

The Trinity Reformed Church

Membership Handbook



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CHAPTER 1**Our Creeds and Confessions**

Trinity Reformed Church is a “creedal and confessional” church. This means that our church believes in several creeds and confessions that date as far back as the second century.

But why would a church hold to ancient and historic creeds and confessions?

We want to affirm our unity in Christ with other faithful Christians in the present and throughout history, and we believe these creeds and confessions are faithful summaries of the essential truths of the Gospel.

Trinity agrees with the creeds below. The Westminster Confession of Faith serves as the doctrinal standard of our congregation. Additionally, we are in essential agreement with the other historic confessions of the Reformation, including the Three Forms of Unity — the Synod of Dort, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism — the 39 Articles of Religion, and the London Baptist Confession of 1689.

Together with the historic Church, the members of Trinity confess the following creeds:

The Apostles Creed (2nd Century A.D.)

I believe in God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin, Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into Hades; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into Heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

The Nicene Creed (Constantinople, 381 A.D.)

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; Who, for us men, and for our salvation, came down from Heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the virgin, Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into Heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spoke by the Prophets. And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church; I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Definition of Chalcedon (451 A.D.)

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages,

but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.

CHAPTER 2

Our Form of Church Government

Trinity subscribes to what is called a presbyterian form of church government. To be clear, using the word “presbyterian” does not mean that we agree with the liberal, heretical views of some mainline Presbyterian churches. Instead, *presbyterian* simply means that our church is a republic, not a democracy.

The presbyterian form of government provides accountability for both the congregation and the elders so that everything may be done decently and in order, for God’s glory. Within our denomination, the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC), the structure of the church’s government includes three levels:

First Level: The Session

The first and primary level of church government is the local church’s pastors and elders, which together are called a session. The church’s elders are elected by the member households and are responsible for overseeing the life of the congregation. The authority and responsibilities of our elders are explained within our church’s constitution.

Second Level: Presbytery

The second level of church government is called a presbytery. Local churches within a certain geographic region are gathered into a particular presbytery. For example, Trinity Reformed Church is a member of Tyndale Presbytery, which covers Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Missouri.

Each local church within a presbytery appoints two delegates to represent their church at the annual meeting of the presbytery. These delegates are typically the pastor and one of the elders.

The delegates of presbytery elect a presiding minister (PM)

who serves a three-year term. The presiding minister acts as a sort of regional pastor who cares for the elders in the entire presbytery.

The actions and rulings of the presiding minister are subject to being approved by the delegates at the annual presbytery meeting. The authority and responsibilities of presiding ministers are explained within the Constitution of the CREC.

The elders of Trinity are accountable to Tyndale Presbytery. In difficult pastoral situations, the elders may seek the help of the presiding minister. Similarly, the formal actions and rulings of the elders may be appealed to the presiding minister by members of Trinity.

If the presiding minister finds any formal action or ruling of the elders to be grossly erroneous, he has the authority to overturn the elder's decision. In such cases, the presiding minister's decision is subject to the approval of the delegates at the annual presbytery meeting.

Third Level: Council

In the CREC, the third and final level of church government is called the Council. Other presbyterian denominations may call their third level its general assembly.

Each presbytery elects two delegates to represent the presbytery at Council, which meets every three years. The Council delegates are responsible for electing a Presiding Minister of Council (PMoC), who serves a three-year term. The authority and responsibilities of the PMoC are explained within the Constitution of the CREC.

Just like the action of a presbytery's presiding minister, the actions and rulings of the PMoC are subject to the approval of the Council delegates at the triennial Council Meeting.

The formal actions and rulings of a presbytery may be

appealed to the PMoC by both elders and members within that presbytery.

If the PMoC finds any of a presbytery's actions or rulings to be erroneous, he may overturn the presbytery's decision. In such cases, the PMoC's decision is subject to the approval of the Council delegates at the triennial Council meeting.

CHAPTER 3**The Role of Our Elders**

The authority and responsibilities of the elders of Trinity Reformed Church are defined as follows within Article III of Trinity's Constitution, according to the Word of God.

