

Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales –  
**BOOK OF CHURCH ORDER – DECENTLY AND IN ORDER**

## DECENTLY and in ORDER

THE  
EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
IN ENGLAND AND WALES

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 History

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales (EPCEW)<sup>1</sup> was formed from the interim Presbytery of the Presbyterian Association in England (PAE)<sup>2</sup> in 1996. It holds as its confession the Westminster Confession of Faith which was drawn up 350 years earlier at Westminster in London.

The English Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century included those who desired a more thorough reformation than was then politically possible. Some of those who later fled to the Continent from the persecutions under Queen Mary found refuge in Geneva. When these returned to England in the reign of Queen Elizabeth their views soon spread. The influence of these puritans, as they became known, was dominant by the time of the civil war. It was at that period that the Assembly of Divines met (1644 - 1647) and the Westminster Confession was produced. Presbyterianism was the polity favoured by the majority of those present. The Confession was adopted in both England and Scotland, but presbyterianism was only partially implemented in England. The restoration of Charles II brought an end to the widespread use of the Confession. The Act of Uniformity in 1662 forced some two thousand puritan ministers out of the National Church in England and made the practice of presbyterian government impossible.

After the Act of Toleration in 1689, theological controversies and error undermined the possibility of an orthodox Presbyterian church.

In Wales in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Methodist Awakening, the leaders were Calvinistic and the churches which arose there took an orthodox presbyterian position.

Presbyterianism was reintroduced in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in many ways derived from Scotland. It was particularly to be found in the North East (Northumberland and Durham), in Lancashire and in London, areas where it was strong even in the seventeenth century.

As was the case with most of the denominations the higher criticism which came from Germany in the 1880s had devastating effects. By the time of the union of the English Presbyterian and Congregational Churches in 1972, as the United Reformed Church, there were very few evangelical presbyterian congregations left in England.

At the same time the awakening of interest in Reformed understanding of Scripture in the 1950s brought the attention of many to the Presbyterian literature of earlier times. There was associated with this a growing awareness of the problems of the mixed denominations in the 1960s.

In Wales this was accompanied by a remarkable growth of evangelical numbers in the Welsh Presbyterian, the Welsh Baptist, and to a lesser extent, in the Welsh Independent churches. Eventually opposition grew and many seceded from the denominations. There was a proper desire to express evangelical unity and a fear of denominational structures. As a result few retained their confessional position.

In both England and Wales there were those who had a sense that a good heritage and biblical emphases had been or were in danger of being lost. There was a conviction that England and Wales needed an Evangelical Presbyterian Church. One expression<sup>3</sup> of this conviction was the London Presbyterian Conference which met in 1986. As a result the Presbyterian Association in England was formed. In 1991 an Interim Presbytery was set up. By 1996 there were five Churches - Blackburn, Cambridge, Chelmsford, Durham and Hull. These constitute the founding members of the EPCEW.

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1 EPCEW at the request of Welsh brethren even though no Welsh congregation was at the time part of the connection.

2 The PAE itself arose in 1987 from the London Presbyterian Conference which had been called by the London Presbyterian Conference Committee. Members of that committee are invited as observers to presbytery.

3 The International Presbyterian Church (IPC) is another expression of this desire.

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## 1.2 Vision

The intention was to establish and maintain a **connectional** and **confessional** reformed church in England and Wales according to biblical principles and appropriate to the contemporary situation in England and Wales. The EPCEW is committed to the proclamation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as it is plainly and fully set out in the Bible.

## 1.3 The Nature of the Church

The nature of the church as the people of God and the bride of Christ is set out in the Scriptures (Eph 2:19-22 & 5:23-32, 1 Tim 3:15-16, 1 Pet 2:5-10). This teaching is expounded in Chapter 25 of the Westminster Confession. Chapter 26 refers to the members of the church as saints who enjoy a communion with one another. The EPCEW is only a small part of Christ's visible and universal church. It seeks to give expression to the oneness of Christ's church under the headship of Christ in its own structure, and wherever possible with other orthodox evangelical churches.<sup>4</sup>

The EPCEW is connectional and confessional and presbyterial in government.

## 1.4 A Common Order

A distinction is to be drawn between basic biblical **principles of presbyterianism** and the outworking of those principles in **particular practices**. The outworking of the principles has differed according to the needs at particular times and in particular countries. M'Creie in referring to the Second Book of Discipline said "Its leading principles rest upon the express authority of the word of God. Its subordinate arrangements are supported by the general rules of Scripture: they are simple, calculated to preserve order and promote edification, and adapted to the circumstances of the church for which they were intended". This book of order first sets out what the EPCEW believes the basic principles to be and then what it considers appropriate to its needs and what most appropriately expresses the fundamental principles. Part one covers these principles and the specific application of them. Part two covers the procedures currently adopted or gives guidelines as to procedures.

In drawing up this Book of Order the presbytery made use of other books of order.<sup>5</sup> It also adapted and adopted a set of governing principles, originally prefixed to the "Form of Government" of the PCUSA in 1788, to inform it as it proceeded.<sup>6</sup>

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4 The EPCEW is seeking fraternal relations with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Ireland (EPC), the Free Church of Scotland, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated) and the International Presbyterian Church (IPC) and has a co-operative agreement with the Presbyterian Church in America. It is considering synodical relations with the EPC. It is a constituent body of the British Evangelical Council (BEC), and intends to apply for membership in the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC).

