

# HERITAGE COVENANT CHURCH ORDER

## Table of Contents

### Preamble

### SECTION I – FOUNDATIONS

- Article 1 – Basis in Scripture and Confession
- Article 2 – The Headship of Christ
- Article 3 – Purpose of the Church Order
- Article 4 – Offices as Gifts of Christ
- Article 5 – Polity Principle of Eldership

### SECTION II – OFFICES OF THE CHURCH

- Article 6 – The Office of Elder
  - Nature of the Office
  - Qualifications
  - Distinction of Functions within One Office
  - Election and Ordination
  - Duties of Elders
  - Authority and Accountability
  - Parity of Elders
  - Term of Service
  - Discipline of Elders
- Article 7 – Equality of Authority
- Article 8 – The Teaching Elder

- Article 9 – The Ruling Elder
- Article 10 – Collegial Exercise of Authority
- Article 11 – Rotation of Chairmanship
- Article 12 – Training and Qualifications
- Article 13 – Nomination and Election
- Article 14 – Ordination and Installation
- Article 15 – Term of Service
- Article 16 – Emeritus Status
- Article 17 – Removal from Office
- Article 18 – Restoration to Office
- Article 19 – The Office of Deacon
  - Nature of the Office
  - Qualifications
  - Election and Ordination
  - Duties of Deacons
  - Authority and Dignity
- Article 20 – The Council of the Church (Elders and Deacons Together)

### **SECTION III – ASSEMBLIES**

- Article 21 – The Consistory/Session Defined
- Article 22 – Authority of the Consistory
- Article 23 – Frequency of Consistory Meetings
- Article 24 – Agenda and Order of Meetings
- Article 25 – Matters Reserved to the Consistory
- Article 26 – The Council Defined

- Article 27 – Authority of the Council
- Article 28 – Frequency of Council Meetings
- Article 29 – Congregational Meetings
- Article 30 – Voting Rights and Quorum
- Article 31 – Financial Stewardship and Trustees
- Article 32 – Appeals and Grievances
- Article 33 – Discipline and Assemblies
- Article 34 – Classis (Regional Assembly)
- Article 35 – Synod (General Assembly)
- Article 36 – Matters and Manner of Assemblies
- Article 37 – Transparency and Communication
- Article 38 – Spirit of Service in Assemblies

#### **SECTION IV – WORSHIP & SACRAMENTS**

- Article 39 – The Lord’s Day
- Article 40 – The Regulative Principle of Worship
- Article 41 – Elements of Worship
- Article 42 – Public Worship Services
- Article 43 – The Preaching of the Word
- Article 44 – The Sacraments Defined
- Article 45 – Baptism
- Article 46 – The Lord’s Supper
- Article 47 – Admission to the Lord’s Table
- Article 48 – Worship Music and Liturgy
- Article 49 – Special Services

- Article 50 – Conduct in Worship

## **SECTION V – DISCIPLINE & SHEPHERDING**

- Article 51 – The Nature and Purpose of Discipline
- Article 52 – Refusal to Listen Defined
- Article 53 – Private and Public Sin
- Article 54 – Informal Admonition
- Article 55 – Formal Admonition
- Article 56 – Suspension from the Sacraments
- Article 57 – Excommunication
- Article 58 – Restoration of the Penitent
- Article 59 – Discipline of Officebearers
- Article 60 – Suspension of Elders and Deacons
- Article 61 – Deposition from Office
- Article 62 – Restoration of Officebearers
- Article 63 – Pastoral Visitation
- Article 64 – Shepherding of Families
- Article 65 – Care for the Erring
- Article 66 – Confidentiality in Discipline
- Article 67 – Appeals in Discipline

## **SECTION VI – BIBLICAL DECISION-MAKING**

- Article 68 – Christ-Centered Discernment
- Article 69 – The Role of Scripture and Prayer
- Article 70 – Principles of Discussion
- Article 71 – Consensus Seeking

- Article 72 – Use of Voting
- Article 73 – Appeals and Reconsideration
- Article 74 – Spirit-Led Collaboration

## **SECTION VII – MEMBERSHIP & CONGREGATIONAL LIFE**

- Article 75 – Nature of Membership
- Article 76 – Admission to Membership
- Article 77 – Responsibilities of Members
- Article 78 – Privileges of Members
- Article 79 – Transfer of Membership
- Article 80 – Withdrawal from Membership
- Article 81 – Inactive Members
- Article 82 – Congregational Fellowship and Unity

## **SECTION VII-A – CATEGORIES OF MEMBERSHIP**

- Article 83 – The Nature of Membership Categories

## **SECTION VII-B – PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH**

- Article 84 – Nature of Profession of Faith
- Article 85 – Preparation for Profession
- Article 86 – Vows in Profession
- Article 87 – Admission to the Lord’s Supper

## **SECTION VII-C – CHRISTIAN EDUCATION OBLIGATION**

- Article 88 – The Covenant Responsibility of Parents
- Article 89 – The Church’s Responsibility
- Article 90 – Means of Fulfillment
- Article 91 – Pastoral Oversight

## **SECTION VIII – MISSION & EVANGELISM**

- Article 92 – The Mission of the Church
- Article 93 – One Mission in All of Life
- Article 94 – Congregational Responsibility for Witness
- Article 95 – Christian Education as Mission and Discipleship
- Article 96 – The Sending of Missionaries
- Article 97 – Accountability and Care for Missionaries
- Article 98 – Training and Preparation
- Article 99 – Church Planting and Expansion
- Article 100 – Diaconal Mission and Mercy
- Article 101 – Faithfulness in Word and Deed
- Article 102 – Local Evangelism and Discipleship
- Article 103 – Cooperation in Broader Mission
- Article 104 – Prayer for the Nations

## Preamble

This Church Order is adopted to govern the life of Heritage Covenant Church in submission to Holy Scripture and in full harmony with the Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), including its appendices and synodically-adopted regulations and interpretations. In the event of any conflict or ambiguity, the URCNA Church Order shall prevail, and this Church Order shall be interpreted accordingly.