The elders are collectively responsible to oversee the following:

- a. Ruling/shepherding (1 Pet. 5:1-2).
- b. Equipping (Eph. 4:11-12).
- c. Prayer/fasting (Acts 6:4; 13:1-3).
- d. Teaching/preaching (1 Tim. 5:17).
- e. Administering baptism and the Lord's Table (Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26).
- f. Administering church discipline and restoration (1 Cor. 5:1-5).
- g. Prayer for the healing of the sick (Jas. 5:14-15).
- h. Delegating responsibilities to the deacons, hiring and dismissing church staff, defining the responsibilities of church staff, and delegating responsibilities to the staff of subordinate ministries. The elders will approve the annual budget.
- i. Commissioning or licensing ministerial students and overseeing the course of their training for the eldership. Under the guidance and oversight of the board of elders, such commissioned individuals will have the opportunity to perform all the various ministerial functions of elders, participation in the rule of the church being the only exception.

Conduct of elders' meetings

All usual business of the elders will be conducted at their regular meetings or at special meetings called for a particular purpose. The elders will appoint one of their number to moderate the meetings of the elders and one to record the minutes of the meetings.

Responsibilities of individual elders

a. Elders are responsible for those duties delegated to them by the body of elders, and recorded in the minutes, with due regard to their gifts and desires. Elders with such a charge will serve willingly, and without domineering in the discharge of their assigned duties, whether pastoral or administrative (1 Peter 5:1-3). There is no distinction of rank within the body of elders.

b. Under Christ, the highest authority in the local church is the board of elders or presbyters in session. While all the elders are equally involved in ruling the church, some presbyters are to be recognized by the church as also given to the labor of word and doctrine. As elders, all share the same rank and authority without distinction. Nevertheless, the church acknowledges the variety of gifts and callings God gives to men, and recognizes that some of the elders, though equal in rank and authority, are especially gifted and called to preach the Word, and to teach right doctrine (1 Tim. 5:17-18).

c. In all meetings of the session of presbyters, each elder has one vote. The meetings of the session will be moderated by an elder selected by the other elders. In their capacity as a session, the elders oversee all the affairs of the church, including the particular labors of teachers and ministers.

CHAPTER 4

The Responsibilities of Our Members

The responsibilities of our members are stated in Article I of our constitution and are drawn from the Word of God:

a. To maintain a manner of life that is consistent with one's profession of faith in Christ. (Rom. 6:12-14; Gal. 5:16-26; Jas. 1:22-25)

b. To be unashamed of Christ and His Gospel and willing to faithfully acknowledge Him before men. (Rom. 1:16; Matt. 10:32)

c. To gladly submit to the oversight of Trinity's elders without giving them reason to groan and to faithfully abide by the Creeds, Confession, and Constitution of Trinity Reformed Church. (Heb. 13:17)

d. To eagerly maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace within their own homes, at Trinity, and within the broader body of Christ. (Eph. 4:3)

e. To faithfully handle conflict with other members according to Scripture as explained within Trinity's Constitution and Membership Handbook. (Matt. 18:15-20)

f. To put away all bitterness, anger, clamor, slander, and malice, refrain from gossip, and be kind and tenderhearted toward each other, forgiving each other as God has forgiven us in Christ. (Eph. 4:31-32)

g. To work hard with one's own hands and provide for one's own needs so that one has something to share with those in need. Heads-of-households must strive to fulfill the spiritual and physical needs of their own households. (Eph. 4:28; 1 Tim. 5:8)

h. To weekly participate in the Lord's Day worship service at Trinity. (Heb. 10:24-25)

i. To joyfully support the ministry of Trinity both spiritually and financially, according to one's gifts and means. (1 Cor. 9:9-12; 1 Tim. 5:17)

CHAPTER 5

Our Vows of Membership

A vow is a solemn promise to do, or to not do, a certain thing. In taking membership vows, our members formally take up the responsibilities of belonging to Trinity Reformed Church. They are recognizing our elders as their own elders and our congregation as their own congregation, in distinction from the elders and congregations of other local churches. Membership includes a promise to bear the responsibility of being a part of a local church.

Our membership vows serve to distinguish our members from visitors. Visitors are always welcome and appreciated, but they bear no responsibility for Trinity nor is Trinity responsible for their spiritual wellbeing.

Our vows of membership are:

To submit ourselves to the discipline of this church and its elders, fulfilling the responsibilities of church members as the Scriptures require, and as expressed in the church constitution, graciously receiving both instruction and correction as well as submitting to the judicial decisions of the church.

