

HERITAGE COVENANT CHURCH ORDER

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Preamble

Heritage Covenant Church confesses Jesus Christ as the sole King and Head of the Church (Col. 1:18). This Church Order seeks to order the life of the congregation according to the Word of God, in submission to Christ, and in continuity with the Reformed confessions (Three Forms of Unity). It stands as an updated expression of the historic Reformed Church Orders of Protestantism—particularly those articulated at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) and received in other Reformed churches from Geneva to Emden—preserving their biblical principles for faithful use in our present context. It is intended to serve the well-being of Christ's flock by ensuring that all things are done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40).

The church is distinct from the state; the state has no jurisdiction over the government, doctrine, or worship of the church (Matt. 22:21; Eph. 1:22). Therefore, the church is tax-immune by divine right and must not submit itself to civil entanglements such as 501(c)(3) status or any arrangement that would bring it under another head than Christ. The church is under the sole Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, the authority exercised in Christ's church is ministerial and declarative—ministerial, meaning that church leaders serve under Christ rather than rule in their own name, and declarative, meaning that they may only proclaim and apply what Christ has revealed in His Word, never binding consciences beyond Scripture.

Assemblies of the church shall deal only with ecclesiastical matters, that is, matters belonging to the spiritual life of the church such as doctrine, worship, sacraments, discipline, mission, and the care of the flock. They are not to intrude into the civil or domestic spheres that God has entrusted to other authorities; yet the church retains the calling to proclaim the whole counsel of God and to speak prophetically from Scripture to all of life, including matters of family, society, and government, always applying God's Word without usurping the roles of those other spheres.

These assemblies must also conduct themselves in an ecclesiastical manner—that is, with prayer, submission to Scripture, humility, and brotherly love. Their business is to seek together the mind of Christ, not to imitate worldly politics or to exercise power for its own sake.

The decisions of assemblies are to be received as settled and binding, unless it is shown that they conflict with the Word of God or the Reformed confessions. In such cases, the right of appeal to broader assemblies is preserved.

In all church government, no church shall lord it over another church, and no officebearer shall dominate another, for Christ alone is the King and Head. Local congregations are distinct, yet they willingly display their unity through a common confession, mutual accountability, and cooperation in broader assemblies for the edification of Christ's body.

SECTION I – FOUNDATIONS

Article 1 – Basis in Scripture and Confession

Heritage Covenant Church acknowledges the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired, infallible, and sufficient Word of God, the only rule for faith and life (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:20–21). We receive the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Canons of Dort) as faithful summaries of the doctrine taught in Scripture. All matters of faith, life, and church government are to be determined and regulated by the Word of God, as confessed in these standards.

Article 2 – The Headship of Christ

Jesus Christ is the sole King and Head of the Church (Eph. 1:22–23; Col. 1:18). No person, whether minister, elder, deacon, or member, may usurp His authority. All governing authority exercised in the church is ministerial and declarative, never legislative apart from Scripture. Officers serve as undershepherds, accountable to Christ the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:1–4).

Article 3 – Purpose of the Church Order

This Church Order is established so that all things in the congregation may be done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40). Its purpose is:

- To ensure that Christ's Word governs His church.
- To provide for the orderly exercise of the offices Christ has instituted.
- To guard the purity of worship, doctrine, discipline, and mission.
- To foster the unity, edification, and witness of the body of Christ.

This order shall serve the church, not lord over it. It may be amended for greater faithfulness, provided no article contradicts Scripture or the confessions.

Article 4 – Offices as Gifts of Christ

Christ has given offices to His church for the equipping of the saints and the building up of His body (Eph. 4:11–12). These offices include elders and deacons, who together exercise oversight and service. Elders govern and shepherd the church; deacons lead in mercy and stewardship. Both are necessary for the well-being of the church, and both are to be honored by the congregation (1 Thess. 5:12–13; Heb. 13:17).

Article 4a – Male Only Ordination

In accordance with God's Word and creation order, the ordained offices of elder and deacon are restricted to qualified men. This order is rooted not in cultural custom but in

divine design: Adam was formed first, then Eve (Gen. 2:18, 21–24; 1 Tim. 2:12–13). Leadership in the covenant community reflects this creational headship. Christ appointed men to serve as apostles and elders (Mark 3:13–19; Acts 14:23), and the qualifications for both elders and deacons require that they be “husbands of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:1–13; Tit. 1:5–9). While women exercise vital gifts of service, prayer, and encouragement (Rom. 16:1–2; Acts 18:26), the ordained offices of the church are entrusted by Christ to men, as a testimony to God’s created order and covenantal structure.

Article 5 – Polity Principle of Eldership

The office of elder is one, exercised in two functions: teaching elder (minister of the Word) and ruling elder (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 5:17). Both hold equal authority in governing the church, differing not in rank but in primary labors: teaching elders devote themselves especially to preaching and sacraments (2 Tim. 4:2), while ruling elders devote themselves especially to shepherding and oversight (1 Pet. 5:1–3). Yet together they shepherd as one body, united in Christ’s calling (Tit. 1:5–9).

No elder is “first among equals”; leadership is collaborative in nature. Authority is exercised corporately by the council of elders (consistory/session), with each elder possessing equal voice and vote. The council seeks consensus in its deliberations, submitting to Scripture and the Spirit’s leading (Acts 15:6, 28). Individual elders exercise authority only as representatives of the body, not in isolation. The church therefore rejects any hierarchical or monarchical form of rule among elders, affirming instead the parity of the eldership under Christ (Matt. 20:25–28; Eph. 4:11–12; Phil. 1:1).

