

## COMMITTEE ON CHURCH DOCTRINE

To the Venerable 149th General Assembly:

To equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:12–13)

The Committee on Church Doctrine exists to assist the General Assembly in thinking theologically about issues that come before it. In so doing, it is our hope and prayer to equip Presbyterians with thoughtful, Christ-centered responses to many of the issues we face today.

Our committee reflects the diversity of The Presbyterian Church in Canada as our members span geographic regions, genders, nationalities and theological nuances. Items we work on come to us either from the General Assembly or through committee members. We are grateful for the work of the Rev. Dr. Heather Vais, Dr. David Holland and the Rev. Dr. Sarah Travis, all of whom are concluding their time with the committee.

This report outlines the work of the committee in the past 12 months. We met twice in-person and are grateful to Knox College and the national church office (50 Wynford) for their excellent hospitality in hosting these meetings. Items are handled by smaller working groups which meet during and in between the in-person meetings. Our report includes a proposed final Preamble for the Ordination Vows, to be used alongside the existing one. It also includes our responses to questions around whether the church is the new Israel and the Right to Dissent.

### **PREAMBLES TO THE ORDINATION VOWS**

Overture No. 30, 2017 (A&P 2017, p. 602) and Overture No. 11, 2019 (A&P 2019, p. 514–15) both asked the General Assembly to revise the language of the preambles to ordination. They sought these to be rewritten “in plain English, using current and accessible language and while maintaining the theological integrity of the document” (Overture No. 30, 2017, A&P 2027, p. 602). A working group created new preambles over the following few years. In 2021, the General Assembly sent a draft to the courts of the church for feedback and the committee received many great responses, including praise for the liturgical version and made editorial changes accordingly. In September 2022, the writing team felt they had done all they could do but that an editor’s approach would be helpful. An editor was hired and the final preambles were sent to the committee in February 2023. At the same meeting, a rewritten version was also presented by a member of the committee. It was agreed to send this rewritten version to the original working group and to postpone presenting the preambles to the Assembly. Since then no member has expressed that more work should be done on the preambles, therefore allowing the committee to present the work on the preamble this year.

What follows is the conclusion of seven years of work with many voices contributing, including those from sessions, presbyteries and colleges of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Once approved by the General Assembly, it is the committee’s intention to create a liturgical version for use in worship services. It is our hope that this and the liturgical version may be placed alongside the existing preamble and that congregations and presbyteries be invited to choose whichever one fits their context best.

This is the proposed preamble:

All ministries of the Church have their source in God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Out of love for all creation, the Creator came to us in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, and now sustains and guides us by the Holy Spirit.

Christ is our prophet, priest, king.

The risen Christ sent his disciples into the world with a mission and a promise to be with them always. In the same way, all who follow Jesus are sent and strengthened by this promise.

Through Christ, God calls the church into being and sends it into the world to embody love, grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing and justice.

All who walk in the way of Jesus are called to share in this work and to witness with thankfulness and joy to God’s gift of salvation.

To enliven and enrich the work of the church, God gives varied gifts and calls people to diverse ministries.

### **For Diaconal Ministers**

In the Presbyterian tradition, we recognize that some people are called to exercise leadership in special ministries of service to the world, within congregations and the courts of the church. We call such people diaconal ministers.

### **For Missionaries**

In the Presbyterian tradition, we recognize that some people are called to exercise leadership in witness and service to the wider world, on behalf of congregations and the courts of the church. We call such people missionaries.

### **For Deacons**

In the Presbyterian tradition, we recognize that some people are called to exercise leadership in serving, caring and advocating for the poor, on behalf of congregations and the courts of the church. We call such people deacons.

### **For Ministers of Word and Sacrament**

From the beginning, God has led the church to set apart and ordain to the ministry of Word and Sacrament those to whom God has given the necessary gifts. As a church, we prayerfully discern and confirm these gifts in the lives of those who offer themselves for this ministry.