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 (the Three Forms of Unity as the confessional standards of this Church). Other Reformed confessions and catechisms may be used for instruction and edification insofar as they agree with Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity. It is intended to serve the well-being of Christ's flock by ensuring that all things are done decently and in good order (1 Cor. 14:40).

The church is distinct from the state. Christ alone governs the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government of His church, and no civil authority may usurp or direct the church in these spiritual matters (Matt. 22:21; Eph. 1:22). At the same time, the church acknowledges its obligation to respect and comply with applicable civil laws insofar as they do not conflict with obedience to Christ and the Word of God (Rom. 13:1–7; Acts 5:29).

The authority exercised in Christ's church is ministerial and declarative—ministerial, in that officebearers serve under Christ and not in their own name; and declarative, in that they may proclaim and apply only 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. These assemblies shall conduct their work in an ecclesiastical manner—prayerfully, humbly, and in submission to Scripture—seeking together the mind of Christ rather than exercising worldly power or political control (Acts 15:6, 28).

The decisions of church assemblies are to be received as settled and binding, unless it is demonstrated that they conflict with the Word of God or the Reformed confessions, in which case the right of appeal to broader assemblies is preserved according to the URCNA Church Order.

In all church government, no church shall lord it over another, and no officebearer shall dominate another, for Christ alone is King and Head. Local congregations are distinct, yet they willingly express their unity through a common confession, mutual

accountability, and cooperation in broader ecclesiastical assemblies for the edification of Christ's body and the advancement of His kingdom.

## **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. Other Reformed confessions and catechisms may be used for instruction and edification insofar as they agree with Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity. 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 Three Forms of Unity.

#### **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. Elders are entrusted with the spiritual government of the church; deacons are entrusted with the ministry of 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 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), 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, the only Head and Chief Shepherd of the church (Matt. 20:25–28; Eph. 4:11–12; Phil. 1:1).

Where this Church Order refers to matters “as discerned by the elders,” this denotes the elders’ collective, prayerful, and confessional judgment regarding the spiritual direction, doctrinal priorities, and mission of the Church under Scripture. It does not include routine administrative decisions or operational execution, which may be delegated.

## **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)

### 1. Nature of the Office

The office of elder is instituted by Christ for the shepherding, governing, and equipping of His people. Elders are under-shepherds 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)

### 2. Qualifications

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).

### 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 the notion of any permanent “first among equals.”

### 4. Election and Ordination

Elders shall be chosen by the congregation, ordinarily upon nomination by the consistory, though members of the congregation may also submit names for consideration. Prior to election, nominees shall be examined by the consistory regarding doctrine, life, and spiritual maturity, ensuring that they meet the biblical qualifications for office (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9).

The process of election shall be conducted with prayer, transparency, and due opportunity for the congregation to bring forward lawful objections, so that the call is seen to be from Christ and not from human partiality (Acts 1:23–26; Acts 14:23).

Those elected shall be set apart with prayer and the laying on of hands in a public worship service, with the use of the appropriate URCNA Form for Ordination (1 Tim. 4:14). Ordination confirms not only the congregation’s choice but also Christ’s call through His body.

No one shall enter upon the duties of the office until they have been duly elected, examined, and ordained, for the sake of good order in Christ's church.

## 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 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. Authority and 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 they serve, and to the broader assemblies of the church (classis and synod). (Matt. 20:25–28; 1 Pet. 5:1–4; Heb. 13:17)

## 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 to prevent hierarchy. (Acts 15:6)

## 8. Term of Service

Elders ordinarily serve for defined terms, renewable upon re-election, and remain subject to examination, accountability, and discipline.

## 9. Discipline of Elders

Elders who err in doctrine or life are subject to suspension or deposition from office, according to the discipline process of this Church Order. Because they are stewards of God's household, they are held to a higher standard. (James 3:1; 1 Tim. 5:19–20)

## **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 (1 Pet. 5:1–3; Matt. 20:25–28).

## **Article 8 – The Teaching Elder**

The teaching elder, or 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, sharing equally in deliberations and decisions.

## **Article 8-A – Support and Care for the Minister of the Word**

### **1. The Duty of the Church to Provide Support**

The congregation shall provide the teaching elder with honorable, adequate, and sustainable support, so that he may devote himself fully to the ministry of the Word, sacraments, prayer, and pastoral care (1 Tim. 5:17–18; 1 Cor. 9:14; Gal. 6:6). This duty reflects both Scripture and the historic Reformed Church Orders, including the Synod of Dort (Art. 11), which required that **ministers be honorably maintained by the churches they serve.**

### **2. Purpose of Ministerial Support**

Financial provision enables the minister to:

- a) labor without distraction in preaching, teaching, and shepherding;
- b) provide for his household responsibly (1 Tim. 3:4–5);
- c) avoid entanglements with secular employment (2 Tim. 2:4);
- d) exercise hospitality and generosity in keeping with the office (Heb. 13:2; Titus 1:8).

