

The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia

1994

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1 THE CHURCH

1.1 General

- 1.1.1 The church invisible consists of all who have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ - the whole number of the elect.
- 1.1.2 The church on earth consists of those who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and obedience to him, together with their children.
- 1.1.3 The Lord Jesus Christ is the only Head and Lord of the Church. He alone in his wisdom and by his authority has appointed offices, instituted ordinances of worship, and enacted the principles and laws of fellowship in his church.
- 1.1.4 The Lord Jesus Christ has appointed therein a government vested in church officers - a government distinct from civil government and, in all things spiritual, independent of it. The principles of church government, its institutions and offices, are made known in the Word of God.
- 1.1.5 In his name and by his authority officers are ordained in the church, courts are constituted, and judicial and authoritative decisions are pronounced and enforced.

1.2 The Reformed Presbyterian Church

- 1.2.1 The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia contends for the supremacy of Christ and the authority of his Word both in the church and in the nation. She traces her descent from the church in the New Testament and adheres to its principles which were recovered and re-emphasised in the Reformation of the sixteenth century in Europe and the Reformation of the seventeenth century in Scotland, and seeks to witness to these principles.
- 1.2.2 The only standard of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia is the Word of God. This standard is summarised, interpreted, and applied in the Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms agreed upon by the Westminster Assembly, and in this Constitution and the Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia.
- 1.2.3 The *Covenant of Church Membership* in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia is:
 1. I believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and the only infallible rule of faith and life.
 2. I believe in the one living and true God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as revealed in the Scriptures.
 3. I confess my guilt and helplessness as a sinner against God; I acknowledge Jesus Christ as my Saviour as he is offered in the gospel; I own him as my Lord and I dedicate myself to his service. I covenant with him that I will endeavour to forsake all sin and conform my life to his teaching and example.
 4. I promise to submit in the Lord to the teaching and government of this church as being based on the Scriptures, and described in substance in the Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia. I recognise my responsibility to work with others in the church and promise to support and encourage them in their service to the Lord. Should I need correction in doctrine or life, I promise to respect the authority and discipline of the church.
 5. To the end that I may grow in the Christian life, I promise that I will be obedient to God's commands.
 6. I propose to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness in all the relationships of life, faithfully to perform my whole duty as a true servant of Jesus

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Christ, and to seek to win others to him.

7. I make this profession of faith and purpose in the presence of God, in humble reliance upon his grace as desiring to give my account with joy at the last great day.

2 GOVERNMENT OF THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2.1 Governing Officers

- 2.1.1 Christ has given gifts to people in the church to minister to it. Elders, also known as presbyters and overseers, have been appointed by Christ to lead, govern and shepherd his church, and their qualifications are given in the Scriptures. Appointments to this position are normally for life and made from those men whose gifts and manner of life match these qualifications. All elders are invested with equal ruling authority, but some with special gifts may be appointed to do special work. Some elders may be equipped and called by God to labour in the Word and in doctrine, preaching and teaching in the church. Those exercising this ministry are known as "ministers of the Word," or informally just as "ministers."
- 2.1.2 It is God and God alone who selects the men who shall be invested with authority to rule in Christ's church; and the validity of this Divine call is made evident by the testimony of the conscience of the one called, the approval of God's people, and the concurrence of Christ's church through her courts.
- 2.1.3 All candidates for eldership shall be members in good standing and shall receive appropriate training so that they shall understand the work to which they commit themselves and so that they will be better able to complete that work to the glory of God. Presbyteries are responsible that this training be carried out, either by elders appointed for the training of each candidate, or by a training institution, or both.
- 2.1.4 Each candidate will be evaluated by the entire Presbytery or by the presbyters appointed for his training, and on approval he will be declared eligible to be called by a congregation to do the work among them for which God has equipped him through spiritual gifts. In the case of ministers of the Word and evangelists, the Presbytery declares, by its approval, that it sees in him the gift of public preaching and teaching as well as those gifts which constitute spiritual leadership.
- 2.1.5 Elders of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia and sister Reformed Presbyterian Churches are eligible to be called to do the work for which they are spiritually qualified, gifted, and trained.
- 2.1.6 Elders coming from other denominations and wishing to take part in the leadership of the Reformed Presbyterian Church may be declared by Presbytery to be eligible for call only after a thorough investigation of their spiritual qualifications, gifts and training, and a careful examination including their doctrine and life and the motive for seeking membership and eldership in the Reformed Presbyterian Church.
- 2.1.7 A congregation may only issue a call when conforming to regulations prescribed by the supreme court of the church.
- 2.1.8 It belongs to Presbytery to make arrangements for ordination or installation of elders according to the regulations prescribed by the supreme court of the church.
- 2.1.9 All candidates on admission to the eldership must give their assent to Questions To All Candidates For Office and sign The Formula prescribed by the supreme court of the church.
- 2.1.10 All those who shepherd the church, ministering to it, are worthy to be paid for that work, especially those who devote all or a large proportion of their time to that work and have not other means of support.
- 2.1.11 Since it is Presbytery that has the responsibility for oversight of congregations within its bounds, it is Presbytery which guides the congregations in their financial responsibilities toward the presbyters which labour among them.