CHAPTER 6

Pursuing the Peace of the Church

Peace is essential to the life of the church. Our mutual peace with God through Christ knits us together as the body of Christ and distinguishes us from the rest of the world. To biblically function as a church, we need to be at peace with each other. In Hebrews 12:14, the Spirit exhorts us to “strive for peace with everyone.” That certainly includes the members of our own congregation.

How are we supposed to strive for peace with each other? God gives us guidance through the prophet Micah:

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? — Micah 6:8

We strive for peace among our members by doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. Justice and kindness go hand in hand. Apart from “doing” justice, true kindness will also be absent. If justice and kindness are not present in our relationships with each other, peace won’t be present, either. Neglecting justice is never an act of kindness. Striving for peace requires striving for justice at the same time.

Justice is a concern whenever one member brings an accusation against another member. To promote peace in the church, accusations must be handled in a just manner, according to Scripture. This requires that authorities be in place to administer and uphold justice. Those authorities are responsible for ensuring that the innocent are not falsely accused and that the guilty do not escape conviction. Without authorities to uphold justice, every man is left to do what is right in his own eyes. This ends only in wickedness and disorder — not peace. For example, see the book of Judges.

God has established elders as the authority responsible for

upholding and administering justice within the church. This means that it is up to the elders to ensure that any accusations arising in the church are handled justly, according to Scripture. It also means that the elders have a solemn duty to be just men, and the members of the church have an equal duty to treat the elders in a just manner. Upholding justice in the relationship between the elders and the congregation is essential to pursuing peace within the church.

For the elders, acting justly includes being faithful to Scripture in their judgments rather than doing what is right in their own eyes. They must fear God (Prov. 1:7), submitting themselves to Him and scrupulously avoiding favoritism (Jas. 2:1-3), dishonesty (Ex. 20:16), the fear of man (Gal. 1:10), and being domineering over the church (1 Pet. 5:3).

When it comes to weighing accusations against a member, the elders must impartially and judiciously consider the available evidence, taking great care to distinguish truth from falsehood. They must also conduct themselves with humility, recognizing that they are accountable to our presbytery for their judgments.

Members of the church should act justly toward the elders, including submitting to the elders' authority because the elders will "give an account" as those who bear greater responsibility before Christ (Heb. 13:17). Thus, members ought to carefully avoid coveting the elders' authority (Ex. 20:17), spreading false or unsubstantiated accusations against them (Ex. 20:16; 1 Tim. 5:19), harboring "evil suspicions" toward them (1 Tim. 6:4), and expecting favored treatment from them (Jas. 2:1-3).

CHAPTER 7**Biblical Conflict Resolution**

From time to time, members of the congregation are going to offend one another. When we are offended by another member or are accused of committing an offense ourselves, we must follow the biblical steps for handling such situations, which are briefly explained below. Members of Trinity Reformed Church are expected to follow these steps in resolving conflicts between each other.

Step 1: Honest Self-Examination (Matt. 7:3-5)

When you are offended by another member, your first step should be honest self-examination. The aim of this step is to “remove the log” from your own eye before attempting to remove the speck from your brother’s eye. As you practice self-examination, ask yourself:

Has my own sin contributed to the other member’s offense against me?

If you have sinned against the other member, you must first seek forgiveness before addressing the other member’s offense against you. Take care not to minimize your own sin in responding to another member’s sin against you.

Has the other member truly sinned against me?

Feeling offended does not prove that you have been sinned against. Sin is not defined by our feelings or preferences, but by Scripture. So, when we feel offended, we must examine our feelings in the light of Scripture and carefully consider whether we truly have been wronged.

How serious is the offense?

If the offense is not serious, or if it may be due to misunderstanding, consider allowing love to cover it. Overlooking minor

offenses in love helps us to avoid being petty and fault-finding with each other.

Do I have strong evidence to support my accusation?

Evidence does not include theories, feelings, or assumptions. Evidence does include other witnesses who observed the other member committing the offense. If there were no other witnesses, and if you lack any other form of objective evidence, then your accusation will be very difficult to prove. In that case, proceed with great caution (Deut. 19:15).

Am I being truthful?

Scripture condemns malicious witnesses who bring false charges against their brothers (Deut. 19:16-18). Those who bring false accusations against another member at Trinity will themselves be subject to church discipline. So ensure that you're being completely truthful as you consider the other member's offense.

Step 2: Go to Your Brother (Matt. 18:15)

If you determine that you truly have been sinned against and that the offense is serious, then the Bible is clear on what to do next: Go to your brother alone and tell him his fault.

