CHURCH ORDER OF THE REFORMED CHURCHES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Article 1
To maintain good order in the Church of Christ, it is necessary that there should be: offices; assemblies; supervision over doctrine, sacraments and ceremonies; and church discipline. These matters are dealt with in the articles that follow:

The Offices

Article 2
There are four types of offices: ministers of the Word, professors at the Theological School, elders and deacons.

Article 3
No person shall be permitted to proclaim the Word and administer the sacraments unless he has been lawfully called to do so and has been admitted to the office.

Article 4
The lawful calling and admission of a person who has not previously served in the office of the Word, and who has been examined preparatively (preparatoir) by the classis in which he resides, shall comprise the following:

first, after prayers have been said, the election by the church council and deacons according to the customary local procedure or as determined by the church council; and, in churches with only one minister, with the advice of the classis or the counselor (konsulent) appointed by the classis for this purpose;

secondly, examination by the classis (to whom the call shall be submitted for approval) into the doctrine and life (peremtoir) of the person to be called, which shall involve the advice of the deputies appointed by the regional (partikuliere) synod;

thirdly, approbation and approval by the members of the church in question, which implies that no legitimate objection was lodged after the name of the person to be called had been announced in church for at least three Sundays;

finally, the public ordination of the person in the presence of the congregation and of the deputies of the classis according to the form prescribed for this purpose.

Article 5
The calling of a minister of the Word from one church to another in the same fellowship of churches shall comprise the following:

first, after prayers have been said, the election by the church council and deacons, with observance of the customary local procedure or as determined by the church council, and of the general ordinances applying to persons who have served outside the Gereformeerde Churches in South Africa to determine whether they qualify for a call; in churches with only one minister of the Word, this process shall involve the advice of the classis or of the counselor (konsulent) appointed by the classis for this purpose;

secondly, approval by the members of the church in question, provided that no legitimate objections were lodged after the name of the minister had been announced in church for at least three Sundays;

thirdly, ascertainment by the church council in conjunction with the deputies of the classis that there exists sound ecclesiastical evidence of the minister's doctrine, his life, the performance of his office and his release.

Article 6
A minister of the Word shall on no account assume the office of the Word under the auspices of a patron or in institutions or in any other way unless he has received permission to do so and has been admitted according to the foregoing articles; and he, like the other ministers, remains subject to the Church Order.

Article 7
If a person has been called to the office of the Word in a specific church, he shall live in that locality, unless he is sent to gather churches elsewhere.

Article 8
Anyone who has not studied shall not be admitted to the office of the Word, unless that person displays unmistakable evidence of extraordinary gifts, piety, humility and modesty, sound intellect and discretion, and eloquence. If someone presents himself for this office, the classis, with the approval of the regional synod, shall examine him, and if the outcome of such examination is favorable, he has to present a number of private probatory sermons after which the classis shall deal with the matter according to its judgement and in an edificatory manner.

Article 9
Preachers that join the church from other churches or sects shall not be admitted to the office of the Word, except with great circumspection and only after they have been subjected to a severe trial period.

Article 10
A minister of the Word who has been lawfully called to a church shall not leave that church in order to obey a call to another church without the consent of the church council and the deacons of the church where he holds office and the permission of the classis in question; and no other church shall receive him unless he has shown legal evidence of his release from the church and classis where he had served.

Article 11
The church council, which represents the church, shall provide adequate means of support to their ministers of the Word and shall not deny them support nor dismiss them from office without the knowledge and approval of the classis, with advice from the deputies of the regional synod.

Article 12
Since a minister of the Word, once he has been lawfully called as described above, is bound to the service of the church for life, he shall not enter upon a secular vocation except for such weighty reasons as shall receive the approval of the church council and the classis with advice from the deputies of the regional synod.

Article 13
A minister who, in the opinion of the church council and with the approval of the classis and the advice of the deputies of the regional synod, has become incapable of performing the duties of his office as a result of age, illness or otherwise, shall nevertheless retain the honor and title of a minister of the Word, and the church which he has served shall provide honorably for him in his need.

Article 14
A minister who is compelled to interrupt his service for some time because of illness or any other reason shall at all times be and remain subject to the calling of his church. Such interruption shall be subject to the permission of the church council and the advice of the classis.

