

Escalon Presbyterian



Our Mission:

SEEK: to bring others to faith in Jesus Christ
SUPPORT: personal growth through God's Word



SERVE: in Mission locally and globally
SUSTAIN: a Christ-centered Fellowship

Denomination Update

May 21, 2013

To the EPC Family -

Grace to you and peace from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This letter serves both as an update to the process of our continuing Denominational discernment as well as an official notification of a called congregational meeting to be held on **Sunday, August 11, 2013**.

As was mentioned in the official congregational letter dated February 7, 2013, our Session is following the process outlined by the Gracious Dismissal Policy of the Presbytery of Stockton. Following a unanimous recommendation of Session to seek dismissal from the PC(USA), two congregational meetings were called in 2013: 1) an informational meeting held on Sunday, February 24, 2013 and 2) a formal advisory vote on the recommendation of Session held on Sunday, March 10, 2013.

Furthermore, the letter stated:

If the results of the above advisory poll reveal that a substantial percentage of the congregation concurs with the request of the Session for dismissal, then:

A Congregational Meeting will be held with at least 45 days notice to vote officially on this matter, including dismissal from the PC(USA), dismissal to an approved Reformed Body, and the terms of dismissal. This meeting requires that at least 40% of our active members be present. If at least 2/3 of active members present vote to approve the request for dismissal, the request will be validated and separate additional related votes will be taken.

The Session, in light of the substantial percentage of congregational concurrence at the advisory meeting, voted in its stated Session meeting in April to recommend that Escalon Presbyterian Church seek membership in the ECO (Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians - website: eco-pres.org).

This letter is to inform you that the Session of Escalon Presbyterian Church and the Presbytery Engagement Team of the Stockton Presbytery are formally calling a:

Congregational Meeting

Sunday, August 11 at 10:30 am: *following morning worship at 9:30 am.*

The meeting is called in order to provide an official vote on the question:

Shall Escalon Presbyterian Church seek gracious dismissal from PC(USA) and join the ECO (Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians)?

Due to the importance of this meeting we hope that you will make every effort to attend. We have chosen this date in pursuit of the Presbytery's policy that every reasonable effort shall be made to maximize attendance. Only active members of the Congregation in attendance are allowed to vote, and voting will be by secret written ballot. Further details will be mailed to you in advance of the Congregational Meeting. Child-care will be provided. Above all, please join us in prayer that the Lord Jesus, who has given us our precious life in Him and our life as a congregation, and who has led us in the past, will continue to lead us in this time of decision.

In this packet we are mailing out, for your review, the essential information that compels us to make the recommendation you will be voting on the morning of August 11, 2013. Included is:

- FAQ about ECO and why various Sessions are recommending it
- The Vision and Values of ECO
- The Essential Tenets and Confessional Standards of ECO

We continue to be grateful to the members of the Presbytery Engagement Team for their sacrificial service in walking through this season with us. We continue to pray that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, will guide us and shape our conversations and decisions for his glory. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact one of the Session members or our pastor. We love this church - desiring to honor God's will and you throughout this process.

In Christ,

Session	Ellen Nelson, Sherry Branscombe, Dick Nelson, Jerry Hougland, Laura Alcantor, Michele Hood, Jeff Hood, Bob McCune, Margy Sawyer, Sal Sandoval, Rick Dodge, Dave Hall
Pastor	Troy J. Onsager
Stated Clerk	Jeff Hood

Materials disbursed at all forums and meetings can still be read on our website at <http://escalonpres.org/denomination>

Top Reasons Churches in Our Area are Joining ECO:



1. Covenanting Together

There is a desire to seek dismissal together and ECO allows us to preserve certain points of connection with the PC(USA) within the framework of a new missional structure. ECO, as of now, is the only approved Reformed Body that our Presbytery has recognized for dismissal. California as a whole is likely to see many churches join ECO.

2. Clarity in Theology

The theology of ECO recognizes the Book of Confessions as its confessional standards. It also outlines the “Essential Tenets” of those confessions into a clear, readable document of four pages. It gives a clear expression of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the authority of Scripture, and that salvation is by grace through faith. One may, at points, disagree with a particular theological or ordering tenet - absolute subscription is not required. Yet, one must be willing to serve knowing that these Essentials are the heart of what will be taught and adhered to in an ECO congregation.