5 In particular it considered those of the EPC and the PCA and the Free Church of Scotland. This section may be read without reference to them and is self contained. Section 2 is based on the EPC code.

6 See Chapter I2 from the "Forms of Government and Forms of Process of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America as amended 1805-1894.

## **2. BASIC PRINCIPLES OF PRESBYTERIANISM<sup>7</sup>**

The fundamental principles of Presbyterianism are held to be

2.1 The church is the body of Christ

2.1.1 Christ alone is the **head** of the church

2.1.2 Christ's body is **joined together** and this is to be expressed visibly

2.1.3 Christ's headship of the body is displayed in the fact of **government**, and is seen in:

- the link between government and witness to the **truth**;
- the link between government and the sincere use of the **sacraments**;
- the link between government and **practical godliness**.

2.2 The church is to be controlled by Scripture

2.2.1 A positive Scriptural basis is required for what is believed and **taught**.

2.2.2 A positive Scriptural basis is required for **order** or government in the church.

2.2.3 A positive Scriptural basis is required for the pattern of **worship** in the church.

2.3 The form of government

2.3.1 The form of government involves

- **representative elders** freely chosen by all the members
- **plurality** of elders, as rule involves more than one elder
- **parity** of elders, as elders rule with equal authority
- a **distinction** between ministers (teaching elders) and ruling elders, as there is a high value to be placed on the preaching ministry.

2.3.2 The first expression of this government is in the **local** congregation.

2.3.3 The **larger** exercise of this government, as seen in the **wider elderships** of presbyteries and general assembly, is an expression of the unity and community of the body of Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> For a further treatment consult 'The Presbyterian Form of Church Government' John Murray London 1959 republished by the EPCEW (as the PAE) 1993.

### **3. THE CONFESSION**

**The word of God**, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, is the **supreme standard** of the church. Chapter 1 of the Confession sets out the teaching of the church with regard to this.

The whole **Westminster Confession** is accepted as a faithful statement and summary of Scripture teaching and is the **subordinate standard** of the church.

**Agreement** with the Confession is **required of all elders**. The Confession expresses the doctrinal position of the church. It is not expected of all members that they will understand nor necessarily fully assent to all parts of the Confession.

Presbyterians have at various times declared a particular understanding of the Confession at a number of points. The EPCEW **declares**

- that the civil magistrate does not have control over presbyteries in matters religious or moral.
- that the forbidding of marriage to a relative of a deceased spouse any nearer than to those of one's own blood relatives is a matter for the interpretation of individual elders and sessions.
- that though the claims of the bishop of Rome to be the head of the church and his legislating on false worship mean that the papacy should be recognised as part of antichrist, the identification of the antichrist exclusively with the papacy is a matter of individual interpretation.
- that the principle of establishment is a matter for individual elders and sessions.

All elders are required to **subscribe**<sup>8</sup> to the Confession recognising these declarations of Presbytery. The effect of these declarations is that either the original form or the modified American form may express the position of a subscribing elder.

The confession itself recognises that all councils of men are human and as such are capable of error. It is in the light of this that subscription is made to the Westminster Confession of Faith. Nonetheless subscription is to be to the Westminster Confession of Faith as it stands, with the prevailing declarations. The elders of the churches will not teach what is contrary to the Confession. They will be free to teach within the recognised declarations. Teaching concerning worship is to be within the parameters found in section 4.5.4, 4.5.9, 8.3-8.5 but will not need to teach all the permitted position. Matters of understanding and legitimate theological debate may be brought to the Presbytery and thereby the advice of the brethren be sought. Presbytery may then make statements which clarify understanding, and, where necessary, warn of any danger of departure from the Confession.

The **Larger** and **Shorter Catechisms** are part of the subordinate standards of the church and elders are to recognise them as faithful expressions of Scripture and in accord with the Confession. They are to be employed by the church as an aid to instruction.

The EPCEW recognises the value of the confessions of the early church (the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creed) and the three forms of unity of its sister reformed churches (The Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Acts of the Synod of Dordt), and the Confession of Faith of the Calvinistic Methodists, and recommends that use should be made of them.

Additional statements may be adopted by particular congregations for their own use or by the whole Presbytery to meet current disputes as long as they are in keeping with the Westminster Standards.

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8 see PART two "Form of Government" 10.1.3 and 11.1.2 for wording of the subscription.

## **4. GOVERNMENT**

### *4.1 The Congregation*

The most visible expression of Christ’s Church is the individual congregation. Government of the congregation is the most direct and immediate part of church government. Each congregation is governed by its own elders (presbyters, bishops, overseers, shepherds or pastors). There should normally be more than one elder. Where necessary Presbytery may be asked to temporarily supply elders (elders acceptable to the congregation) until elders are raised up from within the congregation. All elders must be called and accepted by the clear majority of the communicant members of the congregation. The elders of a particular congregation are referred to as the **congregational elders** or **the session**.<sup>9</sup> Some elders by virtue of their gifts and calling are recognised and set aside as full-time teaching elders. A teaching elder is commonly known as a minister.

