory	The provisions are similar (<i>FG XII:3-4</i>).

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is given. The Consistory has direct authority from Christ over the congregation.

Article 22: The organization of a congregation within the federation is to be under the supervision of a neighboring Consistory with concurring advice of a classis.

The organization of a congregation within the denomination is under the supervision of the presbytery (*FG XXIX:2*).

Article 23: The council consists of elders and deacons, and operates under the authority of the Consistory.

The provisions are similar, except that the OPC has no council (*FG XIII:3-4*).

Article 24: Congregations are distinct and equal, having no dominion over each other. The unity of churches is manifested in the broader assemblies..

Churches are distinct and equal but are governed by the presbytery as well as the general assembly. The unity of the churches is manifested in the broader assemblies (*FG XII:2*).

Article 25: All delegates to broader assemblies are delegated by the Consistories. Only those matters that could not be settled in the narrower assemblies or that pertain to the churches in common, shall be considered by a synod. No broader assembly shall have the power to depose an office-bearer.

Ruling elders are commissioned to the broader assemblies by the session. All ministers within the presbytery are seated as commissioners to the presbytery. The presbyteries, but not the general assembly, have the power to discipline office-bearers (*FG XIV:3,5*).

Article 26: A meeting of a classis shall be convened by Consistories on a rotating basis. Inquiry into the faithful discharge of each church's ministry shall be carried out and advice given when requested.

Each presbytery determines its own meeting time and place (*FG XIV:7*).

Article 27: Church visitors shall be made available by the classis for the Consistories to invite. Church visitors are to inquire about the work of the church in general and offer advice and encouragement and report to the classis.

There is no provision for church visiting, but churches can ask for assistance by contacting the presbytery, and each presbytery annually reads the minutes of its member sessions (*FG XIV:7*).

Article 28: A meeting of a synod is held at least once every three years. Each Consistory delegates two of its members. A meeting of a synod is convened by an appointed Consistory.

The general assembly consists of ruling elders and ministers who are commissioned by the presbyteries in accordance with proportions determined by a previous general assembly (*FG XV:2*).

Article 29: The right of appeal to broader assemblies is permissible, provided that the appeal is first made to the Consistory. All decisions of assemblies are settled and

The right of appeal procedure is similar to that of the URCNA. Decisions of assemblies are viewed in the same way. Any congregation could appeal a decision, but if that appeal is

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<p>binding unless proven to be in conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order. A Consistory may not be compelled to comply with a decision of a broader assembly, provided that they declare to that assembly the points at which the decision is in conflict with the Word of God. If a subsequent synod rules by majority that submission in the matter is essential for the unity of the churches, the congregation will no longer be eligible for membership in the federation.</p>	<p>not sustained, the congregation is required to comply with the decision. A congregation could withdraw, following the procedure set forth in <i>FG XVI:7 (BD VII:1-7)</i>.</p>
<p><i>Article 30:</i> After an appeal a church may through its Consistory withdraw from the federation by submitting a written statement.</p>	<p>Though no procedure is provided for withdrawing from the denomination, we assume that a similar method would be followed.</p>
<p><i>Article 31:</i> A member may appeal a decision of a narrower assembly. Until the appeal is resolved he must conform to the current judgment.</p>	<p>Provisions for a similar judicial appeal are found in <i>BD VII:1-7</i>, whereas provisions for filing a complain are found in <i>BD IX</i>.</p>
<p><i>Article 32:</i> Any church may be admitted provisionally into the federation provided that the office-bearers subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity and the minister passes a classical examination. This provisional admission must be ratified by the next synod.</p>	<p>The provisions are similar, though without requiring subsequent ratification by the general assembly (<i>FG XXIV B:1-2</i>).</p>
<p><i>Article 33:</i> The congregation through the Consistory exercises exclusive control over all of its temporalities. Broader assemblies shall not interfere in such matters.</p>	<p>The provisions are similar (<i>FG XXXI:5</i>).</p>
<p><i>Article 34:</i> Churches are encouraged to pursue ecumenical relations with churches of like faith. Such activities are to be made known to the classis.</p>	<p>No formal procedure for this is provided; however, churches have freedom to engage in ecumenical activities.</p>
<p><i>Article 35:</i> A classis may enter into ecumenical relations with other churches. Such activities are to be made known to the synod.</p>	<p>No formal procedures are provided.</p>
<p><i>Article 36:</i> The federation may enter into ecumenical relations with other federations by synodical decision. Such decision must be ratified by a majority of the Consistories.</p>	<p>Ecumenical actions would be undertaken by committees of the general assembly (<i>FG XV:6</i>).</p>