3. Missional Focus and Structure:

ECO has familiar Presbyterian structures such as Presbyteries and Synods, yet is structured for mission. It does not require a massive central bureaucracy to be funded and for all of its major decisions to be funneled through. It gives Presbyteries certain boundaries to operate within, yet allows them to be entrepreneurial as well as missionally creative. ECO also preserves much of the Book of Order, continuing the legacy of an educated clergy, a structure committed to good order and decency, congregational responsibility and integrity within an accountable structure.

4. Evangelism and Justice

ECO holds together in its Essential Tenets the necessity of and support of both Evangelism and Justice. These have tended to be, sadly, dichotomized with more liberal bodies emphasizing justice and more conservative bodies emphasizing evangelism. Scripture does not allow for such disparity. As you read the Essential Tenets document, this is kept in proper balance, asking each church to be committed to both.

5. Continued Connection points with PC-USA:

There are many churches and pastors in the PC-USA who are believers committed to proclaiming and living out the gospel of Jesus Christ. For us to seek a course that aligns with our own consciences does not require us to dismiss all things related to the PC-USA. National gatherings of the Fellowship and ECO will include ministers and congregations of both organizations. Additionally, Fellowship and ECO congregations are likely to continue support PC-USA mission projects and PC-USA ministers are presently learning from ECO church planting initiatives.

6. Property & Stewardship

Congregations within ECO will have full control of all their financial assets. This ministry structure also allows the structure of ECO to focus on ministry rather than spend time, money, and litigation related to property concerns. This requires heightened responsibility of the congregation to make wise financial decisions - which is always important.

7. Ministry Accountability and Support

Pastors participate in pastoral accountability groups, determined to live out the “Pastoral Rule.” Congregations participate in affinity networks with 2 to 3 other congregations providing mutual support and encouragement. Work on the annual “Narrative on Ministry” happens in these contexts. This is a deeper form of connectionalism than merely gathering together for stated business meetings or reporting annual statistics.

Frequently Asked Questions About ECO:



What does the name ECO mean?

ECO is shorthand for “The Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians.” The name represents a three-fold commitment to make disciples of Jesus Christ (Evangelical), connect leaders through accountable, biblical relationships based in grace (Covenant), and commit to a shared way of life together (Order). The word ECO also speaks to the denomination’s commitment to strengthen the “ecosystems” of local churches, providing the resources they need to grow, thrive, and reproduce.

When and why was ECO formed?

ECO was formed in January 2012 by committed Presbyterians from churches across the country who were concerned about the declining size, theological bureaucracy, and theological shift of the PC(USA). They wanted to build a less rigid, more missional organization founded on a clear theology rooted in Scripture, so they might better serve churches of the future. The day ECO was announced it was proclaimed that “the goal of the denomination should be to serve the local church, not the other way around.”

What is The Fellowship of Presbyterians? How is ECO different than The Fellowship?

The Fellowship of Presbyterians is a larger, umbrella association of Presbyterians who first gathered in August 2011 as part of a national movement to seek a new way to connect churches in common ministry and mission. ECO is the formal denomination that grew out of The Fellowship. The Fellowship remains a ministry association that serves churches from both ECO and the PC(USA), but it is not a denomination churches can be dismissed into.

How many other churches are in ECO?

Over 80 congregations have either officially joined or have applied to ECO in 2012 alone. An estimated 200-400 additional churches are in the pipeline. Locally, six churches in the Presbytery of the Stockton have already begun the process of joining ECO, as well as many others in surrounding Presbyteries. Since the process of leaving the PC(USA) can take anywhere from six months to two years, depending on the church process and the Presbytery, and ECO has only existed for ten months, we expect a steady influx of churches joining ECO over the next few years.

What are the ordination standards in ECO?

ECO affirms that “men and women alike are called to all the ministries of the Church, and that every member is called to share in all of Christ’s offices within the world beyond the church” (Essential Tenets).

ECO affirms accountability to: “maintain chastity in thought and deed, being faithful within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as established by God at the creation or embracing a celibate life as established by Jesus in the new covenant” (Essential Tenets).

What is the governance of ECO?

The governance of ECO is based on classic Presbyterian principles with a streamlined and flattened hierarchy. Churches own their own property. They have more flexibility to hire pastors of their choosing. Churches are not connected arbitrarily by geography but intentionally by affinity and mission. Voting is entrusted to lay and pastoral leaders active in local churches. Local churches are governed by elected lay leaders and ordained pastors. ECO also emphasizes missional accountability networks, peer review systems for churches, and leadership training.