SECTION II – OFFICES OF THE CHURCH

Article 6 – The Office of Elder

The one office of elder is exercised in two functions: teaching elder (minister of the Word) and ruling elder. Both share equal authority, dignity, and responsibility, differing only in their particular labors. Elders are charged to shepherd the flock of God, governing in doctrine, worship, discipline, and life (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9).

6.1 Nature of the Office

The office of elder is instituted by Christ for the shepherding, governing, and equipping of His people. Elders are undershepherds of Christ, guarding the flock, teaching sound doctrine, and overseeing the spiritual life of the church. Teaching and ruling elders

together form one office with equal authority, though distinct functions (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1–4; Heb. 13:17).

The office of elder is restricted to qualified men, in obedience to Scripture. From creation, God established male headship in the home and in the covenant community (Gen. 2:18; 1 Cor. 11:3–10; 1 Tim. 2:12–13). Christ Himself set apart men as apostles and ordained elders in the early church (Mark 3:13–19; Acts 14:23). The qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 explicitly require that an elder be “the husband of one wife,” exercising godly leadership in his household as a pattern for the church. Therefore, eldership is a male-only office, grounded in creation order, divine command, and apostolic example.

6.2 Qualifications & Training

Elders must meet the qualifications of Scripture: above reproach, husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money, managing their households well, not recent converts, and of good repute with outsiders (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). They must exemplify humility, integrity, and spiritual maturity, serving not under compulsion but willingly, not domineering but as examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:2–3). The consistory shall provide or require doctrinal, pastoral, and governance training suitable to the office (2 Tim. 2:15).

6.3 Distinction of Functions within One Office

Teaching elders (ministers of the Word) devote themselves especially to preaching, catechesis, and administering the sacraments (1 Tim. 5:17; 2 Tim. 4:1–2). Ruling elders share equally in governance and shepherding, with a particular focus on oversight, discipline, and pastoral care (Rom. 12:8; 1 Tim. 5:17). Both share equally in decision-making, discipline, and oversight, rejecting any permanent “first among equals.”

6.4 Election, Nomination & Ordination

Elders shall be chosen by the congregation, ordinarily upon nomination by the consistory/session; members may also submit names for consideration. Prior to election, nominees shall be examined by the consistory regarding doctrine, life, and spiritual maturity (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1). The process shall be conducted with prayer, transparency, and due opportunity for lawful objections, so that the call is seen to be from Christ and not from human partiality (Acts 1:23–26; 14:23). Those elected shall be set apart with prayer and the laying on of hands in a public worship service, using an appropriate biblical/confessional form (1 Tim. 4:14). No one shall enter upon the duties of the office until duly elected, examined, and ordained.

6.5 Duties of Elders

Elders shall:

- Shepherd the flock—knowing, protecting, guiding, visiting, and comforting the sheep (John 21:15–17; Acts 20:28).
- Teach the Word—guarding doctrine, refuting error, and applying Scripture (Titus 1:9; 2 Tim. 4:2).
- Oversee worship—regulating worship and administering the sacraments (1 Cor. 11:23–26).
- Exercise discipline—admonishing, correcting, and, if necessary, excluding the unrepentant, always seeking restoration (Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:4–5).
- Equip for mission—preparing the saints for ministry and leading in witness (Eph. 4:11–12; Acts 13:2–3).
- Lead collaboratively—exercising authority collectively, seeking consensus, reflecting Christ’s servant leadership (Phil. 2:2–5).

6.6 Authority & Accountability

Elders exercise real authority derived from Christ, but their authority is ministerial and declarative, not magisterial or autonomous. They are accountable to Christ the Chief Shepherd, to one another in mutual submission, to the congregation, and to broader assemblies (classis and synod) (Matt. 20:25–28; 1 Pet. 5:1–4; Heb. 13:17).

6.7 Parity of Elders

All elders, whether teaching or ruling, are equal in office and authority. Each has one vote in deliberation and decision. While different gifts and responsibilities may be recognized, no elder holds primacy. Leadership is shared, with chairmanship rotated or elected as provided in Article 24 (Acts 15:6).

6.8 Term of Service

Elders ordinarily serve for defined terms, renewable upon re-election, and remain subject to examination, accountability, and discipline. In exceptional cases, lifelong service may be recognized by the congregation. Continuity of pastoral care shall be preserved.

6.9 Discipline, Removal & Restoration

Elders who err in doctrine or life are subject to suspension or deposition from office, according to Section V (Discipline & Shepherding). Because they are stewards of God’s household, they are held to a higher standard (James 3:1; 1 Tim. 5:19–20). Restoration to office, where appropriate, shall follow genuine repentance, careful examination, and pastoral prudence (Gal. 6:1; 2 Cor. 2:6–8).

Article 7 – Equality of Authority

All elders are equal in office and authority. Teaching elders labor especially in Word and sacrament; ruling elders especially in governance and shepherding; but no elder holds primacy. Decisions are reached jointly, and authority is exercised corporately in the consistory/session (1 Pet. 5:1–3; Matt. 20:25–28).

Article 8 – The Teaching Elder

The teaching elder (minister of the Word) devotes himself to preaching, sacraments, public reading of Scripture, prayer, catechesis, and equipping the saints (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:1–2; Eph. 4:11–12). He labors in partnership with ruling elders, not above them.

Article 9 – The Ruling Elder

The ruling elder shares in the government of the church, tasked with oversight of members, guarding doctrine, and shepherding the flock in love and discipline (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12–14).

Article 10 – Collegial Exercise of Authority

Elders must exercise authority corporately, never individually, except where explicitly delegated. All authority flows from Christ the Head, through His Word, and is exercised in common deliberation and decision (Acts 15:6, 22).