### **For Ruling Elders**

In the Presbyterian tradition, we acknowledge that some are called to exercise leadership and governance in congregations and the courts of the church. We set apart such people through ordination as ruling elders.

For all Christians, our deepest allegiance is to Jesus Christ. The whole of his story – his birth, life, teaching, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension and reign – makes God known to us. All that we do, believe and teach is measured against his example and revelation.

The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments witness to Christ and are the measure – the canon – of our teaching and discernment of truth. We acknowledge that these are historical documents, shaped by the language and ideas of their time and place. Yet, as we read them in our own place and time, the Holy Spirit helps us hear in them a living word from God.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada is part of one holy, catholic and apostolic Church. We confess with the Church its ecumenical creeds and with other Reformed churches, our shared Reformed confessions.

Our own subordinate standards express the faith of our ancestors as they sought to be faithful to God in their own place and time. With humility and respect, we look to these standards as we seek to live faithfully in our own time.

Our subordinate standards are the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1875 and 1889, the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation of 1954 and Living Faith (Foi Vivante) of 1998, as adopted in 2010, 산 믿음 and any such doctrine as the church, ever-reforming by the guidance of the scriptures and the Holy Spirit, may yet confess.

We, the congregation of [NAME], have discerned your gifts and call, your faith in Christ and your love for people and are ready to ordain you to the ministry of ruling eldership. The laying on of hands is a sign of our love and support and the grace and love of God which will hold and sustain you through the joys and challenges of this ministry, helping you keep the promises you make this day.

As a public witness to your faith and commitment to this ministry, we ask you to answer the following questions based on the preamble you have just heard: [Questions of Ordination].”

**Recommendation CDC-001**      adopted/defeated/amended

That the above preamble be adopted and placed alongside the existing preamble and permission be granted to bring a liturgical version to the 150th General Assembly.

**Recommendation CDC-002**      adopted/defeated/amended

That the above report be the response to Overture No. 30, 2017 re preamble to ordination and induction of ruling elders and Overture No. 11, 2019 re preamble to ordination and induction of ministers.

## **RIGHT TO DISSENT**

In 2023, the General Assembly referred Rec. CLK-001 to the committee for an opinion. (A&P 2023, p. 83–84, 15) The proposed changes to the Book of Forms are concerned with those who are serving as commissioners to the General Assembly and consequently miss a meeting of the session. Are they able to register dissent with a decision made at a session meeting where they are absent because they have served as a commissioner at the General Assembly?

The Church Doctrine Committee affirms the statement in the Clerks' report which maintains that "Presbyterians discern the mind of Christ together and not in isolation".

We uphold the belief that the mind of Christ is best discerned in the context of a meeting which has been prayerfully constituted and in which everyone has been given the opportunity to voice their thoughts and to listen to the thoughts of others. Those not in attendance at meetings, regardless of the reason, have missed out on these important steps of the discernment process and therefore are not in a position to formally register their dissent in the minutes of the court. This belief is reaffirmed elsewhere in the Book of Forms when it states that "Any member of a court who has voted on a question and is not satisfied with the decision is entitled to have their dissent recorded." (Book of Forms 91)

We also acknowledge other realities. For example, conversations often bridge many meetings. One can imagine scenarios where there are other meetings within which an elder can make their contributions to the discernment process. Also, there are other ways to express dissent, including writing a letter to the session allowing a dissenting view to be included in the minutes through correspondence.

It is our opinion that the most straightforward solution is to remove the permission for sessions to meet while the General Assembly is meeting. Barring this, we advise that alternate forms of expressing dissent be used (i.e., writing a letter). This will preserve the wisdom of our understanding of the discernment process, which is fundamental to our polity and theology of discernment.

### **OVERTURE NO. 6, 2023 (A&P 2023, p. 267, 72,14)**

#### **Re: Living Faith concerning the church as 'the new Israel'**

Overture No. 6, 2023 was referred to the committee by the General Assembly. The overture asked the Assembly to "delete, replace or amend the phrase in Living Faith concerning the church as 'the new Israel'."