VISION AND VALUES OF ECO



ECO

A Covenant Order
of Evangelical
Presbyterians

ECO is committed
to growing and planting
flourishing churches
that makes disciples
of Jesus Christ.

ECO is a Presbyterian denomination that exists to serve the local church. We invite followers of Jesus who share a Reformed, Presbyterian heritage to reclaim a sense of covenanted biblical community. The name ECO is not an acronym. It reinforces our passion for strengthening the **ecosystems** of local churches. We believe the Church is a living organism that needs life-giving resources to help it grow, thrive, and multiply. ECO's name also draws from the Greek term *oikos*, meaning "household," used in the Bible to reference the network of relationships that nurture an individual.

The Commitments Behind Our Name

Covenant

- Connecting leaders in accountable relationships
- Encouraging collaboration
- Ministering out of God's unrelenting grace and covenant with His people

Order

- Committing to a shared way of life
- Uniting around a shared theological core
- Nurturing gospel-centered leaders

Evangelical

- Advancing the gospel of Jesus Christ
- Planting new missional communities
- Serving our communities and God's world in Jesus' name

Presbyterians

- Standing within our Reformed and confessional heritage
- Affirming the life of the mind
- Embracing the value of representative government

ECO is committed to cultivating a healthy, diverse, resource-rich ecosystem where pastors and congregations can flourish. Just as earthly ecosystems draw richness from the right kind of diversity, ECO is committed to unleashing the ministry gifts of women, men, young leaders, and every ethnicity.



The mission of ECO
is to build *flourishing churches*
that make *disciples of Jesus Christ*.

OUR VALUES

Jesus-shaped Identity:

We believe Jesus Christ must be at the center of our lives and making disciples of Jesus at the core of our ministry.

Biblical Integrity:

We believe the Bible is the unique and authoritative Word of God, which teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. The prominence of God's Word over our lives shapes our priorities, and the unrivaled authority of the Bible directs our actions to be in concert with Christ's very best for our lives.

Thoughtful Theology:

We believe in theological education, constant learning, and the life of the mind, and celebrate this as one of the treasures of our Reformed heritage.

Accountable Community:

We believe guidance is a corporate spiritual experience. We want to connect leaders to one another in healthy relationships of accountability, synergy, and care.

Egalitarian Ministry:

We believe in unleashing the ministry gifts of women, men, and every ethnic group.

Missional Centrality:

We believe in living out the whole of the Great Commission – including evangelism, spiritual formation, compassion, and redemptive justice – in our communities and around the world.

Center-focused Spirituality:

We believe in calling people to the core of what it means to be followers of Jesus – what “mere Christianity” is and does – and not fixate on the boundaries.

Leadership Velocity:

We believe identifying and developing gospel-centered leaders is critical for the church, and a great leadership culture is risk-taking, innovative, and organic.

Kingdom Vitality:

We believe congregations should vigorously reproduce new missional communities to expand the Kingdom of God.

Essential Tenets

Presbyterians have been of two minds about essential tenets. We recognize that just as there are some central and foundational truths of the gospel affirmed by Christians everywhere, so too there are particular understandings of the gospel that define the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition. All Christians must affirm the central mysteries of the faith, and all those who are called to ordered ministries in a Presbyterian church must also affirm the essential tenets of the Reformed tradition. Recognizing the danger in reducing the truth of the gospel to propositions that demand assent, we also recognize that when the essentials become a matter primarily of individual discernment and local affirmation, they lose all power to unite us in common mission and ministry.

Essential tenets are tied to the teaching of the confessions as reliable expositions of Scripture. The essential tenets call out for explication, not as another confession, but as indispensable indicators of confessional convictions about what Scripture leads us to believe and do. Essential tenets do not replace the confessions, but rather witness to the confessions' common core. This document is thus intended not as a new confession but as a guide to the corporate exploration of and commitment to the great themes of Scripture and to the historic Reformed confessions that set forth those themes.