Comparison and Evaluation of Ecclesiastical Assemblies (Articles 16-36):

Similarities:

Both polities agree that there are three assemblies among the churches. These assemblies are composed of ministers and elders. Direct authority is seen in the offices of the Consistory. Decisions of broader assemblies are to be received as settled and binding. Church members who believe that they cannot abide by such decisions have a means of appeal, beginning with Consistory and ending with the synod, if necessary. These assemblies seek to provide mutual support among the churches in a variety of areas. In these areas there is great agreement and common practice.

Differences:

The relation between Assemblies

There appears to be a conceptual difference with respect to the interrelation of the Consistory and the broader assemblies. The URCNA begins with the local church and sees the broader assemblies as means of (1) guarding against human imperfections, (2) benefiting from the wisdom of a multitude of counselors, and (3) manifesting our spiritual unity. The OPC, however, begins with the universal church and sees it as organized in regional churches (called presbyteries) and in local churches. All members of churches within a presbytery are members of the regional church. All members of all presbyteries are members of the national church. The URCNA do recognize their shared unity in true faith as members of one holy catholic church, but we see that this church is made visible by means of local churches. This difference, perhaps, would not be of much concern if were not the case that this conceptual difference has practical implications as mentioned below.

For the OPC, the national church consists of all member presbyteries (regional churches). The general assembly is the governing body of the national church, and has exclusive original jurisdiction over all matters belonging to it. It settles all doctrinal and disciplinary questions brought before it. It promotes the unity of the church through correspondence with other churches. It organizes regional churches (presbyteries), and reviews records of presbyteries. It calls ministers and licentiates to the mission field or other ministries of the national church, either directly or through its standing committees. The general assembly consists of as many as 155 voting commissioners along with such ministers and ruling elders who are commissioned by the presbyteries in proportions determined by the previous general assembly. The general assembly is reminded assiduously of the fact that assemblies may not bind the conscience of the members of the churches in matters beyond the declarations of the Word of God.

In the OPC the regional church consists of all the members of the local churches in its region as well as all ministers in the same district. The presbytery as the governing body of the regional church consists of all ministers and all ruling elders within the regional church. The presbytery or regional church has responsibility for evangelism especially in areas not within the sphere of any one of the congregations in its region. It seeks to foster fellowship and nurture within its region. The presbytery has power to organize and receive congregations, unite or dissolve them at the request of the people and with the advice of the sessions involved. It resolves questions of doctrine and discipline. The presbytery takes under its care, examines,

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and licenses candidates for the ministry, and ordains, installs, removes, and judges ministers within its bounds.

In the URCNA, the Consistory that has the primary supervisory responsibility pertaining to its minister, although a Consistory must request the advice of a classis with regard to examining, ordaining, installing, removing, and judging ministers. Furthermore, a Consistory may delegate two of its members to meetings of a classis or a synod, with no distinction being made between a minister or an elder. In other words, two elders could be delegated or two ministers or one of each. Though in practice, the meetings of a classis and a presbytery may look very similar in terms of membership, yet clear differences exist regarding the functions of each assembly, differences that arise from divergent views of the church.

The nature and functions of the general assembly (OPC) and the synod (URCNA) differ along similar lines. These differences arise, again, from diverging concepts of the relationship between ecclesiastical assemblies. Sometimes the practice may be very similar, so that any charges of hierarchicalism seem out of place. This is seen when one compares the status of decisions made by the general assembly and by a synod. Both polities give similar status to decisions of the broadest body and hence both appear to exercise similar authority. However, such apparent similarity should not obscure the deeper matter of the respective views of the church. In the URCNA, the local church is viewed as complete and independent in that it receives direct authority from Christ. However, in the OPC, the general assembly seems to hold or at least to exercise authority over all the churches. It is one thing for churches to meet together for deliberations and commit themselves to certain procedures; but it is altogether another matter for a non-local assembly to exercise ecclesiastical authority over a congregation. This divergence deserves further discussion with the OPC, in order to remove misunderstandings and to understand more accurately the differences and similarities.