2.2 Courts of the Church

2.2.1 General Regulations

- 2.2.1.1 The government of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia is vested in the following courts in descending order of precedence - Synod, Presbyteries, Sessions. Until circumstances warrant the constitution of a Synod, the highest court is the Presbytery.
- 2.2.1.2 Each court shall be presided over by a moderator and recorded by a clerk.
- 2.2.1.3 In the absence of the moderator or clerk, another member of the court may be appointed to act for the duration of the absence.
- 2.2.1.4 Church courts shall be preceded by worship. The clerk shall then read the roll of members of the court present. If there is a quorum the moderator shall constitute the court in prayer. Church courts shall be constituted and adjourned in prayer in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the King and Head of the church. After the court is constituted in ordinary session, the minutes of the preceding meeting or meetings are read, amended if necessary, and when confirmed are signed by the moderator and clerk.

2.2.2 The Synod

- 2.2.2.1 When there is more than one Presbytery, then the highest court of the church is the Synod. It is the bond of organic union, co-operation, and mutual helpfulness between Presbyteries, and is given the oversight of the whole church.
- 2.2.2.2 The Synod shall ordinarily meet at least once a year and shall consist of such elders as are appointed by their Presbyteries to attend. The Synod shall appoint, from the elders in the court, a moderator and a clerk who shall hold office for a period of one year. Besides ordinary meetings held on statutory dates fixed by agreement of Synod, there are adjourned meetings and special meetings. Special meetings are either called for a particular purpose by a previous meeting, or called by the moderator at his discretion or at the request of a Presbytery.
- 2.2.2.3 A quorum is constituted when half of the Presbyteries are represented by a majority of their appointed representatives. In the case of the moderator or clerk being absent, the court shall, from its members, make a temporary appointment for the duration of the absence.

2.2.3 The Presbytery

- 2.2.3.1
 - a) The Presbytery shall consist of all elders of the church labouring within the bounds of Presbytery.
 - b) Elders who resign or retire from active service on a Session shall not continue to have a seat on Presbytery unless (a) duly inducted to the session of a congregation, or (b) are appointed to serve on Presbytery for the purpose of discharging a specific task.
- 2.2.3.2 Any elder of the church who is not a member of Presbytery and who is present at a meeting may be invited by the court to sit as a consultative member.
- 2.2.3.3 The officials of the Presbytery are the moderator and the clerk, and shall be appointed annually by the court.
- 2.2.3.4 It is the duty of the clerk to record the names of the members present, to keep minutes of the proceedings of the Presbytery, to preserve its papers and records, to write and attest extracts of its minutes when ordered by the court. He shall keep a correct roll of ministers and elders under the jurisdiction of Presbytery.
- 2.2.3.5 It is the function of Presbytery to receive and decide on reports from Sessions; to determine all references, complaints, appeals, and petitions from the same, or from