The great purpose toward which each human life is drawn is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Each member of the church glorifies God by recognizing and naming His glory, which is the manifestation and revelation of His own nature. Each member of the church enjoys God by being so united with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit as to become a participant in that divine nature, transformed from one degree of glory to another and escorted by Christ into the loving communion of the Trinity. So we confess our faith not as a matter of dispassionate intellectual assent, but rather as an act by which we give God glory and announce our membership in the body of Christ. We trust that when God's glory is so lifted up and when His nature is thus made manifest in the life of the body, the church will be a light that draws people from every tribe and tongue and nation to be reconciled to God.

I. God's Word: The Authority for Our Confession

The clearest declaration of God's glory is found in His Word, both incarnate and written. The Son eternally proceeds from the Father as His Word, the full expression of the Father's nature, and since in the incarnation the Word became flesh all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are offered to His disciples. The written Word grants us those treasures, proclaims the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and graciously teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. **We glorify God**

by recognizing and receiving His authoritative self-revelation, both in the infallible Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and also in the incarnation of God the Son. We affirm that the same Holy Spirit who overshadowed the virgin Mary also inspired the writing and preservation of the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit testifies to the authority of God's Word and illumines our hearts and minds so that we might receive both the Scriptures and Christ Himself aright.

We confess that God alone is Lord of the conscience, but this freedom is for the purpose of allowing us to be subject always and primarily to God's Word. The Spirit will never prompt our conscience to conclusions that are at odds with the Scriptures that He has inspired. The revelation of the incarnate Word does not minimize, qualify, or set aside the authority of the written Word. We are happy to confess ourselves captive to the Word of God, not just individually, but also as members of a community of faith, extending through time and around the globe. In particular, we join with other members of the Presbyterian and Reformed community to affirm the secondary authority of the *Book of Confessions* as a faithful exposition of the Word of God.

II. Trinity and Incarnation: The Two Central Christian Mysteries

A. Trinity

The triune nature of God is the first great mystery of the Christian faith. **With Christians everywhere, we worship the only true God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who is both one essence and three persons.** God is infinite, eternal, immutable, impassible, and ineffable. He cannot be divided against Himself, nor is He becoming more than He has been, since there is no potential or becoming in Him. He is the source of all goodness, all truth and all beauty, of all love and all life, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. The three persons are consubstantial with one another, being both coeternal, and coequal, such that there are not three gods, nor are there three parts of God, but rather three persons within the one Godhead. The Son is eternally begotten from the Father, and the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son. All three persons are worthy of worship and praise.

God has no need of anyone or anything beyond Himself. Yet in grace this Triune God is the one Creator of all things. The ongoing act of creation is further manifested in God's gracious sovereignty and providence, maintaining the existence of the world and all living creatures for the sake of His own glory. He is the Holy One, the ground of all being, whose glory is so great that for us to see Him is to die. Yet He has made the creation to reflect His glory, and He has made human beings in His own image, with a unique desire to know Him and a

capacity for relationship with Him. Since our God is a consuming fire whom we in our sin cannot safely approach, He has approached us by entering into our humanity in Jesus Christ.

B. Incarnation

This is the second great mystery of the Christian faith, affirmed by all Christians everywhere: that **Jesus Christ is both truly God and truly human**. As to His divinity, He is the Son, the second person of the Trinity, being of one substance with the Father; as to His humanity, He is like us in every way but sin, of one substance with us, like us in having both a human soul and a human body. As to His divinity, He is eternally begotten of the Father; as to His humanity, He is born of the virgin Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit. As to His divinity, His glory fills heaven and earth; as to His humanity, His glory is shown in the form of a suffering servant, most clearly when He is lifted up on the cross in our place.

We confess the mystery of His two natures, divine and human, in one person. We reject any understanding of the communication of attributes that must result in a blending of the two natures such that Jesus Christ is neither truly God nor truly human. We insist upon sufficient distinction between the two natures to preserve the truth of the incarnation, that Jesus Christ is indeed Immanuel, God-with-us, not one who used to be God, nor one who has merely been sent from God. Rather, in His coming we have seen God's glory, for Jesus is the exact imprint of God's very being and in Him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. **The divinity of the Son is in no way impaired, limited, or changed by His gracious act of assuming a human nature, and that His true humanity is in no way undermined by His continued divinity.** This is a mystery that we cannot explain, but we affirm it with joy and confidence.