### *4.2 Presbytery*

The presbytery consists of elders from each of the congregations of the presbytery.<sup>10</sup> A **moderator** is appointed every year to chair all meetings. A **clerk** or secretary is appointed every three years to keep records of Presbytery. A **treasurer** is appointed every three years to keep financial records of Presbytery. Presbytery may appoint a **commission** or commissioner to act in its name. The moderator is often in effect called upon to act as a commissioner of Presbytery. Presbytery may also appoint a **committee** to produce reports and advice for its consideration.<sup>11</sup>

Commission activities are subject to approval by the full Presbytery and committee recommendations are subject to approval by the full Presbytery. Presbytery meetings are normally open to the public. Meetings may be attended by observers except where the Presbytery decides to act in closed session. Other members may be specially invited by the Presbytery and may be co-opted to its committees. Only elders may vote.

### *4.3 The General Assembly*

The General Assembly consists of commissioners from each presbytery.<sup>12</sup> A **moderator** is appointed every year to chair all meetings. A **clerk** and a **deputy clerk** are appointed every three years to keep records of the Assembly. A **treasurer** is appointed every three years to keep financial records of Assembly. The General Assembly may appoint a **commission** to act in its name. The Assembly may also appoint a **committee** to produce reports and advice for its consideration.<sup>13</sup>

Commission activities are subject to approval by the General Assembly, and committee recommendations are subject to approval by the Assembly. General Assembly meetings are normally open to the public. Meetings may be attended by observers except where the Assembly decides to act in closed session.

### *4.4 The Relationship of Congregational Government and Presbytery*

The relationship involves the principles of subsidiarity and of acting in decent and orderly fashion. The individual congregation is not dictated to by the presbytery but there is mutual submission in matters of common concern. The pattern of their relationship may be seen in a summary of their roles:

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9 See part two for guidelines in the running of meetings of the session.  
10 See part two for current practice for representation at presbytery.  
11 See part two for guidelines as to possible committees.  
12 See part two for current practice for representation at General Assembly.  
13 See part two for guidelines as to possible committees.

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4.4.1 Local Eldership (the Session)

- Spiritual Care of the Congregation
- Admission to membership and sacraments
- Discipline of all members
- Oversight of all meetings, literature work, evangelism
- Providing advice to members on family, social and moral matters.

4.4.2 Wider Eldership (the Presbytery)

- Spiritual Fellowship of the congregations within its bounds and especially of the elders
- Admission to the eldership (ruling and teaching)
- Appeals concerning discipline
- Oversight of matters of mutual concern such as ministerial training, wider diaconal work, missionary endeavour
- Providing eldership in the congregations with advice on questions raised
- rulings on matters of doctrine and discipline
- common financial guidelines
- parameters for biblical worship

4.5 *The Relationship of Sessions, Presbytery, and General Assembly (Church courts)*

4.5.1 Church courts are one in nature, constituted of the same elements, possessed of the same kinds of rights and powers.

4.5.2 Sessions exercise jurisdiction over single congregations, and presbyteries exercise jurisdiction over what is of common concern to the presbyters, sessions, and congregations within their bounds. The General Assembly exercises jurisdiction over such matters as concern the whole Church.

4.5.3 These courts are distinct, but are not separate independent tribunals. Every act of jurisdiction of each court is an act of the whole Church performed by it through that court.

4.5.4 The first place or **primacy** is always given to the session of each church. In the wider expression of the unity of the church, the presbytery is the **radical** court. Different presbyteries may have different procedures.

4.5.5 The principles that affect the relationship between the congregations and the presbytery apply to the relations between the presbytery and the General Assembly.

4.5.6 Although each court exercises original jurisdiction over matters belonging to it, the lower courts are subject to the review and direction of the higher courts.

4.5.7 The acts of a lower court are brought under the supervision of a higher court by way of review, referral, appeal, or complaint. When matters arising in a lower court are referred to a higher court, such referral does not impinge on the authority of the lower court.