members of the church transmitting their papers through the Session. It is the duty of the Presbytery to maintain a faithful supervision over all the congregations within its bounds, to direct and superintend the education of candidates for the ministry, and after due trial licence them to preach the gospel. The Presbytery shall direct the work of all licentiates labouring in its bounds, and see to the supply of vacant pulpits and to the pastoral oversight of vacant congregations. It organises new congregations, sanctions the erection of church buildings, and approves sites for same. Presbytery also approves the purchase and sale of land and buildings by congregations; these are held through the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia Association Incorporated. It also belongs to the Presbytery to ordain to the gospel ministry and to watch over all that pertains to the call, ordination, and installation of ministers of the Word, and to the dissolution of the relationship of a minister to a congregation. Where Presbytery is convinced that there is a neglect of church discipline by a Session, Presbytery can take the necessary steps to see that proper discipline is administered. It visits congregations, correcting abuses when found, and provides that the law and order of the church are maintained. It is the duty of Presbytery to obtain copies of the terms of endowments in congregations under its care and to ensure that these terms are observed.

2.2.3.6 One fifth of the members, and no less than four, assembled at the appointed time and place, and representative of a majority of the congregations shall constitute a quorum.

2.2.3.7 At least two stated meetings shall be held each year. The meetings of the court are:

1. Ordinary, which shall be held on statutory dates;
2. Adjourned;
3. Special, for a particular purpose designated by a previous meeting or convened by the moderator for transacting business of an urgent nature that may arise between the statutory meetings.

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- 2.2.3.8 Normally Presbyteries shall consist of at least three congregations. A Presbytery, on reaching sufficient size and judging it expedient, may divide into more than one Presbytery. Where the church has more than one Presbytery, the appointed representatives of these Presbyteries shall be constituted as a Synod. After the establishment of a Synod all further divisions of Presbyteries shall be subject to Synod's approval.
- 2.2.4 The Session
- 2.2.4.1 The Session consists of the elders of the congregation.
- 2.2.4.2 The Session shall appoint a moderator from its members.
- 2.2.4.3 If there are not elders in a congregation, or if the number be less than three, the Presbytery shall appoint one or more of its members to act as interim members of Session until the deficiency has been supplied.
- 2.2.4.4 If a Session, in peculiar circumstances, feels the need of help, Presbytery may, on the request of Session, appoint members of Presbytery to act as interim members of the Session until it reports to the Presbytery that assistance is no longer required.
- 2.2.4.5 The Session from among its members shall appoint a clerk, who shall take minutes of its proceedings, issue citations, keep the Sessional papers and records, and write and attest extracts from the minutes when ordered by the court, keep a register of members and adherents, and perform any other duties required by the Session.
- 2.2.4.6 The Session shall hold stated meetings for the transaction of ordinary business. The meeting should be announced to the congregation on a previous Sabbath.
- 2.2.4.7 The moderator, in case of urgency, either on his own motion, or on a requisition by two members of Session or by five members of the congregation, may convene a special meeting of Session.
- 2.2.4.8 The moderator and two other members of Session constitute a quorum.
- 2.2.4.9 The names of the members present at each meeting shall be inserted in the record.
- 2.2.4.10 Every Session shall submit its minute book for inspection to the Presbytery to which it is subject, once a year, or whenever it may be required to do so by the Presbytery.
- 2.2.4.11 The Session exercises rule in spiritual matters over the congregation, takes cognisance of the conduct of the members, and should hold meetings of a devotional nature.
- 2.2.4.12 The Session sets the time and place for public worship, for the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and for the visitation of the families of the congregation. It also decides what meetings may be held in the church buildings.
- 2.2.4.13 The Session shall revise the register of members every two years.
- 2.2.4.14 The Session has control of the praise service in the congregation, and appoints or removes the precentor.
- 2.2.4.15 To the Session belongs the oversight and control of all associations and organisations in the congregation. The annual reports of such associations and organisations should be submitted to Session before presentation at the annual meeting.
- 2.2.4.16 Sessions shall see to it that no money is raised by ballots, raffles or other forms of lottery.
- 2.2.4.17 Infant children, one or both of whose parents are members of the church in good standing have the right to be publicly recognised in baptism as members of the church on earth.