You must not tell your brother's fault to someone else before you go to him, as that would amount to gossip, which is a serious sin. Those who engage in gossip at Trinity will themselves be subject to church discipline.

Certain situations make it advisable to seek help from others prior to going to your brother and telling him his fault. For example, if a wife witnesses another man of the church commit a sin, she should seek her husband's counsel before confronting the other man, if possible. Or if a child witnesses an adult of

the church commit a sin, the child should first seek his parents' help instead of going to the other adult alone. Finally, if the sin is also a criminal offense, such as in the case of physical or sexual abuse, then both the civil authorities and the elders should be informed immediately.

When you go to your brother to tell him his fault, be sure to clearly define his sin and provide him with Scripture and evidence to support your accusation. Do not make unclear, speculative, or unsubstantiated accusations. Rather, present him with the facts of the matter. Remember that your motive must be to “gain your brother” by giving him the opportunity to repent. You are seeking his good in Christ — not gratifying your own anger or desire for vengeance.

If the other member listens to you and repents, then you have gained your brother. In that case, be kind and tender-hearted toward him, forgiving him as God in Christ has forgiven you (Eph. 4:32).

If he refuses to listen or disagrees with your accusation, then you must again consider the seriousness of the offense. Can you peaceably agree to disagree with him and leave it at that? Or is the offense serious enough to warrant proceeding to Step 3? If the answer is unclear, you may reach out to the elders for confidential pastoral guidance on how to proceed.

Step 3: Bring One or Two Witnesses (Matt. 18:16)

Step three is to bring one or two witnesses to your brother. The witnesses you ask to accompany you do not need to have witnessed the actual offense of the other member. Their purpose is to witness your second confrontation of the offending brother and his response. Those you ask to serve as witnesses should be other spiritually mature members of Trinity. If you need guidance in who to approach for help, the elders can help.

You must not discuss your accusation with the witnesses prior to the meeting with the accused brother nor may you seek to persuade them of the accused brother's guilt. Again, their purpose is to serve as impartial witnesses of your second confrontation of the offending brother, not as biased prosecutors. So when you approach them about serving as witnesses, do not delve into the particulars of the matter. At most you should let them know who it is that you're planning to confront.

After the witnesses have observed your confrontation of the offending brother, including his response to your accusation, you should be open to receiving their counsel. If they believe that your case against the accused brother is weak or unfounded, then you should listen to them and withdraw your accusation. If, on the other hand, they believe that your case is strong — and the accused brother remains unrepentant — then you should proceed to step 4 as explained below.

Step 4: Take it to the Church (Matt. 18:17)

The responsibility of overseeing church discipline is entrusted to the elders, who are charged to shepherd the flock of God and exercise oversight (1 Pet. 5:2). Thus, to bring an accusation to the elders is to “take it to the church,” since it is the elders who are responsible for the church (Heb. 13:17).

Thus, if the accused brother refuses to listen even after you've confronted him with witnesses, then you should bring your accusation against him to the elders alone. You must not take the matter to other members of the congregation since that would be gossip.

When bringing a charge against another member to the elders, you should present a written statement that includes:

1. The identity of the offending member.
2. The nature and date of the alleged offense.

3. A list of available evidence that supports your accusation, including other eyewitnesses.

4. The date on which you completed Step 1.

5. The date on which you completed Step 2, including the names of the witnesses who observed your confrontation of the accused brother.

Once the elders have received your submitted statement, they will proceed according to the steps described within Trinity's Constitution, Article V.B.2-4:

2. In most cases, when one member sins against another member, the offended member shall confront the offending member (Matt. 18:15). If the offending member will not listen, then the offended member will again approach him with one or two other witnesses (Matt. 18:16). If the offending member still refuses to listen, then the offended member shall bring charges against the offending member to the Session (Matt. 18:17). The Session shall then inform the accused member of those specific charges in a timely manner.

3. In establishing charges against a member, the Session must hear witnesses' testimony, and thus have the authority to call upon witnesses by unanimous consent of the Session (2 Cor. 13:1). The Session shall also call upon the accused member to hear the accused's answer to the charges.

4. If, after hearing witnesses and the accused member's answer, the Session determines that the charges are true, the Session shall unanimously decide what measure of discipline to apply to the accused member. The measures of discipline that the Session may apply include formal public admonishment (2 Thess. 3:14-15), suspension from normal fellowship at Trinity (Titus 3:10-11), suspension from the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:27), and, if necessary, excommunication from the

universal Church (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-13).