Two issues were raised for the committee. First, does the church replace Israel's covenant with God, also known as the issue of supersessionism? And second, how should we handle Living Faith as it is a subordinate standard of The Presbyterian Church in Canada?

#### **Supersessionism**

This overture asks for a change to the wording of Living Faith, 1.2. The overture argues that this wording is problematic because it is an "exclusivist definition" of the church. When they are used to describe the church, the words "the new Israel" invite a supersessionist interpretation of the relationship between Israel and the church. But in Christ, God welcomes Gentiles into the covenant with Israel. That covenant expands. It is not abrogated or replaced.

The overture contends that the words "the new Israel" contradict a central tenet of the "Statement of The Presbyterian Church in Canada on our Relationship with the Jewish People" (A&P 2011, p. 43) viz., "that Jews have not been supplanted and replaced by Christians in the one covenant". In Jesus Christ, God's covenant includes Gentile and Jew alike. The overture adds, as a practical reason for this change, that the supersessionist implications of "the new Israel" could undermine efforts to oppose antisemitism.

#### **Observations on the Overture**

The committee made these observations:

1. The overture does not directly claim that the description of the church as "the new Israel" is antisemitic, just that its supersessionist implications risk undermining efforts to oppose antisemitism. The word "risk" describes something that could happen, not something that necessarily will happen. The overture doesn't offer specific examples of the words "the new Israel" actively impeding someone's efforts to oppose antisemitism. Have they? If not, does this lessen the urgency to change them?
2. The "Statement of The Presbyterian Church in Canada on our Relationship with the Jewish People" (A&P 2011) cited by this overture, draws upon an earlier study made by the Church Doctrine Committee "One

Covenant of Grace” (A&P 2010, p. 291–356). This lengthy, illuminating study argues that a “hard supersessionism”, one that sees the church as the replacement of God’s covenant with Israel, ought to be ruled out. But it also admits that a ‘soft supersessionism’ of some kind is almost unavoidable when we defend the salvific meaning of Jesus Christ for all people, both Jew and Gentile alike.

3. The word “new” in the phrase “new Israel”, does not need to denote a replacement for Israel, as when one replaces an old chair with a new one. “New” may have only chronological connotations. The old simply precedes the new, as in the Old and New Testaments. The old Israel still exists. So does the new one.
4. The overture doesn’t suggest a specific change to the words “the new Israel”. It only asks that we “delete, amend or qualify” them. In consultation with the author of this overture, two options were suggested: that “the new Israel” be deleted or that they be replaced with “the people of Christ”.

### **How should we handle Living Faith?**

The issue also raised a number of questions around how we should handle our subordinate standards.

1. Have we amended Living Faith before? Have we amended earlier subordinate standards? Should we? We note that The Presbyterian Church in Canada opted not to change the Westminster Confession language around church and state but to subsequently offer a new statement. We also note that The Presbyterian Church in Canada declined saying that the Westminster Confession should never be changed (Confessing the Faith Today, A&P 2003, p. 256). And we note that the Church of Scotland provides footnotes to the Westminster Confession on their website and links to subsequent statements that have expanded their understanding.
2. If we think some wording has become ‘problematic’ or if it lends itself to misinterpretation in a new context, should this wording be changed only to clarify the original intention and meaning? Or may changes in wording also be allowed to amplify, extend or alter that original intention and meaning?
3. If amendments are allowed, should they be done lightly and routinely or only *in extremis*; that is, only when a new context makes it a pressing issue? Does the overture indicate such a case is happening as Living Faith is being used in antisemitic ways.
4. If we think the original wording of a subordinate standard should not be quickly and easily changed, may we instead issue guidance on how it ought to be interpreted? For example, if the Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of ‘men’ and ‘man’, we should know and agree that both men and women are intended and included in the meaning of those words. If this is contested, the correct meaning may be clarified, not by changing the words in the Westminster Confession but by instruction on how those words should be interpreted. Could this be done with the words “the new Israel”?
5. We understand that any changes to the wording of Living Faith would necessarily happen under the Barrier Act.
6. Since Living Faith is often used as an introduction to what The Presbyterian Church in Canada believes, does providing notes go far enough in keeping Living Faith functional in this way?