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- 2.2.4.18 Members of Session shall attend faithfully to the religious training of the young so that, when they arrive at years of maturity, they may be prepared to enter into the enjoyment of full membership in the church.
- 2.2.4.19 The baptised youth of the congregation and others from without who have received Christian baptism are to be examined as to their soundness in the faith, and their Christian character and conduct, and shall on professing Christ as their Saviour and Lord, and on affirming the Covenant of Church Membership, be admitted to full membership in the church.
- 2.2.4.20 Candidates for admission to the Reformed Presbyterian Church, if able to produce a disjunction certificate from another branch of the Christian church, ought, when practicable, to present it; and being known as persons of consistent Christian life, shall, on giving evidence of their knowledge of the teaching of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, and on affirming the Covenant of Church Membership, be received into full membership.
- 2.2.4.21 In the case of unbaptised adults seeking full membership, public baptism shall accompany and follow their affirmation of the Covenant of Church Membership. In the case of unbaptised adults seeking communicant membership, public baptism shall accompany and follow their affirmation of the first three terms of the Covenant of Church Membership.
- 2.2.4.22 When admitting members, the Session is to be regularly constituted and the admission may appropriately take place in the presence of the congregation. The act of admission is by prayer and giving the right hand of fellowship, and it may be preceded or followed by appropriate exhortations by the moderator and other members of Session.
- 2.2.4.23 Certificates of disjunction of membership shall, on application, be granted by Session to members in good standing.
- 2.2.4.24 It is the duty of Session to provide for the religious and moral interests of the congregation. In the discharge of this duty the Session should promote in the congregation organisations such as Sabbath Schools, Young People's Societies, Missionary Associations, Bible Study Groups, and meetings for prayer. The elders shall visit the sick, instruct the young, edify and comfort believers, warn the careless, and endeavour generally to promote the welfare of the congregation.
- 2.2.4.25 The members of Session are subject to the jurisdiction of Session with right of appeal to Presbytery.

3 LOCAL ORGANISATION

3.1 *The Congregation*

- 3.1.1 A congregation is a company whose members are associated in a particular locality to serve the Lord in worship, the sacraments, instruction, discipline, fellowship, evangelism and service.
- 3.1.2 A congregation shall be under the care of a Session. The Session has the authority to grant membership in the congregation according to the following categories:
1. Full membership pertains to those affirming the Covenant of Church Membership;
 2. Communicant membership pertains to those affirming the first three terms of the Covenant of Church Membership;
 3. Baptised membership pertains to the baptised children of church members.
- 3.1.3 A member in good standing is one not under discipline by the church courts and pertains to any of the three kinds of membership.
- 3.1.4 The baptised children of such persons, while not yet having the right to take part in the business of the congregation, or participate in the Lord's Supper, are also a part of the church, and under the care and oversight of the Session.
- 3.1.5 Adherents are all others who attend the services of the congregation and otherwise manifest sympathy.
- 3.1.6 Administration of the Sacraments shall be granted to those affirming statements one, two, and three of the Covenant of Church Membership and not requiring discipline from any church court.
- 3.1.7 A number of persons in a locality wishing to be supplied with public religious ordinances may apply for the same to the Presbytery within whose bounds they reside; and the Presbytery, on judging it expedient to grant their application, shall establish in the locality a preaching station, and place it under a Session or a commission of Presbytery. A Presbytery itself may originate a preaching station. A preaching station may be raised to the position of a fully organised congregation by the Presbytery.
- 3.1.8 When application is made to the Presbytery for the formation or recognition of a new congregation, the application shall be in writing and shall have been subscribed, at a meeting convened for the purpose, by those who wish to have the congregation formed. The application shall be presented by a commissioner or commissioners appointed to state the circumstances of the case. Inquiry shall be made by the Presbytery as to the following particulars:
1. The causes and circumstances that have led to the application.
 2. The place in which it is proposed that the congregation will assemble for worship, and the distance from any neighbouring congregation.
 3. Whether any neighbouring congregation has any objection to offer to the formation or recognition of the new congregation.
 4. The proposed means of supporting ordinances.