This mystery of the incarnation is ongoing, for **the risen Jesus, who was sent from the Father, has now ascended to the Father in His resurrected body and remains truly human**. He is bodily present at the right hand of the Father. When we are promised that one day we will see Him face to face, we acknowledge that it is the face of Jesus of Nazareth we will someday see. The one who, for us and for our salvation, was born of Mary, died at Calvary, and walked with disciples to Emmaus is the same Jesus Christ who is now ascended and who will one day return visibly in the body to judge the living and the dead.

Jesus promised His disciples that He would not leave them comfortless when He ascended into heaven, but would ask the Father to send them the Holy Spirit as a comforter and advocate. **We are able to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and God only through the work of the Holy Spirit.** He comes to us as He came to the gathered disciples at Pentecost: to kindle our faith, to embolden our witness, and to accompany us in mission.

III. Essentials of the Reformed Tradition

A. God's grace in Christ

God declared that the world He created was good and that human beings, made in His own image, were very good. **The present disordered state of the world, in which we and all things are subject to misery and to evil, is not God's doing, but is rather a result of humanity's free, sinful rebellion against God's will.** God created human beings from the dust of the earth and His own breath, to be His images and representatives, conduits of God's grace to the creation. Since the fall our natural tendency is to abuse and exploit the creation, preferring evil to goodness. God also created human beings to speak His grace and truth to one another, to be helpers who are fit for one another, so that our social relationships would strengthen our ability to serve and obey Him. Since the fall, our natural tendency is to engage in relationships of tyranny and injustice with one another, in which power is used not to protect and serve but to demean. God further created human beings with the capacity for relationship with Him, with His law written on our hearts so that we had the ability to worship Him in love and obey Him by living holy lives. Since the fall, our natural tendency is to hate God and our neighbor, to worship idols of our own devising rather than the one true God.

As a result of sin, human life is poisoned by everlasting death. **No part of human life is untouched by sin. Our desires are no longer trustworthy guides to goodness, and what seems natural to us no longer corresponds to God's design.** We are not merely wounded in our sin; we are dead, unable to save ourselves. Apart from God's initiative, salvation is not possible for us. Our only hope is God's grace. We discover in Scripture that this is a great hope, for our God is the One whose mercy is from everlasting to everlasting.

This grace does not end when we turn to sin. Although we are each deserving of God's eternal condemnation, the eternal Son assumed our human nature, joining us in our misery and offering Himself on the cross in order to free us from slavery to death and sin. Jesus takes our place both in bearing the weight of condemnation against our sin on the cross and in offering to God the perfect obedience that humanity owes to Him but is no longer able to give. All humanity participates in the fall into sin. Those who are united through faith with Jesus Christ are fully forgiven from all our sin, so that there is indeed a new creation. We are declared justified, not because of any good that we have done, but only because of God's grace extended to us in Jesus Christ. **In union with Christ through the power of the Spirit we are brought into right relation with the Father, who receives us as His adopted children.**

Jesus Christ is the only Way to this adoption, the sole path by which sinners become children of God, for He is the only-begotten Son, and it is only in union with Him that a believer is able to know God as Father. Only in Jesus Christ is the truth about the Triune God, fully and perfectly revealed, for only He *is* the Truth, only He has seen the Father, and only He can make the Father known. Only Jesus Christ is the new Life

that is offered, for He is the bread from heaven and the fountain of living water, the one by whom all things were made, in whom all things hold together. The exclusivity of these claims establishes that God's love is not impersonal, but a particular and intimate love in which each individual child of God is called by name and known as precious; that God's love is not only acceptance, but a transforming and effective love in which His image within us is restored so that we are capable of holy living.

B. Election for salvation and service

The call of God to the individual Christian is not merely an invitation that each person may accept or reject by his or her own free will. **Having lost true freedom of will in the fall, we are incapable of turning toward God of our own volition. God chooses us for Himself in grace before the foundation of the world, not because of any merit on our part, but only because of His love and mercy.** Each of us is chosen in Christ, who is eternally appointed to be head of the body of the elect, our brother and our high priest. He is the one who is bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, our divine Helper who is also our Bridegroom, sharing our human nature so that we may see His glory. We who receive Him and believe in His name do so not by our own will or wisdom, but because His glory compels us irresistibly to turn toward Him. By His enticing call on our lives, Jesus enlightens our minds, softens our hearts, and renews our wills, restoring the freedom that we lost in the fall.