Article 16 – Emeritus Status

An elder retiring due to age, infirmity, or long service may be declared emeritus. Emeritus elders may be given voice but not vote unless reactivated by election. They are to be honored for their labors (1 Tim. 5:17).

Article 19 – The Office of Deacon

19.1 Nature of the Office

The deacon's office is a spiritual ministry, reflecting the mercy of Christ. Deacons are called to manifest His compassion by caring for the poor, sick, widows, orphans, and those in distress. Together with the elders, they form part of the council of the church, each office distinct in function but united in dignity and authority under Christ (Acts 6:1–7; Phil. 1:1; 1 Pet. 4:10–11).

The office of deacon, like that of elder, is restricted to qualified men. In Acts 6, the apostles commanded the church to select “men of good repute” for diaconal service. Likewise, Paul teaches that deacons must be “husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their households well” (1 Tim. 3:12). This demonstrates that deacons, no less than elders, are to be men. This divine order reflects God's creational pattern of

male leadership in His covenant household. While women may serve alongside deacons in ministries of mercy (Rom. 16:1–2), the ordained office itself is entrusted by Christ to men, preserving the biblical design of male headship in the church.

19.2 Qualifications

Deacons must meet the biblical qualifications of 1 Timothy 3:8–13.

19.3 Election & Ordination

Deacons shall be chosen by the congregation, ordinarily upon nomination by the consistory/session together with the deacons; members may also submit names. Nominees shall be examined regarding doctrine, life, and spiritual maturity. Election is conducted with prayer, transparency, and due opportunity for lawful objections. Those elected are ordained with prayer and the laying on of hands in public worship (Acts 6:3–6; 1 Tim. 3:8–13).

19.4 Duties of Deacons

Deacons shall extend mercy, steward resources, encourage generosity, relieve the elders for prayer and the Word, and serve collaboratively in council while maintaining their distinct office of mercy (James 1:27; 2 Cor. 8–9; Acts 6:4).

19.5 Authority & Dignity

Deacons exercise real authority within their office. Their ministry is not secondary but complementary to that of elders; their authority is ministerial and declarative, exercised humbly under the Word (1 Pet. 4:10–11).

SECTION III – ASSEMBLIES

Article 21 – The Consistory/Session Defined

The consistory (or session) is composed of all the elders of the church, both teaching and ruling (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1). The consistory is the governing body of the local congregation, responsible for the spiritual government of the flock, including oversight of doctrine, worship, discipline, and pastoral care. It is the only assembly whose decisions possess direct authority within the congregation, for its authority is derived immediately from Christ the Head.

Article 22 – Authority of the Consistory

The consistory/session holds authority jointly and corporately, not individually. All elders have equal voice and vote. Its authority is ministerial and declarative; elders serve under Christ and may only proclaim and apply what He has revealed in His Word, never binding consciences with human commands (Matt. 18:18–20; Heb. 13:17).

Article 23 – Frequency of Consistory Meetings

The consistory shall ordinarily meet at least once each month to attend to the spiritual welfare of the congregation (Acts 20:28). Special meetings may be called as needed, with reasonable notice given to all members.

Article 24 – Agenda and Order of Meetings (incl. Chair Rotation)

Preparation & Order – The chair and clerk shall prepare and distribute an agenda in advance. Meetings begin and end with prayer and the reading of Scripture, conducted in good order (1 Cor. 14:40).

Chairmanship – Chairmanship shall rotate annually or by election, ensuring that no elder becomes a permanent head. The chair facilitates the meeting but has no greater authority than the others (Matt. 20:25–28).

Minutes & Records – A clerk, chosen by the consistory, shall record minutes, maintain correspondence, and preserve the official record of the church (Deut. 31:24–26).

Decision-Making – Deliberations shall be prayerful, seeking consensus—defined as substantial agreement reflecting genuine unity. Where consensus is not possible, decisions may be made by majority vote in humility and unity (Eph. 4:3; Phil. 2:2–4).

Article 25 – Matters Reserved to the Consistory

The consistory/session alone shall deliberate and decide upon: admission to and exclusion from the Lord's Table; doctrinal fidelity and confessional subscription; ecclesiastical discipline and restoration; and oversight of public worship. Deacons may offer counsel but shall not vote on these matters (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:9).

Confessional subscription means the solemn promise of officebearers to uphold the Reformed confessions as faithful summaries of Scripture.

Article 26 – The Council Defined

The council is composed of all elders and deacons together (Acts 6:2–4; Phil. 1:1). Unlike the consistory, which governs spiritual matters, the council oversees the overall life of the congregation, including stewardship, mission, and community witness.

Article 27 – Authority of the Council

The council governs matters pertaining to administration, finances, property, mission endeavors, mercy, and congregational care. In these matters, deacons exercise equal voice and vote with elders (1 Cor. 12:4–7).

Article 28 – Frequency of Council Meetings

The council shall ordinarily meet at least quarterly, or more often as needed, for the care of the congregation and its mission (Acts 11:29–30).

Article 29 – Congregational Meetings

Congregational meetings shall be called by the consistory/council, with at least two weeks' notice given on the Lord's Day. Matters include election of officers, calling of ministers, adoption of budgets, acquisition or disposal of property, and other significant concerns (Acts 6:2–3). Meetings shall be conducted in prayer, humility, and unity.

Article 30 – Voting Rights and Quorum

All communicant members in good standing are entitled to vote (Acts 6:5). A quorum—the minimum number of members required for valid decision-making—shall consist of at least one-third of communicant members, unless otherwise specified by the council. Voting shall ordinarily be by written ballot to preserve discretion and integrity.