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- 4.5.8 It is the right of every court to review the records and acts of the court immediately below, and determine whether the proceedings have been properly recorded; whether they have been regular in accordance with the Constitution; whether they have been wise, just, and equitable; and whether the directions of the higher court have been followed.
- 4.5.9 If in any irregularity or defect is found in the proceedings or the record of the lower court the higher court may correct it.
- 4.5.10 The evidence in a case, properly attested by the clerk of the court by which it has been taken, is held as valid evidence by a higher court to which the case may be appealed.
- 4.5.11 An appellate court forms its judgment from the full record transmitted from the lower court of the evidence that was before it or was tendered in evidence and rejected by it, with due attention to the pleading of the parties at its own bar. If during an appeal new evidence is tendered which in the judgment of the higher court has a bearing on the case it may either refer the case back to the lower originating court, or, with the consent of parties, receive such evidence and determine the case.
- 4.5.12 An appeal or complaint is sustained where the decision of the lower court is
- (i) disapproved, in which case the judgment of the lower court may be modified as the higher court thinks fit; or
  - (ii) defective in process, in which case the higher court without entering on the merit of the decision of the lower court or pronouncing any judgment on it may send back the case to the lower court with instructions to have it taken up again and disposed of in accordance with the laws of the Church.
- 4.5.13 Dismissal of an appeal or complaint implies approval by the higher court of both the decision and the procedure of the lower court. Thereupon the decision of the lower court becomes final.
- 4.5.14 The General Assembly is the highest court in the Church, and represents in one body all its congregations. The Assembly expresses the union, peace, and correspondence among all congregations and church courts.
- 4.5.15 The General Assembly of the EPCEW ('the Church') has powers legislative, administrative, and judicial, which powers shall be supreme with respect to:
- a. Doctrine of the Church;
  - b. Worship of the Church;
  - c. Discipline of the Church;
  - d. The training for service in the Church (including training for the ministry and other training areas as determined by the General Assembly);
  - e. The admission of candidates to the ministry;
  - f. The reception of ministers from other churches;
  - g. Re-admission to the ministry of previous ministers of the Church;
  - h. Overseas missions;

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- i. Home missions;
- j. Relations with other churches;
- k. The publications of the Church;
- l. Addresses to the civil magistrate on behalf of the Church;
- m. Appeals from lower courts.

4.5.16 In ordinary practice the General Assembly exercises its powers of discipline only in cases brought before it by referral or appeal (appellate jurisdiction). However, the Assembly reserves its right to original jurisdiction in disciplinary matters and may remit a case to a lower court, or deal with it by the direct exercise of its own authority.

4.5.17 Matters agreed upon at General Assembly that change the constitution of the EPCEW or address matters to do with the Confession are sent back to presbyteries for acceptance, and are only ratified after debate on all relevant matters raised by the presbyteries.

#### 4.6 *The Role and Responsibilities of the Session*

These are:

- 4.6.1 To oversee the **spiritual life** of the congregation and care for the spiritual welfare of its members.
  - 4.6.2 To **guard** all congregational teaching and worship including preaching, administration of sacraments and singing of praise so that they are biblical, in accord with the Confession and within such parameters as are agreed by presbytery to be biblical.<sup>14</sup>
  - 4.6.3 To examine and admit to **membership** believers and their children, on a credible profession of faith or by transfer from a sister congregation.
  - 4.6.4 To administer **discipline** of the members. This, when necessary, will proceed through the following stages,
    - 4.6.4.1 Warning them of those things which are not in keeping with their profession.
    - 4.6.4.2 Rebuking them in private and then in public.
- For matters of unrepented immorality or heresy, suspending and then excommunicating them until they repent.
- 4.6.4.3 Initial self-discipline should also be exercised within the session for ruling and teaching elders as part of mutual care for one another.
  - 4.6.5 To oversee the **financial** affairs of the congregation. This should be within the common guidelines set out by presbytery. In particular the elders should ensure the church faces its financial responsibilities concerning buildings and ministers according to salary scales recommended by presbytery.

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14 A session of a congregation which has a distinct position and which is within the parameters set out in Ch 8 of “Decently and in Order” is free to maintain that position according to the constitution of the congregation e.g. a congregation which is psalms only would be free to maintain that position. This would be particularly important in congregations established in England and Wales by Churches from outside these countries.

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- 4.6.6 To encourage material provision to be made in cases of individual hardship in the congregation and oversee the election, ordination and work of **deacons**.
- 4.6.7 To promote **missionary** endeavour, including local church planting.
- 4.6.8 To oversee such **additional teaching** as members of the congregation may need in addition to the regular public preaching and especially of covenant children.
- 4.6.9 To oversee **literature work** including magazines and such publications as the congregation may need.
- 4.6.10 To oversee all **meetings** of the church including any special sections such as Sunday school, youth work and women’s meetings.
- 4.6.11 To be alert to the Lord’s raising up of **spiritually gifted men** in the congregation; in the light of this to oversee the free elections of such men to eldership and to ensure no elder is imposed against the will of the congregation.
- 4.6.12 To consider all decisions of the presbytery and, where necessary, to **warn of any doctrinal deviation**. If absolutely necessary, by due process elders should be prepared to withdraw the congregation from the presbytery, but only after they have given sufficient evidence of serious doctrinal deviation.

4.7 *The Role and Responsibilities of the Presbytery*<sup>15</sup>

These are:

- 4.7.1 To be a means of **spiritual fellowship** and encouragement of the brethren.
- 4.7.2 To guard matters of **doctrine**, especially those affecting the Confession and any additional statements of doctrine that may be needed, and to rule on these matters of doctrine.
- 4.7.3 To **examine and ordain elders** freely chosen by the congregations, including candidates for the ministry, and to record details of their subscription to the Confession. This may be done by the whole presbytery or by commissioners acting on its behalf
- 4.7.4 To receive and **mediate appeals** concerning the acts of the sessions. This would cover the administration of discipline and unresolved questions concerning matters of doctrine, worship or behaviour. Such matters should have previously been raised by members with their local eldership.
- 4.7.5 To control **finance** in matters of common concern (funds raised from congregations according to targets approved by presbytery) and to set out guidelines for the proper management of congregational finances.
- 4.7.6 To promote **links** between congregations, and provide a mechanism for stronger congregations to aid weaker congregations for the financial support of ministers.
- 4.7.7 To promote and oversee matters of **common concern** among the churches within its bounds.