We are all sinners who fall short of God's glory, and we all deserve God's eternal judgment. Apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are incapable of being in God's presence, incapable of bearing the weight of His glory. We rejoice that Jesus Christ offers us safe conduct into the heart of God's consuming and purifying fire, shielding us with His perfect humanity and transforming us by His divine power. Having received such grace, we extend grace to others.

We are not elect for our own benefit alone. God gathers His covenant community to be an instrument of His saving purpose. **Through His regenerating and sanctifying work, the Holy Spirit grants us faith and enables holiness, so that we may be witnesses of God's gracious presence to those who are lost.** The Spirit gathers us in a community that is built up and equipped to be light, salt, and yeast in the world. Christ sends us into the world to make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that Christ has commanded us. We are now in service to God's plan for the fullness of time: uniting all things in heaven and earth to Himself. To this end, we preach Christ, calling all persons to repent and believe the gospel. We also care for the natural world, claim all areas of culture in the name of Jesus, serve the poor, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, and defend the helpless. We do this work not with any thought that we are able to bring in the kingdom, but in the confident hope that God's kingdom is surely coming, a day when suffering and death will pass away and when God will live among His people.

C. Covenant life in the church

We are elect in Christ to become members of the community of the new covenant. This covenant, which God Himself guarantees, unites us to God and to one another. Already in the creation, we discover that we are made to live in relationships to others, male and female, created together in God's image. **In Christ, we are adopted into the family of God and find our new identity as brothers and sisters of one another, since we now share one Father.** Our faith requires our active participation in that covenant community.

Jesus prays that His followers will all be one, and so we both pray and work for the union of the church throughout the world. Even where institutional unity does not seem possible, we are bound to other Christians as our brothers and sisters. In Christ the dividing wall of hostility created by nationality, ethnicity, gender, race, and language differences is brought down. God created people so that the rich variety of His wisdom might be reflected in the rich variety of human beings, and the church must already now begin to reflect the eschatological reality of people from every tribe, and tongue, and nation bringing the treasures of their kingdoms into the new city of God.

Within the covenant community of the church, God's grace is extended through the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments, and the faithful practice of mutual discipline. First, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the word proclaimed may indeed become God's address to us. The Spirit's illuminating work is necessary both for the one who preaches and for those who listen. Second, the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs that are linked to the things signified, sealing to us the promises of Jesus. In the Baptism of infants, we confess our confidence in God's gracious initiative, that a baby who cannot turn to God is nonetheless claimed as a member of the covenant community, a child of God, cleansed by grace and sealed by the Spirit; in the Baptism of adults, we confess our confidence that God's grace can make us new creations at any stage of our lives. In the Lord's Supper, we confess that as we eat the bread and share one cup the Spirit unites us to the ascended Christ, so that His resurrection life may nourish, strengthen, and transform us. Third, the community of the Church practices discipline in order to help one another along the path to new life, speaking the truth in love to one another, bearing one another's burdens, and offering to one another the grace of Christ.

D. Faithful stewardship of all of life

The ministries of the church reflect the three-fold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king – reflected in the church's ordered ministries of teaching elders, deacons, and ruling elders. We affirm that men and women alike are called to all the ministries of the Church, and that every member is called to share in all of Christ's offices within the world beyond the church. Every Christian is called to a prophetic life, proclaiming the good news to the world and enacting that good news. Every Christian is called to extend the lordship of Christ to every corner of the world. And every Christian is called to participate in Christ's priestly, mediatorial

work, sharing in the suffering of the world in ways that extend God's blessing and offering intercession to God on behalf of the world. We are equipped to share in these offices by the Holy Spirit, who conforms us to the pattern of Christ's life.

Jesus teaches us that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. There is no part of human life that is off limits to the sanctifying claims of God. We reject the claim that love of any sort is self-justifying; we affirm that all our affections and desires must be brought under God's authority. We reject the claim that human souls are unaffected by the fall and remain naturally inclined to God; we affirm that soul and body alike must be cleansed and purified in order to love God properly. We reject the claim that the life of the mind is independent from faith; we affirm that unless we believe we cannot properly understand either God or the world around us. Historically, the Presbyterian tradition has been especially called to explore what it is to love God with all our minds, being committed to the ongoing project of Christian education and study at all levels of Christian life.