### **3. Nature of Support**

Ministerial support shall ordinarily include:

- a) a fair and livable salary;
- b) housing or a housing allowance;
- c) health insurance;
- d) retirement contributions;
- e) reimbursement for ministry-related expenses;
- f) continuing education;
- g) vacation and, where appropriate, sabbatical rest.

The council (consistory with the deacons) shall ensure that support remains generous, equitable, and responsible, reflecting both the needs of the minister and the ability of the congregation.

### **4. Salary Determination Process**

The council (consistory with the deacons), or a delegated compensation team, shall review and set ministerial support annually. This process shall follow the church's adopted **Salary Determination Policy**, which:

- a) compares appropriate peer and regional compensation data;
- b) considers education, experience, and tenure;
- c) applies the principles of generosity, simplicity, equity, and fiscal responsibility;
- d) aims to free the minister from the need for secular employment, as far as the Lord enables.

These guidelines serve as a practical outworking of this Church Order article and are to be applied with prayerful pastoral wisdom.

### **5. Hardship or Disability**

In cases of sickness, disability, or exceptional hardship, the congregation shall continue to support the minister honorably, according to Christian compassion and as resources permit, ensuring he is not reduced to financial distress through circumstances beyond his control.

### **6. Emeritus Ministers**

Retired ministers (emeritus) receive their primary financial support through retirement and pension provisions. The congregation shall honor their labors and offer additional assistance only in exceptional circumstances of need, according to Christian compassion and as resources permit.

## **7. Accountability and Stewardship**

The council shall administer ministerial support with transparency, integrity, and without favoritism, recognizing that the minister's livelihood directly affects the spiritual care of the congregation (Heb. 13:17). Likewise, the minister shall model wise stewardship, contentment, and financial integrity for the sake of the gospel.

## **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). With teaching elders, he ensures Christ's Word governs the church.

## **Article 10 – Collegial Exercise of Authority**

Elders must exercise authority corporately, never individually, except where explicitly delegated. No elder may impose his will on the body. All authority flows from Christ the Head, through His Word, and is exercised in common deliberation and decision. (Acts 15:6, 22)

## **Article 11 – Rotation of Chairmanship**

The chair of consistory meetings is not an office of primacy, but of order. The chair shall rotate or be elected for a defined term, facilitating orderly discussion but holding no greater authority than any other elder. (1 Cor. 14:40)

## **Article 12 – Training and Qualifications**

Elders must meet the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, being above reproach in life and doctrine, apt to teach, and able to shepherd wisely. Candidates shall undergo doctrinal, pastoral, and governance training as determined by the consistory. (2 Tim. 2:15)

## **Article 13 – Nomination and Election**

The consistory nominates qualified men, after consultation with the congregation. Nominations are prayerfully considered, and the congregation elects by vote, seeking the Spirit's guidance. (Acts 6:3–6)

### **Article 14 – Ordination and Installation**

Elders shall be ordained with prayer and the laying on of hands and publicly installed in worship using the approved URCNA liturgical forms. This solemn act is the church's recognition of Christ's call. (Acts 13:2–3; 1 Tim. 4:14)

### **Article 15 – Term of Service**

Elders may serve indefinite or fixed terms, as determined by the church. If fixed, provision must be made for rest, rotation, and re-election. Continuity of pastoral care must always be preserved. (Acts 20:28)

### **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 17 – Removal from Office**

Any elder persisting in sin, teaching error, or neglecting duty may be removed by the consistory after biblical admonition and discipline. Removal must be executed with justice and pastoral concern. (1 Tim. 5:19–20)

### **Article 18 – Restoration to Office**

An elder removed from office may be restored after repentance and examination of life and doctrine. Such restoration must be carefully considered, with assurance of readiness. (Gal. 6:1; 2 Cor. 2:6–8)

### **Article 19 – The Office of Deacon**

The office of deacon is instituted by Christ for the ministry of mercy, stewardship, and community witness. Deacons lead the congregation in showing the compassion of Christ, administering gifts for the needy, and promoting stewardship of life and resources. (Acts 6:1–4; 1 Tim. 3:8–13). Deacons do not share in the governance of

doctrine, worship, or discipline, which belongs to the elders, but exercise real authority within their own office of mercy and stewardship.

### **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. Deacons serve Christ and His church in an ordained office, distinct from the eldership. They are united with the elders in purpose and honor, while differing in mandate: elders govern and shepherd; deacons administer mercy and stewardship. (Acts 6:1–7; Phil. 1:1; 1 Pet. 4:10–11)

### **2. Qualifications**

Deacons must meet the biblical qualifications of 1 Timothy 3:8–13: dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain, holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience, tested and found blameless, faithful in marriage, and good managers of their households. Verse 11 applies to deacons' wives, requiring that they too be dignified, sober-minded, and faithful—supporting but not holding office themselves.

### **3. Election and Ordination**

Deacons shall be chosen by the congregation, ordinarily upon nomination by the consistory/session together with the deacons, though members of the congregation may also submit names for consideration. Prior to election, nominees shall be examined by the consistory regarding doctrine, life, and spiritual maturity, ensuring that they meet the biblical qualifications for office (Acts 6:3–6; 1 Tim. 3:8–13).

The process of election shall be conducted with prayer, transparency, and due opportunity for the congregation to bring forward lawful objections, so that the call is seen to be from Christ and not from human partiality.