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- 4.7.8 To discuss matters of common spiritual concern to the churches within its bounds and to **advise** congregational sessions on any question raised by them.
- 4.7.9 To consider the biblical parameters of worship for the congregations, recognising the diversity that is consistent with our confessional standards.<sup>16</sup>
- 4.7.10 To ensure no **elder or minister is imposed** against the wishes of the congregation.
- 4.7.11 To take due care **not to multiply bureaucratic structures** which are either not strictly necessary or not under full presbytery control.
- 4.7.12 To oversee the **orderly dissolution of the relationship** of a congregation and the presbytery where there is a complete breakdown of relationship. This may be either as a result of deviation by a congregation or as a result of withdrawal by the congregation. This would require 18 months of attempts at reconciliation from the time of written notification.

4.8 *The Role and Responsibilities of the General Assembly*

4.8.1 The responsibilities of the General Assembly are

- To evaluate needs and resources for the Church at large.
- To superintend the affairs of the whole Church.
- To promote charity, truth, and holiness throughout all the churches under its care.
- To promote the prosperity and enlargement of the Church.
- To suppress schismatical contention.
- To bear testimony against immorality and error.
- To develop and maintain uniform standards across the churches for the training and admission of presbyters.
- To receive all appeals, complaints and referrals brought before it from the lower courts.
- To decide controversies respecting doctrine and discipline.
- To give advice in cases submitted to it.
- To form, unite, divide, and dissolve presbyteries.
- To relate to and unite with other ecclesiastical bodies.
- To promote and oversee matters of common concern:
  - Church planting undertaken collectively.
  - Conferences
  - Publications, including a common magazine
  - Public comment on moral and social matters

## **5. ELDERS**

Elders are God's provision for the government of Christ's church. They are also known as presbyters, bishops, overseers, shepherds or pastors. There are differing understandings in presbyterian churches as to the nature of elders. Elders holding to these different views would have the right to express their position, but the position taken by the EPCEW as a whole is that all elders are viewed as biblical presbyters.

Ministers are elders who, because of their gifts and calling, are set aside to labour in the word and doctrine. The term '**minister**' is the name commonly applied to a teaching elder. Ministers have a special responsibility for the regular preaching of the word and for the administration of the sacraments. They share with the other ruling elders the responsibility for the government of the church set out in Chapter 4. All are to care for the people as shepherds and in visiting the people.

### *5.1 Training for the Eldership especially for the Ministry*

Ideally all elders would benefit from appropriate training. Churches and presbytery should give thought to the ongoing needs for appropriate training for both teaching and ruling elders. However, special attention needs to be given to assessing a call to the preaching ministry and to initial training for the preaching of the word.

5.1.1 Applicants for the ministry must normally have the support of the elders of the congregation in which they are members. The elders must be able to confirm that there are indications that they are likely in future to display the **qualifications for an elder and minister of the word**.

5.1.2 There must be evidence of **spiritual and Intellectual gifts** suitable for the public ministry of the word.

5.1.3 There must be a conviction of a **call** to the work of the preaching ministry.

5.1.4 An applicant should be a **University graduate** or be helped to become one. In other cases men of mature years or in special circumstances may also be considered by presbytery.

5.1.5 Normally applicants will be required to have undertaken or to undertake **theological study** at a college approved by the General Assembly.

5.1.6 An applicant has to satisfy the presbytery of his theological competence and **preaching gifts**. This may involve interviews, reports of preaching, and where necessary written examination both before and after training.

5.1.7 An applicant will be **formally recognised** by being taken **under care** of the presbytery and the presbytery will seek to guide him through his training for the ministry. The next step is frequently known as **licensing** and is undertaken to make it known that the man is recognised as someone eligible for a call to the ordained ministry. Where there is transfer from a ministry outside the EPCEW the initial formal recognition will not be necessary, though there is wisdom in allowing a period of time between receiving an application and approval. **Ordination** will take place following acceptance of a call to a specific work.