If the elders dismiss your accusation as being unfounded, you may ask to meet with them to hear their reasons.

If, after meeting with the elders, you believe that they wrongfully dismissed your accusation, you may appeal their decision to the presiding minister of Tyndale Presbytery in accord with the Constitution of the CREC.

CHAPTER 8**Our Policy Concerning Controversies**

The Bible warns against allowing controversies — and those who promote them — to gain a foothold within the church (1 Tim. 6:4; Titus 3:9). They are “unprofitable and worthless” and produce “envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction.” Controversies usually arise when a person treats a nonessential matter as if it were essential and insists that the rest of the church ought to do the same. Controversies often fall into one of two categories:

1. Uncommon beliefs or practices. A “flat-earther” who insists upon debating the matter with everyone else would be an example of this kind of controversy. Another example would be someone who believes that it’s a sin to celebrate Christmas because it’s a “pagan” holiday.

2. One-size-fits-all legalism. An example of this kind of controversy would be a parent who follows the methods of a certain parenting book and shames those parents who do not. Another example would be a father who has a particular view of courtship or dating and seeks to impose his view on the whole church.

To avoid causing controversy, we all need to begin with ourselves and make sure we are not treating our own opinions, preferences, and methods as if they are obligatory — or “best” — for all Christians. The Word of God is the standard of truth, not our own sensibilities. So, when we disagree with each other over nonessential matters, we must exercise great charity toward each other and graciously agree to disagree. If you ever find yourself involved in a potential controversy, don’t hesitate to seek the elders’ help in resolving the matter.

CHAPTER 9

Our Policy Concerning Gossip

One of the greatest threats to the unity and peace of the church is the sin of gossip. Scripture is full of warnings against this particular sin, which is a sin of the tongue: Ex. 23:1; Lev. 19:16; Prov. 11:3; 16:28; 18:8; 20:19; Rom. 1:29; 2 Cor. 12:20; Jas. 1:26; 4:11. Within the context of the local church, gossip generally entails speaking ill of other members behind their backs, spreading an unproven bad report about another member (slander), and/or sharing sensitive information that should not be shared. Gossip is often presented under the pretense of concern for the person being gossiped about, which is a form of lying.

Gossip can spread through a church like a virus and thus must be dealt with swiftly and decisively. The work of killing gossip must begin in ourselves as we strive to refrain from this sin and warn others to do the same. Thus, regarding how we talk to and about each other in our conversations, the members of Trinity are expected, with God's help, to abide by the instruction given in the answers to Questions 144 and 145 of the Westminster Larger Catechism:

Question 144: What are the duties required in the ninth commandment?

Answer: The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocency; a ready

receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging tale-bearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requires; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.

Question 145: What are the sins forbidden in the ninth commandment?

Answer: The sins forbidden in the ninth commandment are, all prejudicing the truth, and the good name of our neighbors, as well as our own, especially in public judicature; giving false evidence, suborning false witnesses, wittingly appearing and pleading for an evil cause, outfacing and overbearing the truth; passing unjust sentence, calling evil good, and good evil; rewarding the wicked according to the work of the righteous, and the righteous according to the work of the wicked; forgery, concealing the truth, undue silence in a just cause, and holding our peace when iniquity calls for either a reproof from ourselves, or complaint to others; speaking the truth unseasonably, or maliciously to a wrong end, or perverting it to a wrong meaning, or in doubtful and equivocal expressions, to the prejudice of truth or justice; speaking untruth, lying, slandering, backbiting, detracting, tale bearing, whispering, scoffing, reviling, rash, harsh, and partial censuring; misconstruing intentions, words, and actions; flattering, vain-glorious boasting; thinking or speaking too highly or too meanly of ourselves or others; denying the gifts and graces of God; aggravating smaller faults; hiding, excusing, or extenuating of sins, when called to a free confession; unnecessary discovering of infirmities; raising false rumors, receiving and countenancing evil reports, and stopping our ears against just defense; evil suspicion; envying or grieving at the deserved

credit of any, endeavoring or desiring to impair it, rejoicing in their disgrace and infamy; scornful contempt, fond admiration; breach of lawful promises; neglecting such things as are of good report, and practicing, or not avoiding ourselves, or not hindering what we can in others, such things as procure an ill name.