Those elected shall be set apart with prayer and the laying on of hands in a public worship service, with the use of the appropriate biblical or confessional form (Acts 6:6). Ordination confirms not only the congregation's choice but also Christ's call through His body.

No one shall enter upon the duties of the diaconal office until they have been duly elected, examined, and ordained, for the sake of good order in Christ's church.

### **4. Duties of Deacons**

Deacons shall:

- Extend mercy – caring for those in material and physical need (James 1:27; Gal. 6:10).
- Steward resources – collecting and distributing offerings with integrity, transparency, and prayer (2 Cor. 8:19–21).

- Encourage generosity – cultivating cheerful giving and service among God’s people (2 Cor. 9:7; Rom. 12:13).
- Relieve the elders – freeing elders for prayer and the Word by overseeing temporal needs (Acts 6:4).
- Serve collaboratively – offering counsel to elders in council, while maintaining their distinct office of mercy.

## **5. Authority and Dignity**

Deacons exercise real authority within the sphere of their diaconal mandate, administering mercy and stewardship, without assuming governing authority reserved to the elders. Their ministry is not secondary but complementary to that of elders, both being ordained offices reflecting the fullness of Christ’s care for His body. Their authority, like that of elders, is ministerial and declarative, exercised humbly under the Word of God. (1 Pet. 4:10–11)

## **Article 20 – The Council (Consistory and Deacons Together)**

Though distinct in function, elders and deacons collaborate in the leadership of the church. Together they form the Council, entrusted with the material, administrative, and temporal care of the congregation, in service of the church’s spiritual mission. (Phil. 1:1; Acts 11:29–30)

The **consistory** (elders) governs spiritual matters.

The **council** (elders and deacons) addresses stewardship, mercy, and administrative matters without encroaching on elder governance.

### **1. Nature of the Council**

The Council is the deliberative body of the local church, comprised of the consistory (the minister(s) and elders) and the deacons together. The consistory governs in doctrine, worship, and discipline. The council oversees temporal and administrative matters of the congregation in cooperation with the deacons.

### **2. Unity in Leadership**

The Council seeks to discern the will of Christ through prayer, mutual submission, and consensus wherever possible. Decisions reflect not mere majority rule but a corporate seeking of the mind of Christ (Acts 15:6, 28; Phil. 2:2–5), in keeping with the biblical principles of collaborative decision-making (see Section III).

### **3. Distinction of Roles**

- **Elders:** Responsible for oversight of doctrine, worship, discipline, and pastoral care (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:5–9).
- **Deacons:** Responsible for mercy, stewardship of resources, and cultivating service (Acts 6:1–4; 1 Tim. 3:8–13).  
While functions differ, both offices contribute wisdom and counsel to the Council.

#### **4. Collaborative Deliberation**

The Council meets regularly for prayer, discussion, and decision-making regarding the congregation’s mission and care. Each officebearer has equal voice and vote in matters proper to the council’s mandate (property, finances, administrative stewardship, and the practical support of ministry). In matters of doctrine, worship, discipline, and the government of the church, the consistory alone decides. In matters of mercy and benevolence, the deacons lead and administer, in close cooperation with the consistory. (1 Cor. 12:4–7, 21–26)

#### **5. Servant Leadership**

The Council leads as servants, not lords, over the flock. Their authority is ministerial, exercised in humility and gentleness, reflecting Christ’s own example (Matt. 20:25–28; 1 Pet. 5:2–3).

#### **6. Accountability and Transparency**

The Council is accountable to Christ the Head, to one another, to the congregation, and—when necessary—to classis and synod, who provide counsel and hear appeals, ensuring accountability beyond the local church (Heb. 13:17; 2 Cor. 8:21).

## **SECTION III – ASSEMBLIES**

### **Article 21 – The Consistory Defined**

The consistory 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 holds authority jointly and corporately, not individually. All elders have equal voice and vote. Its authority is ministerial and declarative, meaning that elders serve under Christ and may only proclaim and apply what He has revealed in His Word.

They do not legislate beyond Scripture or bind consciences with human commands (Matt. 18:18–20; Heb. 13:17).

In matters of doctrine, worship, sacraments, discipline, and pastoral oversight, the decisions of the consistory are not subject to reversal by any other body within the local congregation.

Matters assigned to the council's temporal mandate are decided by the council in accordance with this Church Order, always in service of (and not in competition with) the spiritual oversight of the consistory.

### **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**

1. **Preparation & Order** – The chair and clerk shall prepare and distribute an agenda in advance. Meetings shall begin and end with prayer and the reading of Scripture, conducted in good order (1 Cor. 14:40).
2. **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)
3. **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).
4. **Decision-Making** – Deliberations shall be prayerful and aimed at consensus—defined as substantial agreement reflecting genuine unity. Where consensus is not possible, decisions may be made by majority vote, with minority opinions heard respectfully and recorded when appropriate, and with all parties committed to maintain the unity of the church (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.
- Oversight of public worship
- The determination and oversight of the church's discipleship direction, spiritual ministries, and pastoral priorities.

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, and to teach and defend them faithfully.

## **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 serves the overall life of the congregation by coordinating stewardship, mercy, and administrative support for the Church's mission, without assuming authority over doctrine, worship, discipline, or the spiritual direction of the Church, which remain entrusted to the elders.

The council serves the congregation by ensuring that the church's material life is ordered faithfully, transparently, and in a manner that supports the spiritual mission and priorities set by the consistory.