### *5.2 Calls and Ordinations to the Ministry*

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- 5.2.1 The **elders**<sup>17</sup> of a congregation have the responsibility of considering suitable men for a position of a minister within that congregation. They need to be open to suggestions from other members of the congregation, as well as from those outside able to advise it.
- 5.2.2 All elders, including ministers, must be called to serve in a congregation by the **clear vote** of the majority of the members of the congregation.<sup>18</sup> A congregation frequently underlines this by a list of members' signatures of those supporting the call.
- 5.2.3 Ministers from outside the EPCEW can be considered so long as they are able to subscribe to the Confession. Their suitability would need special consideration by the presbytery. Ministers in good standing in bodies committed to the Westminster Confession can also be seconded to the EPCEW without prejudice to matters covered by their subscription within their own denomination, assuming they are prepared to operate within the conditions operating in the EPCEW.
- 5.2.4 The intention of a congregation to issue a formal call to a minister must be taken to presbytery for **approval**, though the minister concerned is to be informed of this beforehand. The call will be conveyed to the minister from the elders of the congregation. If the minister is already serving another congregation which is a member of the EPCEW then its elders should also first be informed.
- 5.2.5 Men whose call has been approved in this way must be given reasonable **time to reflect prayerfully** on all that it implies for them, their families and their existing congregation.
- 5.2.6 Where a call has been accepted, the presbytery, in conjunction with the session, will proceed to ordain and/or **install** the minister.
- 5.3 *Calls and Ordinations to the Ruling Eldership*
- 5.3.1 **Elders** have the responsibility of considering men with the spiritual gifts for eldership. They should be open to suggestions from within the congregation<sup>19</sup> and from those from outside able to advise it.
- 5.3.2 All elders when asked to serve in a congregation must have a calling as indicated by a clear vote in favour by the majority of the members of the congregation.
- 5.3.3 As most prospective ruling elders will not already have been tested as to their suitability and call to the office, suitable **teaching** on the subject should be given to the congregation.
- 5.3.4 **Time** should be allowed for men who are being considered for election to the office of elder to reflect prayerfully on what they believe to be God's calling.
- 5.3.5 Only those men who are considered by the existing eldership to possess the appropriate spiritual **gifts** and who are able, with due encouragement, to speak of a **calling** to the office, should be voted upon. Elders should be considered in terms of their spiritual gifts and not in terms of a set number being required.

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17 The elders may ask presbytery to appoint an interim moderator as a commission of presbytery to assist them (where practical).

18 This presupposes the careful maintenance of a membership roll.

19 The way this is done may vary, see part 2 *Form of Government*, 11.3.

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5.3.6 Where a call has been accepted and presbytery has approved the subscription, the presbytery, in conjunction with the session, will proceed to **ordain** the ruling elder.<sup>20</sup>

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20 Suggested forms of service of ordination are given in part 3, *Directory of Worship*, 3.1.

## **6. DEACONS**

- 6.1 Deacons may be appointed to help the elders in the **physical and social needs** of the members and in maintaining the meeting place. Their work is to enable the elders to give their time to the spiritual welfare of the congregation. Particular responsibilities of the deacons will be determined by the elders according to the needs of the congregation.
- 6.2 The New Testament letters to Timothy and Titus set out the **spiritual qualities** necessary for a deacon. Teaching concerning the office and work of deacons is to be provided prior to any elections being held.
- 6.3 Deacons must be freely chosen by a **clear majority vote** of the members on the basis of recommendation by the elders. The elders should be open to the suggestions of the members. The men nominated must be in membership in the congregation and sound in the faith.
- 6.4 Deacons are not assistant elders nor do they exercise rule in the congregation. Though their work is **under the oversight of the elders**, they do not need the immediate involvement of the elders in all their work. There is no necessity that all meetings of the diaconate require the presence of the elders but there is need for some meetings to be with one or all of the elders. A record of their activities is to be kept and to be accessible to the elders.
- 6.5 As they are not members of Presbytery, the oversight of their ordination is in the hands of their own congregation's elders. The form of their examination and length of service is also determined by the session.<sup>21</sup>
- 6.6 Deacons will sometimes require the assistance of women in the social work of the congregation. Each session is free to determine whether a formal office is required and what title best describes the work of these women.

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<sup>21</sup> EPC practice is to have elections every 3-5 years. PCA and Free Church practice is that the office is for life.

## **7. MISSIONS**

### *7.1 Introduction*

All churches are responsible to the Lord to take his **gospel to all men**. In this the glory of God is made known. Without Christ mankind is lost and faces a lost eternity. Particular circumstances affect the opportunities and direction of this gospel endeavour. Each congregation has this responsibility as its week by week concern and as part of its normal life. In addition it is fitting, as opportunity allows, for a congregation to plant a congregation in another area. It is also an endeavour in which congregations can act together and it is one of the many strengths of presbyterianism that congregations can act as one in order to further the cause of the gospel. It is then an act of Presbytery to endeavour to establish congregations in new areas within its bounds. This **church planting** is often referred to as **home missions**. The General Assembly, presbyteries, and individual congregations may also seek to plant churches in other lands or may co-operate with others in doing so. Such gospel work is usually called **foreign missions**.

Congregations not yet able to have their own elected elders are referred to as Mission Churches.

### *7.2 Co-operation*

The EPCEW recognises the many other congregations, denominations and missions engaged in true gospel work. All these gospel endeavours are Christ's work and are worthy of respect. Sadly there are times when the gospel itself is impoverished and where Christ's church is compromised. The EPCEW is unable to support work directly associated with the WCC or with Churches Together because of the confusion of the gospel with ritualism and with liberal theology. It seeks to co-operate with reformed missions such as that of the Free Church of Scotland in Peru and elsewhere. The missions of sister churches and of members of the International Conference of Reformed Churches are recommended as worthy of support. The EPCEW itself has a debt to the London Congregation of the Free Church of Scotland, the Mission to the World (MTW), the mission board of the EPC and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

### *7.3 Home Missions*

#### *7.3.1 Oversight*

Mission churches planted by a particular congregation have the elders of the parent congregation as their own. Mission churches planted by presbytery have **temporary elders** appointed by presbytery including the church planter as its temporary minister.