Article 31 – Financial Stewardship and Trustees

The council shall ensure faithful stewardship of church property, finances, and benevolence. Where civil law requires, trustees may be appointed by the council to hold property in trust for the congregation, always subject to the authority of the council/session. All financial records shall be open to review by the council and congregation, except where confidentiality is necessary (2 Cor. 8:19–21).

Article 32 – Appeals and Grievances

Members believing themselves wronged by a decision may bring appeal to the consistory/session (Acts 15:6–7). If unresolved, the matter may be appealed to classis (regional assembly). If unresolved at classis, further appeal may be made to synod (general assembly). An appeal is a request to a broader assembly to review and judge a decision of a narrower assembly. Appeals must be written, with clear biblical reasoning, and handled with pastoral care and prayer (Prov. 15:22).

Article 33 – Discipline and Assemblies

Cases of discipline shall be handled by the consistory, with deacons giving counsel as appropriate. Members under discipline may appeal to classis and synod, who shall hear such appeals with impartiality, prayer, and submission to Scripture. Confidentiality shall be maintained, but transparency in principle and process is required (Matt. 18:15–17).

Article 34 – Classis (Regional Assembly)

Neighboring churches shall form a classis, ordinarily meeting twice per year. A classis is a regional assembly of neighboring churches. Each church shall delegate two elders and one minister (if applicable) as voting members. Deacons may also be delegated with an advisory vote. Classis shall provide counsel, oversight, and mutual accountability for member churches, including examination of candidates, hearing appeals, promoting mission, and conducting church visitation. **Church visitation** means that experienced officebearers, appointed by classis, visit each congregation to encourage and admonish where necessary, ensuring faithfulness in doctrine, worship, discipline, and mercy.

Article 35 – Synod (General Assembly)

The churches of a region shall form a synod, ordinarily meeting every two or three years. A synod is the broadest assembly of churches, made up of delegated elders and ministers from several classes. Each classis shall delegate ministers and elders in equal number. Synod shall deliberate on matters too broad for classis, preserve unity of doctrine and order, hear appeals, and promote mission and cooperation among churches.

Article 36 – Matters and Manner of Assemblies

In all assemblies only ecclesiastical matters shall be transacted, and only in an ecclesiastical manner. **Ecclesiastical matters** are those proper to the church, such as doctrine, worship, sacraments, discipline, mission, and the care of the flock. An **ecclesiastical manner** means that business is conducted prayerfully, according to Scripture, in humility and love, seeking together the mind of Christ (Acts 15:6, 28).

Article 37 – Transparency and Communication

All assemblies (consistory, council, classis, synod) shall report their decisions to those subject to them, explaining their biblical grounds (2 Cor. 1:12). Sensitive matters shall be handled with confidentiality, but all deliberations must be accountable to Christ and His Word.

Article 38 – Spirit of Service in Assemblies

All assemblies shall exercise authority ministerially and declaratively, not autocratically, seeking the mind of Christ (Acts 15:28). Decisions shall be made with humility, prayer, and mutual submission, displaying Christlike servant-leadership (Matt. 20:25–28; Eph. 4:2–3). Parity means equality of officebearers and assemblies: no consistory shall lord it over another, and no officebearer shall dominate another. All assemblies exist to serve, not dominate, under Christ the Head.

SECTION IV – WORSHIP & SACRAMENTS

Article 39 – The Lord’s Day

The first day of the week, the Lord’s Day, is to be sanctified by rest from ordinary labors and by the assembling of the saints for public worship (Gen. 2:2–3; Ex. 20:8–11; Acts 20:7; Rev. 1:10). The congregation is to delight in the Lord through His appointed means of grace. Works of necessity and mercy are permitted (Matt. 12:12).

Article 40 – The Regulative Principle of Worship

Public worship is to be governed by the Word of God alone. Nothing is to be introduced into worship except what is commanded or clearly warranted by Scripture (Deut. 12:32; Lev. 10:1–3; Matt. 15:9; John 4:24). All elements of worship shall be conducted decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40).

Article 41 – Elements of Worship

Public worship shall ordinarily include: the reading of Holy Scripture (1 Tim. 4:13); the preaching of the Word (Rom. 10:14–17); congregational prayer (1 Tim. 2:1–2); singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16); confession of faith (Rom. 10:9–10); administration of the sacraments (Matt. 28:19–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26); giving of tithes and offerings (1 Cor. 16:2).

Article 42 – Public Worship Services

The congregation shall ordinarily gather twice on the Lord’s Day for worship, unless hindered by providential necessity. Evening services may be used for catechetical preaching, missionary emphasis, or other edifying purposes (Acts 2:42; Heb. 10:25).

Article 43 – The Preaching of the Word

The preaching of the Word is central to the worship of God's people. It must be faithful to Scripture, Christ-centered, and doctrinally sound, for the building up of the saints and the calling of the lost (Rom. 10:14–17; 2 Tim. 4:1–2). Ministers are to preach the whole counsel of God with clarity, boldness, and pastoral concern (Acts 20:27). Catechetical preaching through the confessions is to be maintained (2 Tim. 1:13).

Article 44 – The Sacraments Defined

The sacraments, instituted by Christ, are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace. They are two in number: Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Matt. 28:19–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26). They are to be administered only under the oversight of the consistory/session and by lawfully ordained ministers. Records of administration shall be faithfully kept.

Article 45 – Baptism

Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the visible church. It is to be administered to believers and their covenant children, signifying union with Christ, the washing away of sins, and new life in the Spirit (Acts 2:38–39; Rom. 6:3–4; Col. 2:11–12).

1. Parents presenting their children shall vow to raise them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4).
2. Baptism shall ordinarily be administered in the public assembly of worship.
3. Private baptisms are discouraged and permitted only in extraordinary circumstances, with the approval of the consistory.