## **Article 27 – Authority of the Council**

The council administers and oversees matters pertaining to administration, finances, property, mercy, and material stewardship in service of the Church's mission as discerned by the elders.

In these administrative and stewardship matters, deacons exercise equal voice and vote with elders. Such authority is ministerial and administrative in nature and does not extend to determining doctrine, worship, discipline, or the spiritual direction of the Church.

## **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). The council shall also meet when budget preparation, financial review, property matters, or benevolence oversight requires timely action.

## **Article 29 – Congregational Meetings**

1. Congregational meetings shall be called by the consistory or by the council when the matters properly fall within the council's mandate, with at least two weeks' notice given on the Lord's Day.
2. Matters may include the election of officebearers, the calling of ministers, adoption of budgets, acquisition or disposal of property, and other significant concerns (Acts 6:2–3).
3. Meetings shall be conducted in prayer, humility, and unity.
4. Congregational votes express the judgment and consent of the body in the matters assigned to the congregation by Scripture, this Church Order, the Bylaws, or civil law, but do not transfer governing authority away from the offices Christ has instituted.
5. The consistory retains exclusive authority over doctrine, worship, sacraments, discipline, and membership determinations.

## **Article 30 – Voting Rights and Quorum**

1. All communicant members in good standing are entitled to vote (Acts 6:5).
2. 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 or the Bylaws.
3. Voting shall ordinarily be by written ballot to preserve discretion and integrity.
4. No congregational vote shall be used to decide matters reserved to the consistory under Article 25..

## **Article 31 – Financial Stewardship and Trustees**

1. The council shall ensure faithful stewardship of church property, finances, and benevolence.
2. Where civil law requires, trustees may be appointed by the council to hold property in trust for the congregation, serving as legal agents only, and always subject to the authority of the council and the spiritual oversight of the consistory.
3. All financial records shall be open to review by the council and congregation, except where confidentiality is necessary to protect personal privacy in benevolence, discipline-related matters, or employment administration.

## Article 32 – Appeals and Grievances

1. Members believing themselves wronged by a decision may bring appeal to the consistory/session (Acts 15:6–7).
2. If unresolved, the matter may be appealed to **classis** (regional assembly).
3. If unresolved at classis, further appeal may be made to **synod** (general assembly).
4. An appeal is a request to a broader assembly to review and judge a decision of a narrower assembly.
5. Appeals must be written, with clear biblical reasoning, and handled with pastoral care and prayer (Prov. 15:22).
6. Appeals are ecclesiastical in nature and shall be pursued only through the assemblies of the church, not through civil courts or external tribunals, except where civil law compels reporting or action in matters of abuse or other legally mandated reporting.
7. Those who appeal shall do so with reverence, truthfulness, and a peaceable spirit, and assemblies shall handle appeals without partiality, seeking the mind of Christ..

Members believing themselves wronged by a decision may bring appeal to the consistory (Acts 15:6–7).

If unresolved, the matter may be appealed to classis.

If unresolved at classis, further appeal may be made to synod.

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

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

4. Broader assemblies do not ordinarily administer discipline in the first instance, but review whether discipline was carried out biblically, ecclesiastically, and in good order.

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 – Classes (Regional Assembly)**

Neighboring churches shall form a classis, ordinarily meeting twice per year. A classis is a regional assembly of neighboring churches.

Heritage Covenant Church participates in classis as a covenantal expression of unity, accountability, and mutual submission among the churches. Classis possesses delegated ecclesiastical authority as defined by the Church Order of the URCNA, and its decisions and judgments are to be received as settled and binding, unless it is shown that they conflict with the Word of God or the Reformed confessions, or unless they are overturned upon proper appeal.

Each church shall delegate elders and ministers as voting members in accordance with the URCNA Church Order.

Classis shall provide counsel, oversight, and mutual accountability for member churches, including examination of candidates, hearing appeals, promoting mission, and conducting church visitation.

### **Article 35 – Synod (General Assembly)**

The churches shall meet in synod, ordinarily every three years. Synod is the broadest assembly of churches, made up of delegated elders and ministers from the classes.

Synod possesses delegated ecclesiastical authority as defined by the URCNA Church Order for the churches in federation, particularly in matters too broad for classis, in maintaining unity of doctrine and order, and in hearing appeals.

Synod's decisions are to be received as settled and binding, unless shown to conflict with the Word of God or the Reformed confessions, or unless overturned upon proper appeal.

## **Article 36 – Matters and Manner of Assemblies**

1. In all assemblies only *ecclesiastical matters* shall be transacted, and only in an *ecclesiastical manner*.
2. Ecclesiastical matters are those proper to the church, such as doctrine, worship, sacraments, discipline, mission, and the care of the flock.
3. 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).
4. The authority of broader assemblies is ministerial and declarative, serving the unity, accountability, and orderly government of Christ's church.
5. Participation in broader ecclesiastical assemblies expresses unity and accountability among churches of a common confession, but does not transfer governing authority over this congregation except in the limited sense that this congregation voluntarily binds itself to the lawful decisions of broader assemblies in accordance with this Church Order and the commitments of federation.

## **Article 37 – Transparency and Communication**

1. All assemblies (consistory, council, classis, synod) shall report their decisions to those subject to them, explaining their biblical grounds (2 Cor. 1:12).
2. Sensitive matters shall be handled with confidentiality, but all deliberations must be accountable to Christ and His Word.
3. When confidentiality is necessary, assemblies shall still communicate the substance of decisions and the biblical rationale to the extent that wisdom, privacy, and justice permit.