#### *7.3.2 Formal Constitution*

Under the guidance of the church planter and the other temporary elders a mission church may ask the presbytery to allow for the election of elders and so **formally constitute** it as a regular congregation with normal representation at presbytery. Presbytery would make full enquiry as to the timeliness of this action, bearing in mind numbers, stability and suitable eldership gifts.

#### *7.3.3 Committee for Church Planting.*

Presbytery as a whole has the immediate responsibility for all church planting within its bounds other than that carried out by a single congregation. It is **advised** by its committee for church planting (which includes the church planter for the particular mission church under consideration). That committee offers whatever help it can to members of presbytery labouring with other missionary bodies

### *7.4 Foreign Missions*

#### *7.4.1 The Nature of Foreign Missions.*

The chief work of foreign missions is the preaching of the gospel. This requires the same high standards and calling as for other ministers or ruling elders. The distinctive difference is that it involves church planting in another culture and in co-operation with other Christians from that culture.

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7.4.2 Other Missionary Work.

Missionary work is often supported by other Christian **diaconal workers** involved in such work as relief, medical and educational work. These are often referred to as missionaries because their work is in another culture and part of the overall mission. This work is not the same as the preaching of the gospel by men called to that work, nor the same as the work of ruling within the church. However, such workers, if men, may also be called to and may be involved in a regular preaching ministry as ministers, or be ruling elders in the church.

7.4.3 Presbytery Responsibility

Presbytery has a collective responsibility to promote foreign missions. It seeks in the light of providence to **identify those geographical areas** where it will be able to make a **distinctive contribution** as well as encouraging a **concentration** of support for existing missionary endeavour. At the same time individual congregations are free to support those with whom they have specific links.

Ministers or elders appointed by presbytery to work in foreign mission churches are responsible to presbytery and should provide reports to it and through it for its congregations. Where the mission church belongs to the presbytery the missionary church planter is supported out of the presbytery's **foreign mission fund**. Missionary ministers of the gospel working for other missions recognised by presbytery may also apply for support as funds may allow. They may be associated with the presbytery when home visits permit, and asked to provide reports and financial accounts.

The wider diaconal work of mission receives financial support as funds permit. These workers have access to such expertise and help as the church planting committee may develop. They are also asked to submit reports.

Ministers and Elders of the EPCEW are free to work in approved missions outside that of the presbytery. All missionary ministers and elders remain under the care of their presbytery.

## **8. WORSHIP**

The EPCEW recognises that there is diversity in the worship carried out in reformed churches and that there is also a need to recognise parameters within which this diversity is acceptable.

8.1 The **regulative principle** distinguishes Reformed from Lutheran or Anglican as well as Charismatic worship. It is accepted as one of the fundamentals of Presbyterianism. It distinguished worship in Geneva at the time of Calvin. It was the guiding principle for the Puritans and for the Scottish Church from the time of Knox on. The regulative principle is the recognition that God has appointed in his word the **way** in which he should be worshipped. Only those things which are **commanded by God** for his present church, either directly or by inference in his word, are to form part of our worship. The church which exists now must recognise that Christ, who is the heavenly pattern of the temple, has now come in the flesh to be the head of the church. It is this, not taste, which determines the characteristic simplicity of reformed worship.

8.2 The **Westminster Confession** works out the principles concerning worship in Ch. 1 section 6 and Ch. 21. The sufficiency of Scripture is stated. The components of worship are given as:

- prayer
- the reading of scripture
- preaching
- singing of psalms
- sacraments
- the keeping of the Lord's Day
- benediction
- and on special occasions
  - religious oaths and vows,
  - fasting, and
  - thanksgiving.

A distinction is drawn between these commanded constituents of worship and the circumstances in which the worship is conducted.

8.3 Reformed churches have shown variation in worship as they have differed in the application of this principle as well as in many of the circumstances concerning worship. For that reason the PAE accepted the vision of unity which embraced such differences. Particularly in mind was the legitimate debate concerning what Scripture precisely commands (and so what is recognised by the Confession). It was such matters as whether our sung praise is to be psalms only or psalms and hymns, whether the singing is accompanied or unaccompanied, whether there should be any responses or none, that was in view. Such differences were accepted as arising from a different application of the regulative principle. It was not recognised that worship was a matter of taste nor merely avoiding what is specifically forbidden. At the beginning of the PAE it was also accepted that there is a

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need to determine the parameters within which there is legitimate debate as to whether a matter is biblical and in accord with our Confession.

8.4 Stating the **parameters** within which variation may occur requires positive and negative consideration. These need to reflect current concerns and will therefore need frequent updating.