Article 46 – The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is the sacrament of covenant renewal, instituted by Christ for the nourishment of His people. Worthy receivers, by faith, partake of Christ's body and blood spiritually, feeding on Him unto eternal life (1 Cor. 11:23–29; John 6:53–57).

1. It shall be observed regularly, ordinarily monthly, or at another frequency determined by the consistory/session.
2. The Supper shall be administered with the reading of Scripture, prayer of thanksgiving, the words of institution, and distribution of the elements.
3. Communion tokens, cards, or interviews may be used as pastoral means of guarding the Table.

Article 47 – Admission to the Lord's Table

Admission to the Lord's Table is for professing believers who demonstrate faith in Christ, repentance of sin, and membership in good standing within a faithful Christian church (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 10:16–17).

1. Elders shall guard the table by exercising pastoral care, warning against unworthy participation, and barring the impenitent when necessary (1 Cor. 11:27–32).
2. Guests from sister churches may be admitted on the basis of commendation or examination by the elders.
3. Children shall not be admitted until they make a credible profession of faith and are received into communicant membership.
4. Thus, we reject *Paedocommunion*—that is, admitting infants or young children to the Lord's Table—is expressly rejected.
 1. In harmony with the historic Reformed consensus (Belgic Confession 35; Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 81–82), admission to the Supper requires more than baptism: it requires a personal and credible profession of faith together with evidence of a godly life.
 2. Because communicants must be able to examine themselves, discern the body of Christ, and confess Him publicly (1 Cor. 11:27–29; 10:16–17; Rom. 10:9–10), baptized children are received into communicant membership and admitted to the Supper only after making public profession of faith, under the oversight and pastoral care of the elders.

Article 48 – Worship Music and Liturgy

Music and liturgy in worship must conform to the Word of God and edify the congregation. Psalms are to be given primary place, with hymns and spiritual songs used in harmony with Scripture (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19).

1. Liturgy shall be simple, reverent, and centered on the gospel.
2. Creeds and confessions (e.g., Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Heidelberg Catechism) shall be regularly employed to confess the faith.
3. Musical leadership shall be under the oversight of the elders, ensuring congregational participation and doctrinal integrity.

Article 49 – Special Services

The consistory/session may call special services on occasions of fasting, thanksgiving, covenant renewal, or extraordinary need (Joel 2:15–16; Ps. 50:14–15).

1. Weddings and funerals shall be conducted as services of worship under elder oversight.
2. National holidays may be acknowledged with prayer, but worship shall remain God-centered and free from undue nationalism.
3. Days of prayer and fasting may be proclaimed in times of crisis, and days of thanksgiving in times of blessing.

Article 50 – Conduct in Worship

Worshippers are to come with reverence, humility, and expectancy (Ps. 95:6; Heb. 12:28). Elders shall encourage faithful attendance, active participation, and the discipline of silence and listening in the presence of God's Word. Children are to be welcomed and trained in reverent worship.

SECTION V – DISCIPLINE & SHEPHERDING

Article 51 – The Nature and Purpose of Discipline

Church discipline is a spiritual duty commanded by Christ for the purity of His church, the restoration of the sinner, and the honor of God's name (Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:6–7; Gal. 6:1). It is to be exercised in love, humility, and patience, always aiming at the repentance and reconciliation of the offender and the edification of the body.

Article 52 – Refusal to Listen Defined

Refusal to Listen

- A member is considered to “refuse to listen” (Matt. 18:17) when he will not acknowledge the matter as sin, rejects biblical correction, or resists the shepherding of the elders.

Strugglers Under Care

- A member who acknowledges the sin, seeks forgiveness, and submits to elder shepherding is not refusing to listen.
- Those who repent, even if still struggling, are to be treated with gentleness, patience, and ongoing pastoral care (1 Thess. 5:14).
- Where needed, the elders may encourage or require professional counseling alongside pastoral guidance.

Process Before Public Action

- No case is to be brought before the congregation until sufficient pastoral engagement, admonition, and—if warranted—professional help have been pursued.
- Only if the member persists in denial or rebellion after these steps shall the matter proceed to public discipline.

Article 53 – Private and Public Sin

1. Private Sin

- Private sin is known only to the offender and to the one or few witnesses (Matt. 18:15–16).
- Such sin shall be addressed privately in obedience to Christ:
 1. *Personal Admonition* – If your brother sins, go and tell him his fault privately. If he listens, you have gained your brother.
 2. *Small Group Admonition* – If he does not listen, take one or two others along, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.
 3. *Elder Oversight* – If he still refuses to listen, the matter shall be brought to the elders for pastoral care, admonition, and, when needed, professional counseling support.
- **Not Public Until Excommunication** – Private sin is not to be made public at any stage short of excommunication. Admonitions and suspensions from the sacraments are exercised pastorally by the elders and remain confidential. Only if the sinner persists in impenitence and excommunication is required does the matter become public before the congregation (Matt. 18:17).

2. **Public Sin**

- Public sin is that which is already open, scandalous, or widely known (1 Cor. 5:1–2; Gal. 2:11–14). Examples include gross immorality, divisiveness, false teaching, public slander, or criminal acts.
- Because such sin is already public, the elders must act immediately to guard the purity of the church, warn the flock, and pursue the offender's repentance. Public correction or suspension may be required for the sake of the body's witness.

Article 54 – Informal Admonition

When a member strays in doctrine or life, fellow believers should admonish him privately and gently, seeking repentance and restoration (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1). Such admonition is the duty of all members and is to be carried out in love, not gossip.

Article 55 – Formal Admonition

If private admonition does not bring repentance, the matter may be brought to the elders. After patient instruction, prayer, and pastoral counsel, the elders may issue formal admonitions, warning of the seriousness of sin and urging repentance (2 Thess. 3:14–15).