3.2 *Congregational Meetings*

- 3.2.1 All meetings of the congregation shall be held at the call of the Session which sets the time and place of meeting. The meeting shall be open to all members and adherents, but only

those holding full membership shall vote. The quorum for congregational meetings is one third of those enrolled as full members of the congregation.

- 3.2.2 An annual meeting of the congregation shall be held for the purpose of receiving reports of the year's work, and for transacting such other relevant business as may be brought before it.
- 3.2.3 A special meeting of the congregation shall be convened by Session on a written requisition from four persons holding full membership stating the object of the meeting, provided that the object of such meeting be constitutional and proper. Only the business for which the special meeting has been summoned may be considered.
- 3.2.4 Meetings for the election of elders or deacons shall be publicly announced to the congregation on two Sabbaths before the day of the election, shall be presided over by the moderator of Session, and shall have decisions recorded in the minute book of the Session.
- 3.2.5 All other meetings of the congregation may be convened after one public announcement on the Sabbath, shall be presided over by the moderator of Session or by a member chosen by the Session; and the proceedings shall be recorded by a secretary and recorded in a minute book.

3.3 Trustees

- 3.3.1 Trustees should be appointed according to regulations prescribed by the supreme court of the church.
- 3.3.2 Congregational Trust Deeds and all securities should be lodged for safe keeping in a bank. Copies of these should be retained for the convenience of the congregation. Old minute books of the Session and committees should also be lodged in safe custody.

3.4 Other Appointed Workers

- 3.4.1 Christ has also given gifts of ministry to the church for service other than the oversight of a congregation. Appointments to these official ministries, also known as the role of deacons, are open to men and women who accept the Covenant of Church Membership, and whose suitability according to the qualifications given in the Scriptures, and the requirements of this constitution is identified by the church. The period of appointment is to be determined by the congregation and shall not exceed three years. Reappointment may be made.
- 3.4.2 These ministries are to be commensurate with the Scriptural qualifications for deacons. Such work might include financial management, home help, works of mercy, teaching of children, and other areas relevant to the overall ministry of a particular congregation, according to its needs and the needs of its neighbours and the provision of suitably gifted people to carry out these ministries. The specific nature of such ministries shall be determined by the Session.
- 3.4.3 People appointed to official ministries other than oversight shall be arranged in committees which shall keep minutes and financial records.
- 3.4.4 Official ministries in a congregation are under the supervision of the elders concerned who shall set the number of a quorum. Elders may join the committee and exercise a deliberative and voting power.
- 3.4.5 Committees may be convened by a public announcement from the pulpit, or by notice given to every member. All the meetings shall be opened and closed with prayer.
- 3.4.6 The moderator of Session has the right to act as chairman of a committee, but it shall be competent for the committee at his request to appoint any of its members to act as chairman.
- 3.4.7 Treasurers shall lodge any committee funds in bank accounts approved by the congregation.

4 CONSTITUTION AMENDMENT

4.1 General

- 4.1.1 Any member of a congregation has the right to initiate steps to amend the constitution. The proposed amendment must be submitted in writing first to the Session of the congregation concerned for approval, and if approved by simple majority, be transferred to Presbytery. Any amendment proposed to Presbytery may not be voted on until the next meeting of Presbytery. In the event of the proposed amendment being refused or rejected by a Session, the originating member has the right to appeal, in writing, directly to Presbytery.
- 4.1.2 Any amendment approved by two thirds of the Presbytery shall be submitted to the Session of each congregation. Each Session shall make available to its congregation details of the proposed amendment and call a special general meeting of the congregation, with notice being given on four consecutive Lord's Days, to encourage comment on and to gauge reaction to this proposal.
- 4.1.3 Following the discussion with the congregation, each Session will vote on the proposed amendment and the clerk of each Session will report the result at the following meeting of Presbytery.
- 4.1.4 Presbytery will examine the result from each Session, and, if it is found that at least three fourths of the number of Sessions, and three fourths of all elders voting were in favour of the amendment, the amendment shall be declared as part of the constitution.