Article 15
No minister of the Word shall proclaim the Word or administer the sacraments in any other church without the consent of the church council of that church, and nobody who has interrupted his ministry or is not an ordained minister in a local church may proclaim the Word wherever he pleases without the consent of the specific classis or regional synod.

Article 16
The office of a minister of the Word is to persevere in prayers, proclaim the Word and administer the sacraments, attend to and oversee his fellow ministers, the elders, the deacons and church members, and ultimately, in conjunction with the elders, exercise the discipline of the church and ensure that everything in the church takes place in an orderly and proper manner.

Article 17
When there is more than one minister of the Word in a church, there shall be as much equality as possible with respect to their duties as well as all other aspects, according to the judgement of the church council and, if necessary, with the advice of the classis. The same principle applies to elders and deacons.

Article 18
The duties of professors at the Theological School are to instruct ministers of the Word, interpret and explain the Word of
God, and defend the true doctrine against heresies and false doctrines.

**Article 19**
The churches should ensure that there are a sufficient number of students of Theology and that they receive financial support from the churches.

**Article 20**
At the demise of a minister of the Word, the church which he has served, or in the case of a professor, the church fellowship, shall care and provide in an honorable way for his widow and children in their need.

**Article 21**
Church councils shall ensure that parents observe their responsibility in seeing to it that their children's school education comprises the training and instruction of the Lord.

**Article 22**
Elders are elected by the congregation under the guidance of the church council according to the customary local procedure or as determined by the church council. Each church council may offer church members the opportunity to direct the attention to able persons before the election. The church council, with the deacons, may present the required number of elders to the church members for approbation, present them as pairs of which one should be elected in each case, or present a list of names from which the congregation may elect the required number. After their names had been announced on several occasions and no legal objection was lodged, the elected brothers are ordained according to the form prescribed for this purpose.

**Article 23**
The office of elders includes, besides the duties jointly performed by them and the minister of the Word as provided in article 16, to exercise the necessary supervision so as to ensure that the ministers of the Word, their fellow elders and the deacons conduct their offices faithfully; to conduct home visitations, as permitted by time and locality, both before and after the Lord's Supper, in order to build up the church; to take particular care to comfort and instruct church members; and to evangelize other people to adopt the Christian faith.

**Article 24**
The procedure applying to elders must also be observed in the election, approval and ordination of deacons.

**Article 25**
The essence of the office of deacon is conscientiously to collect the money and goods given to the poor as gifts of love and to distribute these gifts diligently, after joint deliberation, according to the needs of both the needy and other church members. It is also their duty to visit and comfort those in need and to ensure that the gifts are not wrongly applied. The deacons must report to the church council about their activities and, if so desired, to the congregation as well when the church council considers it appropriate.

**Article 26**
The deacons must request other bodies and institutions, who also provide help to the poor, to consult with them so that the gifts may be distributed more advantageously among those who have the greater need.

**Article 27**
The period of service of elders and deacons shall be determined by the church council in the best interests of the particular church. In the case of periodical retirement after at least two years, the same proportionate number of office bearers must retire annually.

**Article 28**
Precisely as civil authorities, as institutions of God, are obliged to assist and protect the church and its office bearers, it is likewise the duty of all ministers, elders and deacons to impress upon church members, faithfully and diligently, the need to obey and honor the government. They must also endeavor, in the fear of the Lord, to arouse and retain the goodwill of the civil authorities towards the churches in the best interest of the churches. Church assemblies must communicate with the government in order to acquire the necessary cooperation of the government and, as the church of Christ, must bear testimony to the government in cases where the need to do so occurs.
Church assemblies

Article 29
There are the following kinds of church assemblies: the church council, classis, regional synod, national synod and general synod.

Article 30
Church assemblies shall deal only with ecclesiastical matters and shall do so in an ecclesiastical manner. Major assemblies shall deal only with matters that could not be finalized in minor assemblies or that concern all the churches in question collectively.

Article 31
A decision reached at a church assembly by a majority of votes shall be considered fixed and binding, unless it is subsequently proved that it conflicts with the Word of God or the articles of the church order. If someone complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to a major assembly, up to the national synod. An appeal from a national synod to a general synod is possible only when the appeal is made to the Bible, confession, church order or a verdict of the general synod.