- **Refusal to Listen Defined** – Refusal to listen means the individual will not acknowledge the behavior as sin according to God's Word.
- **Not Refusal to Listen** – Those who acknowledge the sin, repent, and submit to the care of the elders (including receiving professional help if necessary) are not to be treated as impenitent, but as weak sheep under Christ's care.

Article 56 – Suspension from the Sacraments

If admonition is resisted, the elders may suspend the member from the Lord's Supper. Suspension is a sober pastoral act intended to awaken repentance and is not a matter of public announcement unless excommunication becomes necessary (1 Cor. 11:27–32).

Article 57 – Excommunication

If the offender persists in unrepentance and refuses to acknowledge sin, despite repeated admonitions and pastoral care, the elders shall, with sorrow and prayer, proceed to excommunication.

- At this point, the matter becomes public, and the congregation is solemnly informed, so that all may know the reason for separation and pray for restoration (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:4–5).
- Excommunication is the removal of the individual from the fellowship of the church, handing him over to Satan so that he may be brought to repentance.

Article 58 – Restoration of the Penitent

When one who has been suspended or excommunicated repents and seeks forgiveness, the elders shall joyfully restore him to full fellowship, declaring publicly the grace of Christ in his life (2 Cor. 2:6–8; Luke 15:7).

Article 59 – Discipline of Officebearers

If an elder or deacon falls into sin or neglects his duties, he shall be subject to the same discipline as any member, with additional weight due to the gravity of his office (1 Tim. 5:19–20; James 3:1).

Article 60 – Suspension of Elders and Deacons

Pending investigation of charges, an elder or deacon may be suspended from office by the consistory/session, to guard the purity of the church and prevent scandal (Tit. 1:7). Suspension of officebearers is to be kept as private as possible until public action is required.

Article 61 – Deposition from Office

If an officebearer is found guilty of persistent sin, heresy, or gross neglect, he shall be deposed from office by the elders. This act shall be carried out with solemnity, prayer, and pastoral care (1 Tim. 3:2–7; Acts 20:28–30).

Article 62 – Restoration of Officebearers

A deposed officebearer may only be restored after true repentance and careful examination of his doctrine and life. Restoration must be cautious, prayerful, and

ordinarily done with counsel from sister churches or broader assemblies (Gal. 6:1; 1 Tim. 5:22).

Article 63 – Pastoral Visitation

The elders shall conduct regular visitation of members, encouraging them in faith and life, admonishing where necessary, and strengthening covenant fellowship (Acts 20:20; Heb. 3:13).

Article 64 – Shepherding of Families

Elders shall oversee not only individuals but households, encouraging family worship, parental discipleship, and covenant faithfulness (Eph. 6:4; Gen. 18:19).

Article 65 – Care for the Erring

Special care must be shown toward the erring, the weak, and the wandering. Elders shall seek them out, bind up the wounded, and point them to Christ the Shepherd (Ezek. 34:4; John 10:14–16).

Article 66 – Confidentiality in Discipline

All discipline shall be conducted with strict confidentiality, shared only with those who must know. Matters remain private until excommunication is necessary. This protects the honor of Christ, the purity of the church, and the dignity of the individual (Prov. 11:13; Matt. 18:15).

Article 67 – Appeals in Discipline

Any member under discipline may appeal a decision to the elders. If unresolved, counsel may be sought from classis, synod, or sister churches, in accordance with biblical accountability (Acts 15:6, 22; Prov. 15:22).

SECTION VI – BIBLICAL DECISION-MAKING

Article 68 – Christ-Centered Discernment

All decisions in the church must be made under the lordship of Jesus Christ, who governs His people by His Word and Spirit (Col. 1:18; James 1:5). Decisions are not to be driven by human will or majority rule alone, but by seeking together the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:1–5).

Article 69 – The Role of Scripture and Prayer

The foundation of decision-making is the prayerful study and application of Scripture. Meetings of the consistory/session and council shall begin and end with prayer, and deliberations must be guided by the Word of God (Acts 6:4; Ps. 119:105).

Article 70 – Principles of Discussion

In deliberations, elders and deacons shall:

1. Speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).
2. Listen carefully and patiently (James 1:19).
3. Avoid quarrelsome or domineering behavior (2 Tim. 2:24–25; 1 Pet. 5:3).
4. Seek unity and peace without compromising truth (Rom. 14:19).
5. Remember that the glory of God and the good of His church are paramount (1 Cor. 10:31).

Article 71 – Consensus Seeking

Decisions should be made by consensus wherever possible, reflecting the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). Consensus is defined not as unanimity of opinion, but as substantial agreement reached by listening, persuasion, and prayer.

Article 72 – Use of Voting

When consensus cannot be reached after prayer and extended deliberation, voting may be employed as a tool for decision-making (Acts 1:26). However, voting must never replace the pursuit of unity in the Spirit. Minority opinions are to be heard, respected, and recorded when significant.

Article 73 – Appeals and Reconsideration

Any elder, deacon, or member who conscientiously disagrees with a decision may request reconsideration, offering biblical and pastoral grounds (Prov. 27:17). The body must prayerfully weigh such concerns, guarding against pride and haste (Prov. 18:13).

Article 74 – Spirit-Led Collaboration

All decision-making is to be collaborative, reflecting the parity of elders and the priesthood of all believers (Acts 15:6, 22–25). Leaders are to model humility, listening, and dependence on the Spirit, trusting Christ to lead His church through His appointed servants (John 16:13; Acts 20:28).