## **Article 38 – Spirit of Service in Assemblies**

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

4. All assemblies exist to serve, not dominate, under Christ the Head.
5. All members and officebearers shall guard against factionalism, coercion, and worldly political maneuvering, pursuing instead peace, truth, and mutual edification in the fear of God (Phil. 2:1–4; James 3:17–18).

## **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.

The Lord’s Day belongs to Christ and is not subject to human preference, convenience, or cultural trends.

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).

The elements of worship are fixed by Scripture; the circumstances of worship are determined by the consistory according to biblical wisdom and good order.

All worship shall be conducted reverently and decently, so that God is glorified and His people are edified (1 Cor. 14:40).

No element of public worship may be added, removed, or substantially altered apart from the judgment of the consistory, exercised in submission to Scripture and the Reformed confessions.

### **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).

No element shall be introduced into public worship that lacks biblical warrant, even if culturally meaningful or emotionally compelling.

## **Article 42 – Public Worship Services**

The congregation shall ordinarily gather twice on the Lord’s Day for public worship, unless hindered by providential necessity.

The second service shall ordinarily be devoted to catechetical preaching, instruction in the confessions, prayer, or other edifying uses of the means of grace.

Attendance at both services is to be encouraged as part of faithful covenant discipleship (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 shall 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 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).

Parents presenting their children for baptism shall vow to raise them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4).

Baptism shall ordinarily be administered in the public assembly of worship, as a covenantal act of the church rather than a private family event.

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).

It shall be observed regularly, at a frequency determined by the consistory.

The Supper shall be administered with the reading of Scripture, prayer of thanksgiving, the words of institution, and distribution of the elements.

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).

Elders shall guard the table by exercising pastoral care, warning against unworthy participation, and barring the impenitent when necessary (1 Cor. 11:27–32).

Guests from sister churches may be admitted on the basis of commendation or examination by the elders.

Children shall not be admitted until they make a credible profession of faith and are received into communicant membership.

## **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).

Those who lead in music or liturgical elements do so under the oversight and direction of the elders and do not exercise independent authority in shaping the worship of the church.

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.

Music and liturgy in public worship must conform to the Word of God and serve the edification of the congregation.

The singing of psalms shall be given a prominent place in worship, together with biblically faithful hymns and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19).

All who lead in music or liturgical elements do so under the oversight and direction of the consistory and do not exercise independent authority in shaping worship.

Liturgy shall be simple, reverent, and gospel-centered.

The regular use of creeds and confessions (e.g., Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Heidelberg Catechism) is encouraged as a means of confessing the faith together.

## **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 glory of God, the purity of His church, and the restoration of the sinner (Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5:6–7; Gal. 6:1).

Discipline is pastoral in nature and is to be exercised in love, humility, patience, and truth, always aiming at repentance, reconciliation, and renewed obedience to Christ.

Church discipline is an ecclesiastical act of shepherding and oversight, not a therapeutic process, employment action, or civil judgment.

Discipline proceeds from Christ’s authority exercised through His ordained elders and shall be governed by Scripture and this Church Order alone.

## **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.

Recommended:

A member is considered to “refuse to listen” (Matt. 18:17) when he persists in sin by denying its sinfulness, rejecting biblical correction, or resisting the shepherding authority of the elders.

A member who acknowledges sin, seeks forgiveness, and submits to pastoral care—even if progress is slow or struggles remain—is not refusing to listen.

Those who repent are to be treated with patience, gentleness, and continued shepherding (1 Thess. 5:14).

Where appropriate, elders may encourage or require outside counsel that is consistent with Scripture, but such counsel never replaces pastoral oversight or ecclesiastical discipline.

No matter shall be brought before the congregation until sufficient pastoral instruction, admonition, and patient shepherding have been pursued. Only persistent, willful impenitence warrants public discipline.

## **Article 53 – Private and Public Sin**

All members, officebearers, and those serving in teaching, leadership, or representative roles within the congregation are subject to ecclesiastical discipline in matters of doctrine, life, and worship.

### **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). Formal admonition is an ecclesiastical act of shepherding, not a punitive measure, and must be exercised with clarity, restraint, and pastoral wisdom. Those who acknowledge sin and submit to care are not to be treated as impenitent, but as weak sheep under Christ's care.

- **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.

The elders shall exercise pastoral wisdom in the application of these steps, recognizing that discipline is not a rigid formula but a shepherding responsibility governed by Scripture.

## **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). Suspension shall ordinarily remain confidential and known only to those necessary for pastoral care, unless excommunication becomes required.

## **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. At this stage, the matter becomes public, and the congregation shall be informed so that all may pray for repentance and restoration.
- Excommunication is always remedial in purpose, never vindictive, and is exercised for the salvation of the sinner and the purity of the church.

## **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). Restoration shall be conducted with discernment, ensuring credible repentance and a renewed commitment to faithful discipleship.

## **Article 59 – Discipline of Officebearers**

Elders and deacons are subject to the same discipline as other members, with greater seriousness due to the trust of their office (1 Tim. 5:19–20; James 3:1).

Charges against an officebearer must be established by proper evidence and handled with care, avoiding partiality or haste.

## **Article 60 – Suspension of Elders and Deacons**

When credible allegations of serious sin or neglect arise, an elder or deacon may be suspended from office by the consistory to protect the church and prevent scandal (Titus 1:7).