Article 32
All assemblies shall be opened by calling upon the Name of God and be concluded by giving thanks to Him.

Article 33
Delegates to major assemblies shall bring along their credentials and instructions, signed by the people who are sending them, and they shall have a vote in all matters, except such as particularly concern their person or church.

Article 34
In all assemblies a secretary shall assist the praeses and keep faithful record of all the important matters.

Article 35
At major assemblies a minister of the Word shall preside over the meeting. The task of the chairman is to state and explain the matters to be dealt with, to ensure that everyone awaits his turn to speak, to silence anyone who is quarrelsome or speaks too vehemently, and to discipline him suitably if he persists. His office shall cease when the assembly is concluded.

Article 36
A classis has the same authority over a church council as a regional synod has over a classis, or as a national synod has over a regional synod, or as a general synod has over a national synod.

Article 37
In all churches there shall be a church council composed of the minister or ministers of the Word and the elders. The church council shall meet regularly under the chairmanship of the minister, or the ministers alternately if there is more than one.

Article 38
When a church council is instituted for the first time, or reinstituted, it must be done with the advice of the classis. If there are only a small number of elders, the deacons may be considered to form part of the church council by way of local arrangement; this shall apply only in cases where there are less than three elders.

Article 39
Places where as yet no church council can be constituted shall be placed under the care of a neighbouring church council.

Article 40
The deacons shall meet regularly and, after calling upon the Name of God, deal with matters pertaining to their office. The minister(s) of the Word shall watch carefully over their activities and, if necessary, attend the meeting.

Article 41
The classis is a meeting of neighbouring churches of which each delegates a minister and an elder, or two elders if there is no minister, to represent them. The venue and time of the next classis is determined at each meeting. Such meetings shall be held at least once every three months. The various ministers shall preside over the classis in rotation, or one shall be
chosen by the meeting; however, the same minister shall not be chosen twice in succession.

The chairman shall inquire whether the churches hold meetings of the church council, exercise church discipline, take good care of the poor and the schools, and whether any of the churches require the advice and assistance of the classis in any matter regarding proper management.

At the last meeting prior to the regional synod, delegates must be chosen to attend the synod.

**Article 42**
When a church has more than one minister of the Word, the minister who has not been delegated according to article 41 may also attend the classis and shall have an advisory vote.

**Article 43**
At the conclusion of a classis and other major assembly, anyone who has done something in the meeting that merits discipline or who has ignored an admonition by a minor assembly shall be censured.

**Article 44**
The classis shall authorize at least two of the oldest, most experienced and competent ministers to conduct regular visitations at all the churches in the classis. They must ascertain whether the office bearers perform their duties faithfully, adhere to sound doctrine, comply with the church order at all times, and apply themselves diligently, as far as they are able to do so, to building up the congregation and promoting the education of the youth. If anyone should be found to be negligent in his office, they must admonish him in a brotherly spirit, and they must assist the church, through word and deed, in the management of everything that is conducive to peace and the building up of the church in its best interests.

**Article 45**
Every major assembly shall appoint a church council or deputies for ecclesiastical correspondence who must receive and keep all correspondence and documents of the meeting and present the minutes of that meeting to the next assembly.

Every major assembly shall also appoint a church council to call the next assembly and to receive it at the time and place determined for it; or, in the case of a regional synod, at the place and time determined according to the advice of its classis, and, in the case of a general synod, according to the advice of its regional synod.

**Article 46**
Matters to be dealt with in major assemblies shall not be prepared for discussion until the decisions of previous synods regarding these matters have been studied, in order that matters which had already been finalized were not tabled yet again unless it be considered necessary to review such matters.

**Article 47**
The regional synod is an assembly of neighbouring classes, to which each classis delegates an equal number of ministers of the Word and elders, as determined by the regional synod. The regional synod shall meet annually, unless, in the opinion of at least two classes, it has become essential to call an extraordinary regional synod.

**Article 48**
Each classis, regional synod and national synod in general synodical context may conduct correspondence with neighbouring classes, regional synods and national synods when, according to its judgement, this will promote the general welfare of the church.

**Article 49**
Each major assembly shall appoint deputies to implement the resolutions of the meeting according to explicit instructions. A regional synod as a matter of course appoints deputies to assist classes in dealing with problems that may develop and to be present at the examination of candidates for the ministry. For other purposes, as many different groups of deputies as possible must be appointed. These deputies shall keep proper record of all their activities so as report back to the major assembly. Only the major assembly which appointed them can release them from their office.