### **Conclusions**

Our preference is to respond to this overture by qualifying the phrase in Living Faith, clarifying how to interpret and how not to interpret, the words “the new Israel”. We commend anyone interested in this process to the Church Doctrine Committee’s study “One Covenant of Grace”. (A&P 2010, p. 291–356)

The word “new” in “new Israel” should be interpreted to refer to the “new thing” God has done in Jesus Christ by welcoming Gentiles into God’s one covenant of grace. “New” should not be interpreted to mean that the new covenant which establishes the Church abolishes and replaces the old one with the people of Israel. If it is “new”, it is because the unsurpassable work that God has done in Jesus Christ is dependent upon and has emerged from, the Israel that came before him in time. If there’s a secondary sense to the word “new”, beyond the chronological, it is in the sense of something being renewed, not replaced.

We are also asking the General Assembly to indicate if the subordinate standard Living Faith is a living document that can be changed and so remain effective in introducing newcomers to what The Presbyterian Church in Canada believes. Or, should Living Faith remain unchanged, a historical statement of what we believed when it was drafted, with notes as necessary.

**Recommendation CDC-003** adopted/defeated/amended

That, in the interest of providing newcomers to The Presbyterian Church in Canada with an articulation of what we believe, Living Faith should be considered a living document that can be changed under the Barrier Act.

**Recommendation CDC-004** adopted/defeated/amended

That the prayer of Overture No. 6, 2023 re Living Faith concerning the church as “the new Israel” be answered in the terms of the above report.

**STATEMENT ON UNITY IN DIVERSITY**

As The Presbyterian Church in Canada grappled with questions around marriage and ordination, the committee developed a plan to respond. This included a series of papers that explored the facets of the issue, including whether we could be unified despite our diversity.

A draft was submitted to the General Assembly (A&P 2018, p. 237–58) and feedback was sent to the Special Committee of Former Moderators. Though unaware of the content of that feedback, we continued to work on this paper in response to the difficult conversations taking place.

As our church is now emerging from this season, the committee is concerned that continued conversation may agitate rather than help with the healing. It is neither our hope nor intention to preach how people should be unified despite our diversity, as many have experienced that doing so can raise defenses and make conversation more difficult. Also, we do not want this work to be interpreted through any tension that exists in conversations around withdrawing congregations.

We also understand that congregations of The Presbyterian Church in Canada continue to grapple with difficult subjects that can divide. The Committee on Church Doctrine hopes that the existing work “On the Question of Unity and Diversity”, (A&P 2018, p. 237–58) may be helpful in navigating these issues.

The committee recommends that this project be ended and we recommit ourselves to demonstrating unity despite diversity in our own dealings with each other and the recommendations we make to the General Assembly. We observe this same spirit in much of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and anticipate how it will unfold.

**Recommendation CDC-005** adopted/defeated/amended

That “On the Question of Unity and Diversity” be commended to congregations and courts when they navigate contentious and divisive issues.

**DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY**

The committee’s working group has begun research surrounding the Doctrine of Discovery and other colonial concepts at play in the life of the church today. Each of us has taken a different approach to this information gathered based on our own areas of focus. At the meeting in February, we discussed possible applications for the work and considerations for this project. This included discussion on what voices have not yet been heard fully in this conversation and how the working group might build relationships and create conversations moving forward.

It is our goal to provide a report and recommendations next year.