Suspension is temporary and investigative, not a final judgment.

Suspension shall 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, false doctrine, or gross neglect of duty, he shall be deposed from office by the consistory. The consistory shall ordinarily seek the counsel of classis in cases of deposition, and the act shall be carried out with solemnity, prayer, and pastoral care.

## **Article 62 – Restoration of Officebearers**

A deposed officebearer may be restored only after true repentance and careful examination of his doctrine and life. Restoration must be cautious, prayerful, and ordinarily undertaken with the advice of classis, to safeguard the church and the honor of Christ's office.

Restoration shall ordinarily occur only with the counsel of sister churches or broader assemblies, to preserve accountability and peace in the church.

## **Article 63 – Pastoral Visitation**

A deposed officebearer may be restored to office only after evident repentance, careful examination of doctrine and life, and sufficient time to demonstrate fruit consistent with repentance (Gal. 6:1; 1 Tim. 5:22).

Restoration shall ordinarily occur only with the counsel of sister churches or broader assemblies, to preserve accountability and peace in the church.

## **Article 64 – Shepherding of Families**

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

The family is a primary sphere of discipleship under Christ, and elder oversight supports rather than replaces parental responsibility.

## **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 gently lead them back to Christ the Shepherd (Ezek. 34:4; John 10:14–16).

## **Article 66 – Confidentiality in Discipline**

All discipline shall be conducted with strict confidentiality and shared only with those who must know.

Matters remain private unless and until excommunication becomes necessary.

Confidentiality serves 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 consistory. If unresolved, appeal may be made to classis, and thereafter to synod, in accordance with the URCNA Church Order. Appeals shall be handled prayerfully, impartially, and in submission to Scripture (Acts 15:6, 22; Prov. 15:22).

# **SECTION VI – BIBLICAL DECISION-MAKING**

## **Article 68 – Christ-Centered Discernment**

Jesus Christ, the sole King and Head of the Church, governs His church by His Word and Spirit through the lawful assemblies and offices He has instituted (Col. 1:18; Acts 20:28).

Decision-making authority in the church is exercised ministerially and declaratively by the consistory of elders, and in temporal matters by the council, each according to its proper mandate as defined in this Church Order.

No individual officebearer, committee, staff member, ministry leader, or informal group possesses independent governing authority in the church.

### **Article 69 – The Role of Scripture and Prayer**

The consistory alone deliberates and decides all matters pertaining to doctrine, worship, sacraments, discipline, membership, pastoral oversight, and the spiritual direction of the church.

The council (elders and deacons together) deliberates and decides matters pertaining to the temporal and administrative life of the church, including stewardship of finances, property, benevolence, and legal obligations, always in service of the spiritual priorities established by the consistory.

The council shall not initiate, revise, or determine spiritual policy or direction, nor act independently in matters that materially affect worship, sacraments, discipline, discipleship or pastoral oversight without the consent of the consistory.

### **Article 70 – Principles of Discussion**

Meetings of the consistory and council shall be conducted in a distinctly ecclesiastical manner, marked by prayer, reverence for Scripture, mutual respect, and pastoral seriousness (Acts 15:6, 28; 1 Cor. 14:40).

Officebearers shall speak truthfully, listen carefully, and deliberate patiently, avoiding coercion, factionalism, or domineering conduct (Eph. 4:15; 1 Pet. 5:3).

Discussion is a means of discernment, not a contest of influence or power.

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).

These principles govern ecclesiastical assemblies and do not grant governing authority to staff teams, ministry leaders, informal groups, or committees apart from the offices Christ has instituted.

### **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 71 – Seeking Unity of Judgment

### **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). Voting within the consistory and council is an internal deliberative tool. Congregational voting is used only when required by law or the Bylaws and does not exercise governing or spiritual authority over matters reserved to the elders. 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). Requests from members are made through the elders in accordance with the grievance and appeal provisions of this Church Order.

### **Article 74 – Spirit-Led Collaboration in Lawful Assemblies**

All decision-making is to be collaborative, reflecting the parity of elders and the orderly participation of the offices Christ has instituted (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).

Collaboration does not negate the distinct responsibilities and authority of the elders in governing doctrine, worship, and discipline, nor does it transfer governing authority beyond the assemblies established by Christ.

# **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). Membership entails a voluntary submission to the shepherding, oversight, and discipline of the elders in accordance with Scripture and this Church Order.

## **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. Admission to membership is an ecclesiastical act exercised by the elders and does not create civil, contractual, or property rights.

## **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 as admitted by the elders (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). The elders shall ordinarily provide a formal transfer/commendation when a member unites with another faithful congregation.

#### **Article 80 – Withdrawal from Membership**

A member who seeks to withdraw from the church must do so in consultation with the elders. A request to withdraw does not terminate membership automatically; membership status is determined ecclesiastically by the elders, and withdrawal may be delayed or denied when necessary to address pending disciplinary matters. 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). Removal of an inactive member shall be carried out in a manner consistent with the discipline process of Section V and with pastoral care.

#### **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). All fellowship and unity are pursued under the ministry of the Word, the sacraments, and the shepherding oversight of the elders.

## **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. Refusal to profess faith in due time, after sufficient instruction, as determined by the elders, 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 may be admitted by the elders to the Lord's Table as communicant members, enjoying the full privileges and responsibilities of Christ's covenant family (1 Cor. 11:23–29). Admission to the Lord's Supper is an ecclesiastical act exercised solely under the oversight and authority of the elders.