SECTION VII – MEMBERSHIP & CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

Article 75 – Nature of Membership

Membership in the visible church is a covenantal privilege and responsibility. Members are united to Christ and His body, called to mutual love, accountability, and service (1 Cor. 12:12–27; Eph. 4:15–16).

Article 76 – Admission to Membership

Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ, affirm the truths of the gospel, submit to the oversight of the elders, and commit to the life and mission of the church shall be admitted to communicant membership (Rom. 10:9–10; Acts 2:41–42). Baptized children of believers are received as non-communicant members until they publicly profess faith.

Article 77 – Responsibilities of Members

Members are called to:

1. Participate faithfully in the means of grace — Word, sacraments, and prayer (Acts 2:42).
2. Support the work of the church through prayer, service, and giving (2 Cor. 9:7).
3. Submit to the loving oversight of elders (Heb. 13:17).
4. Pursue personal holiness and family worship (1 Thess. 4:3; Deut. 6:6–7).

5. Engage in mission and witness in daily life (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:8).

Article 78 – Privileges of Members

Members enjoy the privileges of:

1. Participation in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10:16–17).
2. Baptism of their covenant children (Acts 2:39).
3. Pastoral care, shepherding, and discipline (1 Pet. 5:2–3).
4. Voting in congregational meetings on matters outlined in this Church Order (Acts 6:3).
5. Fellowship in the communion of saints (Eph. 2:19–22).

Article 79 – Transfer of Membership

When members move or unite with another faithful congregation, they should request a letter of transfer from the elders. The consistory/session shall commend them to the care of the new church, ensuring the continuity of shepherding (Acts 18:27; Rom. 16:1–2).

Article 80 – Withdrawal from Membership

A member who seeks to withdraw from the church must do so in consultation with the elders. If the withdrawal is to join another faithful church, the elders shall bless the transfer. If withdrawal is sought apart from uniting with a faithful church, the elders shall lovingly warn of the dangers of separation from Christ's body (Heb. 10:24–25).

Article 81 – Inactive Members

If members persist in neglecting worship or the duties of membership without valid reason, the elders shall admonish them. Continued neglect may result in removal from membership, with pastoral care extended throughout the process (Heb. 3:12–13).

Article 82 – Congregational Fellowship and Unity

Members are to cultivate love, hospitality, and unity, bearing one another's burdens and striving for peace (Rom. 12:10–13; Gal. 6:2). The congregation is called to embody a covenant family, living as a foretaste of the heavenly community (Acts 2:44–47; Rev. 7:9–10).

SECTION VII-A – CATEGORIES OF MEMBERSHIP

Article 83 – The Nature of Membership Categories

The visible church consists of all who are called by God's name and live under the oversight of Christ's shepherds. To order the life of the congregation, membership is recognized in the following categories:

1. **Baptized Members** – the children of believers, received into the covenant by baptism, belonging to the church though not yet admitted to the Lord's Table (Acts 2:39; Eph. 6:4). Baptized members are under the oversight of the consistory, entitled to nurture and instruction, and subject to pastoral admonition when neglectful or disobedient. Though not yet communicant members, they remain accountable to Christ's covenant.
2. **Confessing Members** – those who, having been baptized or converted later in life, make a public profession of faith before the congregation and are admitted to the Lord's Supper. They enjoy full privileges and responsibilities of membership, including the right to vote in congregational meetings (Rom. 10:9–10; 1 Cor. 10:16–17).
3. **Guests and Adherents** – those who attend the means of grace and fellowship regularly but who have not formally united with the congregation. They are welcomed with love and hospitality, though they remain outside the formal discipline and privileges of membership (Heb. 10:24–25).
4. **Inactive Members** – those who persistently neglect the means of grace or the responsibilities of membership without sufficient cause (Heb. 3:12–13). Inactive membership is not permanent; the consistory shall admonish such members and seek their restoration. If neglect continues, their names shall be removed from the roll with pastoral care and prayer.

SECTION VII-B – PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH

Article 84 – Nature of Profession of Faith

Public profession of faith is the solemn act by which baptized members, or those newly converted, confess Christ before His people, affirm the truth of the gospel, and commit themselves to the oversight and fellowship of the church (Matt. 10:32; Rom. 10:9–10).

Article 85 – Preparation for Profession

Those desiring to profess their faith shall receive instruction in Scripture and the Reformed confessions, ordinarily through catechesis. They shall be examined by the consistory to discern their understanding of the gospel, their credible profession of faith and repentance, and their willingness to submit to the church's doctrine and discipline (1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 1:13). Refusal to profess faith in due time, after sufficient instruction, shall be a matter of pastoral admonition.

Article 86 – Vows in Profession

In the presence of the congregation, candidates shall vow:

1. To confess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
2. To affirm the truths of the Christian faith as summarized in the Reformed confessions.
3. To participate faithfully in the means of grace—Word, sacraments, prayer, and fellowship.
4. To submit sincerely and willingly to the government and discipline of the church, acknowledging this oversight as Christ's provision for their good.

Article 87 – Admission to the Lord's Supper

Upon making profession of faith, members shall be admitted to the Lord's Table as communicant members, enjoying the full privileges and responsibilities of Christ's covenant family (1 Cor. 11:23–29).

SECTION VII-C – CHRISTIAN EDUCATION OBLIGATION

Article 88 – The Covenant Responsibility of Parents

Believing parents are commanded to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, instructing them diligently in the Word of God (Deut. 6:6–7; Eph. 6:4). When parents present their children for baptism, they vow to train them in the Christian faith. This vow includes the duty to provide them with an education consistent with the Word of God and the Reformed confessions.