8.4.1 Positively we should recognise that

- Worship should seek to show wholehearted delight in glorifying God and in making him the centre of worship
- Praise is to combine awe and joy
- Preaching and reading of the word are at the heart of our public worship
- Discipline must be exercised regarding the sacraments both as to who is to be baptised and who is allowed to the table in communion
- In the singing of praise the use of psalms should form a significant part of worship. They are biblically required, part of the reformed tradition, laid down in the Confession and in both the PCA blue book and the EPC code.
- All that occurs in public worship should always be under the control of the eldership

8.4.2 Negatively, recognising that the whole counsel of God being either set down in Scripture, or deducible from it, and God’s former ways of “revealing his will unto his people being now ceased” (WCF 1:1). we accept that:-

- There is no place for any supposed prophesying, speaking in tongues or organised miracle workings
- The purpose of worship is primarily to glorify God, not to entertain the congregation
- Musical accompaniment, when present, is to aid the singing of praise not to replace it. It should be suitable for the serious, reverential worship of a Holy God.
- Dance and mime have no place in worship.

8.5 **Doctrine and worship** are intimately related. It is important for presbytery to **debate** trends in worship without it being seen as an attempt to impose a uniform pattern. The need is not to provide a prescriptive ‘straitjacket’ but to gain the collective insight of the brethren, as vital matters of substance are often involved.

8.6 The EPCEW offers a number of **alternative** patterns of service and **recommendations** concerning the circumstances of worship as an **aid** to the churches. Variation need not be inconsistent with the desire to see a common ethos in our services. A number of versions of Scripture are already in use in our churches - AV, NKJV, NIV, NASB. However a reliable literal translation should be used and not a paraphrase. A range of suitable Psalters and Hymn Books will be considered and recommended. A range of alternative forms of service will be made available.

## **9. FINANCE**

The present practice of the EPCEW is that each congregation is responsible for the **stipend** of its own minister and for the ownership of its own **buildings**. Recommended **scales** for a minister's stipend have been considered and after further discussion specific recommendations are to be agreed by the General Assembly. It has been agreed that as the EPCEW develops further, attention will need to be given to financial matters to ensure financially stronger congregations help financially weaker ones.

## **10. ACCESSION OF ESTABLISHED CONGREGATIONS**

The EPCEW has arisen at a time when there is turmoil in the older theologically mixed denominations and isolation of many evangelical congregations outside them. It recognises the many legitimate concerns and the wariness of congregations who have a common theological position with it. It is of the essence of its presbyterian position that it welcomes **applications** of congregations for membership of the presbytery. It would seek to be sympathetic to factors arising from the past history of the congregation.

The basis of membership is acceptance of the Westminster Confession. Contact should first be made with the clerk of the presbytery of the bounds. The elders of the congregation applying would be invited to attend presbytery as observers and, when ready to do so, to present their request together with an account of the history of the congregation. A commission of presbytery would visit the congregation. If the request is accepted elders would be asked to subscribe to the confession, but would not be re-ordained. The formal acceptance of the congregation into the presbytery would then be recognised.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time the EPCEW would like to maintain **contacts** with likeminded congregations outside the EPCEW.

Any group of believers wishing to become a congregation would be able to approach the presbytery of the bounds in the same way. It would then be treated as a church planting work of that presbytery.

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22 See 11.10

## **11. FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES GOVERNING PROCEDURES**

- 11.1 Only God may rule over the conscience, He rules through his Word. We must obey Scripture, but are not bound to believe, or to do in worship, anything men teach or require that is against God's Word or added to it.
- 11.2 We see in Scripture that all believers together form one universal church. There is one body, one temple and one people of God, the bride of Christ.
- 11.3 The general principles of church government are taught in Scripture. The most important principles are these:
- The church is governed by elders who are properly chosen and ordained.
  - Believers are to submit to one another, both within the local congregation and in the wider church.
  - An individual, congregation or lower court has the right to appeal to a higher church court.
- 11.4 Many details of church government are the same as in other human institutions. They are determined by common sense as in other institutions, but must always be based on the fundamental rules of Scripture. Therefore every association of churches or local congregation has the right to decide on what terms it will admit people to the Lord's Supper. It may also decide the qualifications for ministers and members, as well as the whole way the church is governed.
- 11.5 Our Saviour has given the office of elder for the growth of the church. Elders do not only preach the gospel and administer the sacraments, but also shepherd the flock of God by example and encouragement. When necessary, they exercise discipline so that truth and holiness may be preserved.
- 11.6 For the good of the visible Church our Saviour has given the office of deacon so that material needs may be met and physical suffering relieved.
- 11.7 Some doctrines and practices are not essential to the gospel and do not disturb the harmony of the church. They are matters about which spiritual and biblical Christians may disagree. In these areas Christians must be restrained and tolerant towards one another.
- 11.8 The officers of the church are selected by the congregation. They must be men who have the character and qualifications required in Scripture for their office.
- 11.9 Whenever authority is exercised in the church it is done by stating and explaining the truth. This applies whether authority is exercised by the congregation, or by the representative officers in the church session, presbytery, synod, or general assembly. Church discipline must aim for purely moral and spiritual results, so it cannot be enforced by the civil authorities. It is effective as it deals fairly with the case, so that the procedure persuades any impartial observer that justice is being done. Its power comes from Christ's blessing.
- 11.10 Each court (local church session, presbytery, synod, or general assembly) controls the property acquired by that court. No other court shall have any claim upon that property, except as may be contracted through loans or mortgages.