2.3 ECCLESIASTICAL FUNCTIONS AND TASKS (Articles 37-50)

<i>URCNA</i>	<i>OPC</i>
<i>Article 37:</i> Consistories shall call the congregation together for corporate worship <i>in observance of</i> special days in the Christian calendar.	No specific provision is mentioned for the observance of special days in the Christian calendar.
<i>Article 38:</i> Consistories shall regulate the services of corporate worship; the principal elements of corporate worship are identified.	The <i>DPW</i> (Chapter III) offers a brief explanation concerning the nature, purpose, and basic elements of corporate worship. Chapter III: 8 specifically states that ruling elders are not prohibited from leading in public prayer, reading the Scriptures, leading responsive readings, or, on occasion, exhorting the congregation as part of public worship.
<i>Article 39:</i> The 150 Psalms shall have the	“Since the metrical versions of the Psalms are

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<p>principal place in the singing of the churches; hymns that are faithful to Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity may be sung, provided they are approved by the Consistory.</p>	<p>based upon the Word of God, they ought to be used frequently in public worship. Great care must be taken that all the materials of song are in perfect accord with the teaching of Holy Scripture. Let the tunes as well as the words be dignified and elevated. The stately rhythm of the choral is especially appropriate for public worship. No person shall take a special part in the musical service unless he is a professing Christian and adorns his profession with a godly walk” (DPW III: 6).</p>
<p><i>Article 40:</i> At one service each Lord’s day, the minister shall ordinarily preach the Word of God as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism.</p>	<p>No specific provision for catechism preaching is mentioned.</p>
<p><i>Articles 41-42:</i> Baptism shall be administered with the use of the appropriate liturgical form.</p>	<p>Ministers of the Word are not required to use a <i>specified</i> form, but only to follow the general pattern outlined in the DPW IV: B.</p>
<p><i>Article 43:</i> Public professions of faith shall be conducted with the use of the appropriate liturgical form.</p>	<p>No specific form for the public profession of faith is mandated. The DPW V: 5 stipulates that “the minister shall address the candidate in these or like words. . . .”</p>
<p><i>Article 44:</i> Ecclesiastical memberships from non-URCNA congregations shall be received only after a consistorial examination and public announcement is made.</p>	<p>“The session is charged with maintaining the government of the congregation. It shall oversee all matters concerning the conduct of public worship; it shall concert the best measures for promoting the spiritual growth and evangelistic witness of the congregation. It shall receive, dismiss, and exercise discipline over the members of the church, supervise the activities of the diaconate, the board of trustees and all other organizations of the congregation, and have final authority over the use of the church property. The session also shall appoint ruling elder commissioners to higher assemblies.</p> <p>The session shall keep the following records: (1) minutes of its meetings, including a record of the administration of the sacraments and changes in the membership of the congregation; (2) minutes of the meetings of the congregation; and (3) rolls of the members of the congregation, both of</p>

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communicant members and of their baptized children, with the dates of their reception. Such rolls shall designate those members worshipping with a mission work. Births, baptisms, censures, restorations, deaths, and removals shall be noted on these rolls. The session shall submit its minutes and the minutes of the congregation to the presbytery for review at least once every year.

The names of members shall be placed upon or removed from the rolls of the church only by order of the session, and according to the provisions of the Book of Discipline.

When upon the request of a member the session dismisses him to another congregation the clerk shall send a letter commending him to its care, and the clerk of the receiving church shall notify the dismissing church of the date of his reception. When notification is received the clerk shall remove his name from the roll and record the fact in the minutes.

Whenever a member desires dismissal to a church of which the session cannot approve, and he cannot be dissuaded, it shall grant him a certificate of standing, unless the session institutes disciplinary action against him; upon being informed that he has joined such a church the clerk shall erase his name from the roll" (FG XIII: 7-9).

Article 45: The Consistory shall supervise participation at the Lord's Table. Those who have not made a public profession of faith or who are currently not living a godly life are not to be admitted to the sacrament. Visitors may be admitted to the Lord's Table provided the Consistory is assured of their proper profession of faith and godly walk.