Article 89 – The Church's Responsibility

The consistory shall exhort, encourage, and support parents in this covenant obligation, reminding them that the training of covenant children is a spiritual duty of the highest importance. The church shall promote Christian education in the home, in the congregation, and—where possible—in schools that honor Christ and uphold biblical truth (Ps. 78:4–7; Prov. 22:6).

Article 90 – Means of Fulfillment

Parents may fulfill this obligation through:

1. Faithful practice of family worship and catechesis in the home.
2. Enrollment of their children in Christian schools where available and possible.
3. Regular participation in congregational instruction and catechetical preaching.

4. Guarding against instruction, whether in home or public settings, that undermines biblical truth.

Article 91 – Pastoral Oversight

Elders shall regularly inquire into the instruction of covenant children during family visitation, admonishing parents where negligence is found and encouraging them to persevere in this duty (Gen. 18:19; Mal. 2:15). Persistent neglect of this obligation is a matter for pastoral admonition, for it undermines the baptismal promises made before God and His church.

SECTION VIII – MISSION & EVANGELISM

Article 92 – The Mission of the Church

The mission of the church flows from the glory of God: missions exists because worship does not. The church is called to proclaim the gospel, make disciples of all nations, and bear witness to God's kingdom in word and deed, so that the nations may turn to Christ and glorify His Name (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:8; Eph. 3:10; Rev. 5:9–10). Mission is not optional but essential to the church's identity, for the church exists to glorify God by gathering and perfecting the saints through the gospel (John 17:18; 20:21).

Article 93 – One Mission in All of Life

Every believer is called to participate in the mission of God. This calling includes faithfulness in the family (Gen. 18:19; Eph. 6:4), witness in the home (Acts 16:31–34), integrity in schools and vocations (Col. 3:23–24), service in local communities (Jer. 29:7; Matt. 5:14–16), and gospel witness locally, nationally, and globally (Acts 1:8). There are not multiple missions, but one mission under Christ: to live and proclaim the gospel in every sphere of life.

Article 94 – Congregational Responsibility for Witness

Every member shares in the church's mission by living as Christ's ambassador (2 Cor. 5:20). The consistory/session shall equip the saints for this work through preaching, catechesis, discipleship, and exhortation, so that each member may live as a witness in word and deed (Eph. 4:11–12; Phil. 2:15–16).

Article 95 – Christian Education as Mission and Discipleship

Christian education is a vital means of evangelism and discipleship. The covenant community is called to nurture its children in the fear of the Lord through family worship, catechesis, Christian schools, and congregational instruction (Deut. 6:6–7; Ps. 78:4–7). Education grounded in God's Word serves not only to disciple covenant youth but also to bear witness to the truth of Christ in society, offering a powerful form of evangelism to the world (Prov. 22:6; 2 Tim. 3:15–17). The church shall encourage, support, and defend faithful Christian education as part of its mission.

Article 96 – The Sending of Missionaries

Missionaries and evangelists shall be called, trained, examined, and sent under the oversight of the consistory/session, and in partnership with classis and synod (Acts 13:2–3). They remain under the spiritual care, support, and accountability of the sending church, which shall regularly intercede for them and receive their reports (Acts 14:26–27).

Article 97 – Accountability and Care for Missionaries

Missionaries shall report faithfully to their sending church and assemblies, giving account of their doctrine, life, and labors (Phil. 1:5). The church shall ensure that they receive pastoral care, encouragement, financial support, and, when needed, correction, that they may serve blamelessly and fruitfully (3 John 5–8; Heb. 13:17).

Article 98 – Training and Preparation

Those called to missionary or evangelistic service shall be prepared through sound theological instruction, spiritual formation, and—when necessary—language and cultural training (2 Tim. 2:2; Tit. 1:9). Missionaries must demonstrate godly character, confessional faithfulness, and the gifts necessary for their calling, confirmed by the church.

Article 99 – Church Planting and Expansion

Heritage Covenant Church shall seek to reproduce itself by planting new congregations and supporting sister churches in mission. Church planting is to be carried out with prayer, pastoral oversight, and in partnership with faithful Reformed churches, always with a shepherding model rather than a business model (Acts 13:2–3; Tit. 1:5).

Article 100 – Diaconal Mission and Mercy

The deacons shall lead the congregation in demonstrating the compassion of Christ through works of mercy and justice, both locally and globally (Acts 6:1–4; Gal. 6:10; James 1:27). Such acts adorn the gospel and open doors for proclamation, but mercy must never displace the centrality of the Word (Rom. 10:14–17).

Article 101 – Faithfulness in Word and Deed

In all missions and evangelism, the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen shall remain central. Works of mercy, cultural engagement, and Christian education may support, but may never replace, gospel proclamation. The church rejects all compromise with unbelief, syncretism, or worldly methods that obscure the gospel (1 Cor. 1:23–24; 2 Cor. 4:2–5).

Article 102 – Local Evangelism and Discipleship

The congregation shall actively engage in evangelism within its own community, calling the lost to repentance and faith in Christ. New believers shall be catechized, discipled, and incorporated into the covenant community through baptism, profession of faith, and instruction in godliness (Acts 2:41–42; Col. 1:28).

Article 103 – Cooperation in Broader Mission

The church shall join with classis and synod in cooperative efforts of mission, both

domestic and international. In these labors, Heritage Covenant Church affirms its accountability to broader assemblies and its unity with the wider Reformed community (Acts 15:2–3, 22, 28).

Article 104 – Prayer for the Nations

The congregation shall regularly intercede for the advance of the gospel throughout the world, for missionaries, for persecuted believers, and for the conversion of the nations (Ps. 67:1–2; 1 Tim. 2:1–4; Rev. 7:9–10). Prayer undergirds all mission, for apart from Christ the church can do nothing (John 15:5).