## **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. This obligation is moral and covenantal in nature and is exercised under pastoral guidance, not civil enforcement.

### **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). The church exhorts and supports but does not coerce conscience beyond Scripture in matters of educational application.

### **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 and, if necessary, discipline in accordance with Section V of this Church Order, 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). The mission of the church is carried out under the oversight of the elders and through the ordinary means Christ has appointed, not through autonomous programs or extra-ecclesiastical authorities.

#### **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. The church proclaims God's Word to all of life but does not assume jurisdiction over spheres God has entrusted to family, vocation, or civil government.

#### **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. Such encouragement is pastoral and instructional in nature and shall not be enforced as a condition of employment, membership standing, or civil compliance.

### **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). All such sending authority remains with the local consistory and is not delegated away, even when cooperating with broader assemblies or agencies. 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). The church is called to participate in the spread of the gospel beyond its immediate context through prayer, support, and sending of missionaries (Acts 13:1–3; Rom. 10:15).

Missionary labor shall be undertaken in fellowship with and accountability to the broader assemblies of the churches, and missionaries shall be examined, called, and supervised according to the order of the churches. Independent or unsupervised mission work is discouraged.

### **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. Preparation and assessment are ecclesiastical determinations made by the elders and shall not be reduced to academic credentialing alone.

### **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).

New congregations shall be planted under the oversight of an existing consistory or classis, with ordained leadership, clear confessional commitments, and orderly progress toward full ecclesiastical maturity. Church plants are to be shepherded into existence, not manufactured.

A church plant ordinarily remains under the supervision of a mother church or classis until it is organized as a congregation with its own consistory, in accordance with the Church Order of the URCNA.

#### **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). All diaconal mission operates in harmony with and under **the spiritual oversight of the elders, without assuming teaching or governing authority.**

#### **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 under the oversight of the elders. New believers shall be catechized, disciplined, 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**

Heritage Covenant Church lives in ecclesiastical fellowship with other Reformed churches through classis and synod. In this fellowship, the church willingly submits to the mutual accountability and discipline of the broader assemblies, according to the Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA).

Decisions of broader assemblies shall be received as settled and binding unless it is shown that they conflict with the Word of God or the Reformed confessions, or unless they are overturned upon proper appeal.

### **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).

## **SECTION IX – AMENDMENTS & FINAL PROVISIONS**

### **Article 105 – Authority of This Church Order**

This Church Order governs the life and discipline of Heritage Covenant Church, subject always to the authority of Holy Scripture and the Reformed confessions. It is a servant of the church, intended to preserve good order, peace, and faithfulness to Christ (1 Cor. 14:40).

No article of this Church Order may be interpreted or applied in a manner contrary to the Word of God or the Reformed confessions.

### **Article 106 – Relationship to Broader Assemblies and Withdrawal from the Federation**

Heritage Covenant Church lives in ecclesiastical fellowship with other Reformed churches through classis and synod, and therefore receives the lawful decisions of broader assemblies with respect and submission. Such decisions shall be considered settled and binding unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA).

If the consistory is convinced that it cannot comply with a decision of a broader assembly because it does not agree with the Word of God, it shall state to classis the points at which the decision disagrees with the Word of God and shall pursue protest and appeal in an orderly ecclesiastical manner.

Having availed itself of the avenues for appeal, the church, through its consistory, may withdraw from the federation at any time by submitting a written statement to the classis to which the church belongs, in accordance with the URCNA Church Order.

This submission to broader assemblies expresses covenantal unity and mutual accountability under Christ and His Word; it does not grant any assembly authority to bind the conscience contrary to Holy Scripture, which remains supreme.

## **Article 107 – Amendments to the Church Order**

This Church Order may be amended only with great care and deliberation.

Amendments require:

- Proposal by the consistory
- Review and recommendation by the council
- Approval by the congregation at a duly called congregational meeting
- **Consistency with the Church Order of the URCNA where ecclesiastical federation is implicated**

No amendment may alter the confessional basis, the offices instituted by Christ, or the fundamental polity of the church without **prior consultation with classis**, where applicable.

## **Article 108 – Temporary Provisions During Church Planting**

During the period of church planting, when the congregation has not yet been organized with a full consistory, provisional arrangements may be made for leadership and oversight.

Such arrangements shall be:

- Ecclesiastical, not entrepreneurial
- Temporary, not permanent
- **Undertaken with the knowledge and oversight of a supervising consistory or classis**

These provisions shall expire upon the organization of the congregation or as directed by classis.

## **Article 109 – Interpretation of This Church Order**

The authoritative interpretation of this Church Order belongs to the consistory, subject to review by broader assemblies upon appeal.

In interpreting this Church Order, the church shall seek:

- Faithfulness to Scripture
- Consistency with the Reformed confessions
- Harmony with the Church Order of the URCNA
- The peace, unity, and edification of the church

## **Article 110 – Supremacy of Scripture**

In all cases of conflict or uncertainty, Holy Scripture is supreme. This Church Order exists to serve Christ's rule, not to replace it. Where human formulations fall short, the Word of God must prevail (Isa. 8:20; Acts 5:29).

## **Article 111 – Adoption**

This Church Order was adopted by Heritage Covenant Church on \_\_\_\_\_, following prayerful deliberation, congregational consent, and commitment to live together under the gracious rule of Christ.