E. Living in obedience to the Word of God
Progress in holiness is an expected response of gratitude to the grace of God, which is initiated, sustained, and fulfilled by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. The first response of gratitude is prayer, and the daily discipline of prayer – both individually and together – should mark the Christian life. The life of prayer includes praise to God for His nature and works, sincere confession of our sin, and intercession for the needs of those we know and for the needs of the world. **As we practice the discipline of regular self-examination and confession, we are especially guided by the Ten Commandments.** We therefore hold one another accountable to:

1. worship God alone, living all of life to His glory, renouncing all idolatry and all inordinate loves that might lead us to trust in any other help;
2. worship God in humility, being reticent in either describing or picturing God, recognizing that right worship is best supported not by our own innovative practices but through the living preaching of the Word and the faithful administration of the Sacraments;
3. eliminate from both speech and thought any blasphemy, irreverence, or impurity;
4. observe the Sabbath as a day of worship and rest, being faithful in gathering with the people of God;
5. give honor toward those set in authority over us and practice mutual submission within the community of the church;
6. eradicate a spirit of anger, resentment, callousness, violence, or bitterness, and instead cultivate a spirit of gentleness, kindness, peace, and love; recognize and honor the image of God in every human being

from conception to natural death.

7. maintain chastity in thought and deed, being faithful within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as established by God at the creation or embracing a celibate life as established by Jesus in the new covenant;
8. practice right stewardship of the goods we have been given, showing charity to those in need and offering generous support of the Church and its ministries;
9. pursue truth, even when such pursuit is costly, and defend truth when it is challenged, recognizing that truth is in order to goodness and that its preservation matters;
10. resist the pull of envy, greed, and acquisition, and instead cultivate a spirit of contentment with the gifts God has given us.

In Jesus Christ we see the perfect expression of God's holy will for human beings offered to God in our place. His holy life must now become our holy life. In Christ, God's will is now written on our hearts, and we look forward to the day when we will be so confirmed in holiness that we will no longer be able to sin. As the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus leads us along the path of life toward that goal, bringing us into ever deeper intimacy with the Triune God, in whose presence is fullness of joy.

Confessional Standards

The appropriate confessional standards for ECO are the creeds, confessions, and catechisms in the *Book of Confessions* – The Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Westminster Shorter Catechism and the Westminster Larger Catechism, the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith. This collection is theologically faithful, ecclesially appropriate, and organizationally suitable. The *Book of Confessions* contains the confessions that we have taken vows to receive. It also embodies the Reformed understanding of the way confessions function in the life of the church, an understanding that differs from two common approaches:

Doctrinal Progressives understand the church's confessional and theological tradition as an evolutionary development of doctrine in which the church's expression of the gospel becomes richer in each succeeding age. In this view, contemporary theology and new confessions of faith are more developed, better expressed, fuller apprehensions of truth than the faith of previous centuries. *Our way is the way.*

Doctrinal Restorationists understand the church's theological and confessional tradition as a series of missteps leading to imperfect understanding and inadequate articulation of the gospel. In this view, a particular moment in the church's confessional and theological tradition, such as the sixteenth century Augsburg Confession or the seventeenth century Westminster standards, is the pure faith of a theological golden age. *Their way is the way.*

The Reformed understanding of the church's confessional and theological tradition sees contemporary Christians as participants in an enduring theological and doctrinal conversation that shapes the patterns of the church's faith and life. Communities of believers from every time and place engage in a continuous discussion about the shape of Christian faith and life, an exchange that is maintained through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Today's church brings its insights into an ongoing dialogue with those who have lived and died the Faith before us. Voices from throughout the church's life contribute to the interchange - ancient voices that articulate the enduring rule of faith, sixteenth and seventeenth century voices that shape the Reformed tradition, and twentieth century voices that proclaim the church's faith in challenging contexts. The confessions in the *Book of Confessions* were not arbitrarily included, but were selected to give faithful voice to the whole communion of saints.