**MEDICAL ASSISTANCE IN DYING (MAiD)**

In 2023, the General Assembly made the following decision:

That the Committee on Church Doctrine produce a document for the 150th (2025) General Assembly using the term Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) that will assist the church to respond faithfully and practically in pastoral situations. (Rec. CDC-002, A&P 2023, p. 82, 26)

Realizing our diversity of opinion on Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD), the committee is working on a document to be presented at the 2025 General Assembly that will assist the church to respond faithfully and practically in pastoral situations. To this end, the committee will be taking into consideration the changing government policies on MAiD, as well as considering how Reformed theology dialogues with and interprets ethical and spiritual matters. The committee realizes that there is a need for pastoral care and non-judgmental guidance for both patients and their families. We also need to grapple with the role of suffering in end-of-life situations and the traditionally high-view Christians have regarding the sanctity of life. We hope to explore how we point to God in the decision-making process.

## STATEMENT ON CHURCH AND STATE

Over the past number of years, the Committee on Church Doctrine has been discussing and exploring the question of the relationship between church and state. Its origins were in the series of papers we envisioned to address the difficult conversations being had.

Some preliminary work on this theme has been written and reviewed by committee members and yet we have found it challenging to discern a helpful approach to exploring the theological, cultural, political and other questions that are at stake in this relationship.

This year we wish to highlight for the General Assembly that 2024 is the 70th anniversary of the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation – one of our subordinate standards. It was adopted in 1954 and has, we might say, “flown under the radar” since then. That is, as the subordinate standards of the church, the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation (henceforth, “the Declaration”), a relatively concise document, is little known in the church. This is perhaps to be regretted, since it is a subordinate standard, which teaching and ruling elders pledge to uphold and one that touches on themes that are always relevant to the life of the church.

As we have continued to wrestle with the question(s) of church and state, the committee has determined that a helpful approach will be one that focuses on the Declaration. Here is the approach we have in mind and we seek the General Assembly’s support. As we do so, we should note that some helpful theological writing has been done with respect to the Declaration, including that by the late Rev. Dr. William Klempa. This prior work will be relevant to what we propose and yet our approach, we think, will be broader – in that it will touch on the whole Declaration and will invite broad engagement from the church.

Our intention is to work towards a final report that will be presented to the General Assembly in 2029, on the 75th anniversary of the Declaration. That may seem too far off but we know that it takes time to do careful work as a committee and we also are aware that meaningful engagement with the ministers, elders, diaconal ministers and members of the church will take time. As a result, with this general framework in mind, we propose to do the work based on the following timeline:

2026: Present a preliminary report to the General Assembly. This preliminary study/report will offer historic background to the Declaration and set it in its context in the post-WWII world. It will also offer theological, cultural and contemporary reflection on its twelve paragraphs – engaging these paragraphs from the point of view of our own moment of time and also with a view to both expressing its meaning and extending its reflections in new directions. We expect that this engagement and reflection will be an instance of the confessional engagement that is articulated in an earlier document of the General Assembly, “Confessing the Faith Today”.

2026–2027: Send the above report for study and engagement by the courts and bodies of the church. It is not our expectation that the above report or its circulation will simply be an intellectual and academic exercise. Rather, we expect that we will be able to articulate questions that engage the whole church about how our faith connects to the contemporary world we inhabit, how churches are creatively engaging various levels of government (from municipal counselors to local Members of Parliament), how we wrestle to understand what it means that our faith is more than private and how we can continue to live and confess our faith in public words and actions.

2027–2029: Prepare a final report that will include the preparation of a study guide that will present the church’s diverse understandings and experiences of the relationship between church and state. It will both celebrate what the Declaration helps us understand and extend its meaning in new and creative ways. On the 75th anniversary of its adoption, perhaps we can have a meaningful celebration of it in 2029.

We hope that the General Assembly sees the wisdom and opportunities that are inherent in the above and see its endorsement of this approach.

**Recommendation CDC-006**      adopted/defeated/amended

That the 75th anniversary of The Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation be marked with the process outlined above.

Jeremy Bellsmith  
Convener