**Article 50**
The national synod is an assembly of all the regional synods (or the minor assemblies concerned) to which each regional synod (or the minor assembly concerned) delegates an equal number of ministers of the Word and elders, as determined by the national synod. The national synod shall meet every three years unless, in the opinion of at least two regional synods (or the minor assemblies concerned), it has become essential to call an extraordinary meeting.
Article 51
The general synod is an assembly of all the national synods to which each national synod delegates an equal number of ministers of the Word and elders, as determined by the general synod. An extraordinary or early general synod may be called when at least two national synods deem it necessary.

Article 52
Ecclesiastical correspondence and cooperation or contact with churches and ecclesiastical institutions outside the general synodical context shall be directed by the general synod.

Doctrine, sacraments and other ceremonies

Article 53
Ministers of the Word and professors at the Theological School shall endorse and sign the three Forms of Unity as established by the Synod of Dordrecht 1618-19. A minister who refuses to do so shall de facto be suspended from his office by the church council or classis, and a professor by the national synod, until such time as he has given full account of himself. If he obstinately persists in refusing, he shall be deposed.

Article 54
Elders, deacons and those candidates who have been admitted to the ministry shall likewise endorse and sign the aforementioned Forms of Unity.

Article 55
To uphold sound doctrine in the church and to ward off false doctrines and deviations, ministers of the Word and elders shall employ the means of instruction, refutation, warning and admonition in the performance of their respective offices, in proclaiming the Word, in catechismal instruction, and in home visitations.

Article 56
As soon as it is feasible, the covenant of God shall be sealed unto the children of Christians through Holy Baptism during a church service according to the Form established for this purpose.

Article 57
Ministers of the Word shall ensure that fathers, mothers or guardians request baptism for their children

Article 58
In administering baptism to children and adults, the Minister of the Word shall use the form established for the respective cases.

Article 59
Through their baptism, adults are incorporated into the church of Christ and are accepted as members of the Church. They shall therefore partake of the Lord's Supper as they had promised at their baptism.

Article 60
The names of the persons that have been baptized, together with the names of their parents or guardians, and the dates of birth and baptism shall be recorded.

Article 61
Only those persons shall be admitted to The Lord's Supper who, according to the custom of the local church, have confessed their belief in the Reformed faith and are reputed to lead a life of piety. Without such testimony anyone who is a member of another church shall not be admitted either.

Article 62
Each church shall celebrate the Lord's Supper in the way it considers most conducive to edification, provided, however, that the external ceremonies as prescribed in the Word of God be not changed and all superstition be avoided and that, at the conclusion of the sermon and the usual prayers, the form for administering the Lord's Supper, together with the prayer included in it, shall be read.
Article 63
The Lord's Supper shall be administered at least every three months.

Article 64
The administering of the Lord's Supper shall take place only during a church service under the supervision of the elders.

Article 65
Death rites shall not be introduced.

Article 66
In times of war, pestilence, national disasters and other great afflictions, the pressure of which is felt throughout the churches, the classis appointed by the general synod for this purpose shall proclaim a day of humiliation and prayer.

Article 67
The observation of Christian feast days, such as Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and the Day of Ascension, is left to the discretion of the local church.

Article 68
On Sundays, usually during the second service, the ministers of the Word shall interpret and explain the essence of Christian doctrine as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism, and endeavor to complete as much as possible of this confession in the course of every year according to the division of the Catechism into Lord's Days.

Article 69
In the Churches only the 150 Psalms and the rhymed versions of the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostolic Confession, and the Hymns of praise of Mary, Zacharias and Simeon shall be sung. The use of other rhymed versions of Bible verses which have been approved by the synod, is left to the jurisdiction of each church council.

Article 70
Church councils shall ensure that the matrimonial state is solemnized as a holy union in the Lord according to the form prescribed for this purpose.

Church discipline

Article 71
Since Christian discipline is of a spiritual nature, censure by the church is essential, in addition to civil punishment, so as to uphold the honor of God, reconcile the sinner with the church and his neighbour, and erase all offense given to the Church of Christ.