The *Book of Confessions* is an appropriate expression of the Reformed commitment to honor our fathers and mothers in the Faith. It begins with two foundational creeds, shared throughout the whole Church. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is the decisive dogmatic articulation of Trinitarian faith. It establishes the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of Christian theology. The Apostles' Creed is the Baptismal creed that expresses the shared belief of the faithful as persons are incorporated into the body of Christ. Two Reformation confessions, Scots and Second Helvetic, and one Reformation catechism, Heidelberg, give voice to the dawning of the Reformed tradition. The seventeenth century Westminster standards powerfully express God's sovereignty over all of life. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith articulate the church's fidelity to the gospel in the midst of uncongenial and sometimes hazardous cultures. These confessions, from widely different contexts, are complementary. They do not sing in unison, but in a rich harmony that glorifies God and deepens our enjoyment of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Are these the only voices that could be included in the church's theological conversation? No, but they are faithful witnesses to the gospel and appropriate expressions of the Reformed perspective on Christian faith and life. Participating in their colloquy frees us from the narrow prison cell of our own time and place by listening to the voices of our brothers and sisters who struggled to be faithful in diverse circumstances. Through their confessions of faith we are privileged to hear their wisdom in the midst of our own struggle to be faithful. We overhear conversations among our forebears that expand and enrich our apprehension of the gospel. Sometimes we simply listen in on their discussion, at other times we pay particular attention to one of their voices, and many times we find ourselves participating actively in lively instruction.

The questions of our parents in the faith may not be identical to ours, but their different approaches enable us to understand our own questions better. Their answers may not be identical to ours, yet their answers startle us into new apprehensions of the truth. We may sometimes be puzzled by their particular questions or answers, but even that perplexity serves to clarify our own thinking and the shape of our faithfulness. Throughout the conversation we are aware that all councils may err, yet because we are not doctrinal progressives we acknowledge the confessions have a particular authority over us: we are answerable to them before they are answerable to us.

The confessions call the church to account. Because we are not traditionalists, we can be utterly honest about the church's past failings - crusades and inquisitions, easy acceptance of Christendom and easy dismissal of the leadership of women, neglect of evangelistic mission and excess of missionary zeal. Because we are not idealists we can be utterly honest about the church's current failings – marginalization of the Sacraments, indifference to theological labor, easy acceptance of cultural morality, neglect of evangelism, and inadequate mission. If we listen to our forebears in the Faith we will hear their hard questions addressed to us. Perhaps then we can be utterly honest about our own accommodations to the culture, our indifference to the proclamation of the gospel, and our abandonment of shared conviction and committed community in easy acquiescence to the individualism and localism of our time.

The confessions are not final authorities; Scripture is the authority that measures all doctrinal, confessional, and theological expression. The Reformed tradition has always understood that while confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. Being questioned by the confessions is not an exercise in servitude, but liberation from the tyranny of the present that enables us to live freely and faithfully within God's will.

As subordinate standards, the confessions are not free-standing authorities. They are subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who is known through Scripture, the word of God. Subordination to the Lord and to Scripture's witness serves to locate confessional authority, however, not diminish it. The confessions provide reliable guidance to our reading and reception of Scripture, protecting us from self-absorbed interpretation, and opening us to Christ's way, Christ's truth, and Christ's life.

The *Book of Confessions* itself is not problematic. The problem with the *Book of Confessions* is the church's – the *whole* church's – neglect and misuse of its theological treasure. Too often, we have treated the confessions of the church as museum pieces, historical artifacts of what people used to believe long ago and far away. Too many of us have imagined that our own thoughts are sufficient for faithful proclamation of the gospel. We have been guilty of what C.S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery, the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.” We have also been guilty of reducing the confessions to theological and moral law books, selecting disembodied affirmations as elements in a logical proof. Our task is to put misuse of the confessions behind us, engaging in bold, faithful appropriations of the doctrinal and theological wisdom of the *Book of Confessions*, allowing them to enrich our faith and faithfulness.

The church's confessions are not marginal details in the church's life. The ordination vows made by most deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders commit us to receive and

adopt their essential tenets, and to be instructed, led, and guided by them. Our task is to be faithful to our vows, reading and studying the confessions, learning from them, teaching them, and living out their wisdom. Shared confession of faith shapes any serious community of faith, and the community's ordered ministries bear a particular obligation to order their confession around the church's creeds, confessions, and catechisms. Because confessional seriousness includes mutual responsibility and accountability, the church must be prepared to instruct, counsel with, or even discipline one ordained who rejects the faith expressed in the confessions.

ECO cannot imagine that it should or could disavow the Reformed confessional heritage. Whatever the church's confessional and theological failings may be, they are the failings of all of us. The task now is to embody faithful ways of being Presbyterian. The most appropriate footing for a new venture is the faithful doctrinal and theological foundation provided by the creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the *Book of Confessions*.