"Since the sacraments are ordinances of the visible church, they are not to be administered except under the oversight of the government of the church. Moreover, in ordinary circumstances they are properly administered only in a gathering of the congregation for the public worship of God, baptism signifying solemn admission into the visible church, and the Lord's Supper constituting the communion of believers with Christ and with each other as members of his mystical body. Nevertheless, if a session judge that very unusual circumstances obtain in a particular instance, the sacraments may be administered

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	<p>elsewhere; but, in any event, the church must be represented in the service.</p> <p>Although the efficacy of the sacraments does not depend upon the piety or intention of the minister, they are not to be administered by any private person but only by a minister of Christ, called to be a steward of the mysteries of God” (<i>DPW IV: A:3-4</i>).</p>
<p><i>Article 46:</i> The Consistory shall ordinarily administer the Lord’s Supper at least every three months.</p>	<p>According to the <i>DPW</i>, “The Lord’s Supper is to be celebrated frequently, but the frequency may be determined by each session as it may judge most conducive to edification” (<i>DPW IV: A:2</i>).</p>
<p><i>Article 47:</i> The church’s missionary task is to preach the Word of God to the unconverted. Mission work beyond the field of an organized church is to be carried out by ministers of the Word who are set apart to this labor and are called, supported, and supervised by their Consistory.</p>	<p>“Sessions, presbyteries, and the general assembly have their respective responsibilities for the work of missions. Each congregation and presbytery, as well as the general assembly, is obliged to pursue the task of evangelism within its respective bounds. Foreign missions is conducted by the general assembly on behalf of the whole church, or by individual presbyteries and congregations acting in coordination with one another and with the general assembly.</p> <p>The general assembly or its agencies normally may initiate mission work within the bounds of a presbytery only with the consent of that presbytery; but in extraordinary circumstances the general assembly on its own initiative may appoint missionaries to labor within the bounds of a presbytery for a period not to exceed six months.</p> <p>A person appointed to labor within the bounds of a presbytery shall place himself under the jurisdiction of that presbytery as soon as practicable. If his work is not limited to one presbytery he shall be under the jurisdiction of that presbytery most convenient to him” (<i>FG XXVII</i>).</p>
<p><i>Article 48:</i> Christian marriages should be solemnized with the use of the appropriate liturgical form.</p>	<p>The liturgical form for marriage contained in the <i>BCO</i> is only a suggested form.</p>

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Article 49: A Christian funeral is not considered to be a service of corporate worship nor subject to ecclesiastical government.

The *BCO* provides a suggested litany for funeral services.

Article 50: The Consistory shall maintain accurate membership records which include names and dates of baptisms, professions of faith, marriages and deaths of members of the congregation.

See the quotation above from *FG XIII: 7-9* (in connection with Article 44).

Comparison and Evaluation of Ecclesiastical Functions and Tasks (Articles 37-50):

Similarities:

Your committee gratefully acknowledges the striking uniformity between the OPC and the URCNA in their common desire to promote God-glorifying, Word-centered worship, to administer the sacraments in an understandable and edifying manner according to the teaching of Scripture, and to conduct the affairs of the local church decently and in good order.

Differences:

There are, however, several notable differences between the OPC and the URCNA in matters relating to ecclesiastical tasks and functions.

1. Article 40 of the *CO* reflects the rich heritage of catechism preaching in the Dutch Reformed tradition. The OPC, on the other hand, does not mandate regular catechism preaching as part of its corporate worship services. In fact, no mention is made whatsoever of the place of the Larger or Shorter Catechisms in the service of corporate worship.
2. The *CO* mandates that the sacraments shall be administered with the use of the appropriate liturgical form. The same is true for the public profession of faith in the context of corporate worship. The OPC, reflecting its distinctive Presbyterian heritage, does not mandate specific liturgical forms for the administration of the sacraments, nor for the public profession of faith. Instead, Ministers of the Word and/or local sessions are granted the liberty to conduct these elements of corporate worship according to their own discretion so long as they follow a general pattern outlined by the Directory for Worship.
3. Article 47 of the *CO* assigns the primary organization and oversight of mission work to the local Consistory. In addition, those who are set apart for evangelistic and missionary labors are called, supported, and supervised by the Consistories that called them to their respective fields. The OPC assigns the work of evangelism to each ecclesiastical assembly (i.e., session, presbytery, general assembly) and specifically assigns the work of foreign missions to the general assembly and its committees/agencies.