Article 72
If someone deviates from the true doctrine or from a pious way of life, the rule clearly prescribed by Christ in Matthew 18 shall be followed, provided that the transgression occurred secretly and did not cause public offense.

Article 73
Secret sins, of which the sinner repents after being admonished by one person in private or in the presence of two or three witnesses, shall not be reported to the church council.

Article 74
If anyone who has been admonished in a spirit of love by two or three persons for a secret sin and then refuses to heed it, or if anyone has committed a public sin, the matter shall be reported to the church council.

Article 75
The reconciliation of all such sins which were revealed as a result of their public nature or because the transgressor had despised the admonition of the church shall be undertaken (provided there is sufficient evidence of repentance) in the form and manner that the church council in question considers necessary for the edification of the church. If there is a difference of opinion among members of the church council as to whether such reconciliation should take place in public, the matter should be decided after the advice of two neighbouring churches has been sought.
Article 76
Anyone who obstinately rejects the admonition of the church council or who has committed a public or otherwise gross sin, shall be suspended from participation in the sacraments of the Lord.

Article 77
Anyone who has been suspended from participating in the sacraments and who, after repeated admonitions, shows no signs of repentance but persists in sin, shall eventually be excommunicated as the extreme means of church discipline according to the form prescribed for this purpose.

The final excommunication shall be preceded by three public announcements thereof to the congregation. In each announcement the sin committed by the transgressor shall be mentioned and it must be pointed out that the church council has devoted a lot of time to the transgressor in the form of censure, suspension from participation in the sacraments and repeated admonishments but that he had nevertheless not repented and reformed his ways. In these announcements the congregation must be exhorted to speak to and pray for the transgressor.

At the first announcement the name of the transgressor shall not be mentioned so as to spare him to some extent.

At the second announcement, on the advice of the classis, his name shall be mentioned.

At the third announcement the congregation shall be informed that, unless the transgressor repents, he shall be excommunicated from the church; this implies that, should he remain obstinate, his excommunication may take place with the tacit approval of the church members.

The church council determines the interval between the three announcements.

Article 78
When someone who has been excommunicated shows repentance and wishes to become reconciled to the Church, it shall be announced to the congregation, either before the celebration of the Lord's Supper or at some other appropriate time, so that the penitent, provided that nobody lodges any objection, may be publicly reinstated after the declaration of his repentance, according to the form prescribed for that purpose.

Article 79
When an office bearer has committed a gross sin, which is a disgrace to the church or deserves punishment by the authorities, he shall immediately be temporarily suspended by the church council. Elders and deacons shall then be suspended or expelled from their office by their church council in conjunction with a neighbouring church council or deputies from two neighbouring church councils. However, ministers shall only be temporarily suspended by the church council in conjunction with the neighbouring church council or deputies from two neighbouring church councils. The classis, with the advice of the deputies of the regional synod, shall then decide whether they should be dismissed from their office.

Article 80
The primary gross sins, which merit suspension or deposition from office, include false doctrine or heresay, public schism, public blasphemy, simony, faithless desertion of office or intrusion upon that of another, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, violence, inebriety, brawling, and profiteering; in other words, all the sins and transgressions which render the perpetrators infamous in the eyes of the world and the church.

Article 81
Ministers of the Word, elders and deacons shall exercise Christian censure among themselves and admonish one another in a friendly spirit with regard to the fulfillment of their offices.

Article 82
The church council shall provide those who move out of the boundaries of that church with a document of attestation concerning their confession and conduct which shall be signed by two of its members.

Article 83
The deacons shall provide poverty-stricken church members, who are moving out of the boundaries of that church because of sound reasons, with sufficient means of support according to their judgement. They must also consult with the deacons of the church to which these church members are moving about further care for them.
**Article 84**
No church, minister of the Word, elder or deacon shall in any way dominate other churches, ministers, elders or deacons respectively.

**Article 85**
In nonessential matters, churches whose customs differ from ours shall not be denounced.

**Article 86**
These articles, relating to the legal order of the Church and having been drafted and adopted by common consent, may, and ought to be, modified, augmented or reduced, if the interests of the church require it. However, no particular church, classis or synod, may do so but shall endeavor to uphold these articles until it be otherwise ordained by the general synod after the churches have had the opportunity to advise the synod by means of the respective national synods.