2.4 ECCLESIASTICAL DISCIPLINE (Articles 51-66)

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Article 51: The spiritual nature and aims of church discipline are explained.

BD I: 1-3 distinguishes ecclesiastical discipline (for preserving the church's purity, peace, and good order) in two forms: administrative discipline (for maintaining good order in church government in non-judicial cases) and judicial discipline (for the prevention and correction of offenses).

Articles 52-53: Sins of a private character are to be handled according to Matthew 18.

Normally within two years of an alleged offense, a written charge of an offense may be brought by an injured party, by a person not an injured party, or by a judicatory (*BD III: 1.-2.*). Matthew 18:15-17 must have been followed faithfully before admitting a personal private charge. In the case of public offenses, it is permissible, but not required, to seek reconciliation in terms of Matthew 18:15-17 or Matthew 5:21-27 or Galatians 6:1.

Detailed instructions guide the judicatory called to render a verdict regarding a charge (*BD III: 7.a.-d., III: 8.a.-c., and especially BD IV, 'The Trial of Judicial Cases'*), including suggested forms for filing a written charge and for citing the accused to appear.

Judicial discipline contains five degrees of censure: admonition, rebuke, suspension, deposition, and excommunication. These are described in detail in *BD VI: B.1.-5.* Suspension is for either a definite or an indefinite period of time, and applies to both church members and officers.

Article 54: Continuing or public sin requires the involvement of the Consistory.

"No charge of a personal private offense shall be admitted unless the judicatory has assured itself that the person bringing the charge has faithfully followed the course set forth in Matthew 18:15-17; nor shall a charge of a private offense which is not personal be admitted unless it appears that the plaintiff has first done his utmost privately to restore the alleged offender. However, even in the case of public offenses, it is not wrong to seek reconciliation in terms of Matthew 18:15-17 or Matthew 5:21-27 or Galatians 6:1" (*BD III: 5.*).

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<p><i>Article 55:</i> The procedure for proceeding with office discipline is set forth, including the steps of public announcement and the role of the classis.</p>	<p>This article of the Church Order details necessary steps in the process of official discipline of church members. Chapter VI of the <i>BD</i> seems to indicate that the various degrees of censure would be followed—viz., admonition, rebuke, suspension, and excommunication (not necessarily followed seriatim)—and stipulates that indefinite suspension, deposition, and excommunication “shall be announced to the church..”</p>
<p><i>Article 56:</i> The terms and procedure for public excommunication are explained.</p>	<p>“Excommunication is the most severe form of censure and is resorted to only in cases of offenses aggravated by persistent impenitence. It consists in a solemn declaration by an ecclesiastical judicatory that the offender is no longer considered a member of the body of Christ” (<i>BD VI: B.5.</i>). We observe that the <i>CO</i> stipulates that excommunication occurs in a public worship service.</p>
<p><i>Articles 57-58:</i> The terms and procedure for public restoration of a penitent sinner are explained.</p>	<p><i>BD VI: D.</i> speaks of the restoration of officers, and <i>BD VI: B.3.b.</i> speaks of restoration to either membership or office as being “accompanied by a solemn admonition.”</p>
<p><i>Articles 59-60:</i> The terms and procedures for the official discipline and public restoration of baptized members is explained.</p>	<p>“When a noncommunicant member neglects the ongoing exhortation of the session to profess faith in Christ and rejects the covenantal responsibility of submission to home or church, the session may upon prior notification erase his name from the roll” (<i>BD II: B.3.d.(6)</i>).</p>
<p><i>Articles 61-63:</i> The terms and procedures for the official discipline and public restoration of office bearers is explained.</p>	<p>Suspension is either for a definite period or for an indefinite period (<i>BD VI: B.3.a.</i>). Indefinite suspension is reviewed annually.</p> <p>The indefinite suspension and deposition of officers involve action of the presbytery only in the case of a minister, including the dissolving of the relation between a suspended minister and his congregation.</p>
<p><i>Article 64:</i> The procedure for transferring membership to another URC is explained.</p>	<p><i>BD II: B.2.a.-f.</i> specifies ways of receiving memberships, such as transfer, reaffirmation of faith, profession of faith, and baptism. <i>BD II:</i></p>

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3.a.-g. specifies occasions for removing names of members, such as transfer, dismissal, erasure (cf. also *BD V: 2.*), death, and excommunication.

BD II: C.2. provides that the presbytery has original jurisdiction over all teaching elders (ministers).

Article 65: The parity of office is declared.

Neither the *FG* nor the *BD* contains a statement regarding the parity of the ecclesiastical offices.

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Article 66: The procedure for changing the Church Order is explained.

The *FG* is very explicit regarding the procedures for amending the *FG*, the *BD*, and the *DPW*.

“With the exception noted in Section 3, below, the Form of Government, Book of Discipline, and Directory for the Public Worship of God may be amended only in the following manner: The general assembly after due discussion shall propose the amendment to the presbyteries; each presbytery shall vote on the question before the next regular assembly, and the clerk of each presbytery shall notify the clerk of the assembly, in writing, of the action of the presbytery; if a majority of the presbyteries has thus signified approval of the amendment, the amendment shall become effective on January 1 of the first year ending in 5 or 0 following the year in which the clerk announces to the assembly that a majority of the presbyteries has approved the amendment. If the assembly proposing the amendment desires it to become effective earlier than the date hereinbefore provided, it may set an earlier date, but not sooner than the next regular assembly, by a two-thirds vote. No amendments shall be proposed to the presbyteries without written grounds for the proposed amendments” (*FG XXXII: 2.*)

A similar procedure obtains for amending the denomination’s credal statements and form of subscription:

“The Confession of Faith and Catechisms and the forms of subscription required of ministers, licentiates, ruling elders, and deacons, as these forms are found in the Form of Government, may be amended only in the following manner: The general assembly shall determine whether a suggested change is worthy of consideration. If so determined, it shall appoint a committee to consider any suggested change and to report to the next regular assembly with recommendations; that assembly may then propose the amendment to the presbyteries by a two-thirds majority of the members voting; approval by a presbytery shall be by a majority of the members voting, and following the decision the clerk of

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presbytery shall notify the clerk of the assembly, in writing, of the decision of the presbytery; if two-thirds of the presbyteries approve the amendment it shall be adopted finally only after approval of the next ensuing assembly by a two-thirds vote of the members voting” (*FG XXXII: 3.*).

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Matters in the BD not included in the CO

BD II: D.1. provides that when a session ceases to exist or becomes too small to work effectively, a presbytery shall provide for an election and ordination of elders or (with the congregation's consent) appoint ruling elders or ministers to be the acting session or to augment the existing session temporarily.

BD II: D.2.-4. stipulates that as a presbytery functions for a session or church that ceases to exist, so the general assembly functions for a presbytery that ceases to exist.

BD VII provides a detailed procedure for submitting an appeal in a judicial case.

BD IX provides a detailed procedure for submitting a complaint, which is a written charge, other than an appeal or protest, alleging a judicatory with delinquency.

Comparison and Evaluation of Ecclesiastical Discipline (Articles 51-66):

Similarities:

Both polities recognize the need for, and spiritual nature of, church discipline. Both are concerned to protect private admonition, and to provide for the orderly procedure of public, official discipline and public restoration upon repentance.

Differences:

The OPC has many more detailed procedural regulations for practicing church discipline at various assembly levels. One significant difference is that the presbytery has original jurisdiction over all teaching elders (ministers). Another significant difference is the explicit guidance provided to individuals and assemblies with regard to formulating, processing, adjudicating, and executing appeals, trials, and verdicts.

In summary, the polity regulations for ecclesiastical discipline are quite similar for the URCNA and for the OPC. The prominence given these regulations in the respective polities indicates the esteem and value with which church discipline is exercised as a mark of the true church of Jesus Christ.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That Synod Escondido 2001 grant the privilege of the floor and of participating in all discussions involving this report to the committee's chairman, Paul R. Ipema, and its reporter, Nelson D. Kloosterman.
2. That Synod Escondido 2001 refer this report to the churches for study and discussion.
3. That Synod Escondido 2001 refer this report to the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity for use in fulfilling its mandate.
4. That Synod Escondido 2001 declare that the committee has fulfilled its mandate and dismiss the committee.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert Clausing

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Joghinda Gangar
Paul R. Ipema, chairman
Nelson D. Kloosterman, reporter