

Recommendation to the Theological Task Force of the ECO Synod  
from  
The Presbytery of the Northwest  
Approved May 5, 2017

Dear Friends,

On May 5, 2017, Presbytery of the Northwest received a recommendation from the Theological Task Force of our Presbytery regarding the Confessions of ECO. Upon prayerful consideration of their recommendation we resolved to send you the following recommendation for your consideration at the 2018 synod gathering:

1. That ECO include the following documents as our Foundational Statements of Faith:

- The Nicene Creed
- The Apostles' Creed
- The Heidelberg Catechism
- The Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger Catechism, and Shorter Catechism
- The Theological Declaration of Barmen

2. Since the word "confession" has various meanings, the collection of these documents is to be called *Foundational Statements of Faith* rather than *The Book of Confessions*. We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are our ultimate authority for Christian Faith and life; the Essential Tenets of ECO hold ecclesiastical authority which binds and guides our ministry; and the Foundational Statements of Faith are reliable historical expositions of Scripture which continue to instruct the church today.

3. That the Synod Theology Taskforce considers updating the language of the Reformation-era statements. At a minimum, we recommend publishing one cogent version of the Westminster Standards that includes modern revisions, instead of having two amended versions side-by-side.

4. That the ECO Polity be amended to require affirming the Foundational Statements of Faith as a qualification for ordained office. Specifically, to amend the third sentence of 2.0101 to read: "Ordaining bodies must assure that all officers adhere to the Essential Tenets of the ECO and affirm ECO's Foundational Statements of Faith." This brings officer qualifications in line with the ordination vows in 2.0103.

5. That we retain (with amendment) the introductory statement and footnotes in our current Book of Confessions regarding Roman Catholics. The statement should be amended to fit ECO and whichever statements are included in our Foundational Statements of Faith. The current statement says: "Specific statements in the 16th and 17th century confessions and catechisms in The Book of Confessions contain condemnations and derogatory characterizations of the Catholic Church: Chapters XVIII and XXII of the Scots Confession; Question and Answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism; and Chapter II, III, XVII and XX of the Second Helvetic Confession. (Chapters XXII, XXV and XXIX of the Westminster Confession of

Faith have been amended to remove anachronous and offensive language. Chapter XXVIII of the French Confession does not have constitutional standing). While these statements emerged from substantial doctrinal disputes, they reflect 16th and 17th century polemics. Their condemnations and characterizations of the Catholic Church are not the position of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and are not applicable to current relationships between the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Catholic Church.”

### **Rationale for Each Recommendation**

1. These statements were strongly affirmed by a near-consensus of the sessions that reported their discussions to our Taskforce, while other statements received less support. More importantly, these statements have been foundational for our own branch of Christianity, and also for our broader theological family. Clearly, the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds have been definitive statements across Christ’s Church for centuries. Heidelberg and Westminster are in broad use by other Reformed Churches around the globe. Together, these statements comprehensively profess our Reformed faith, with little of the polemic language other statements contain. While there is great merit in many other confessions, the taskforce wanted a smaller, more manageable set of statements.

2. We want the title to be easily understood, so the taskforce recommends the broader term “faith statements.” We note that this collection would contain two creeds, three catechisms, and only one “confession.” Also, most contemporary people associate the word “confession” with wrongdoing. (One elder thought that a “book of confessions” sounds like something the police would collect!) The word “foundational” declares that they are significant, but do not have the same authoritative status as the Essential Tenets. Officers vow to “receive, adopt, and be bound by” the Essential Tenets, and only to “be guided by our confessions” (2.0103c-d).

3. Along with several churches, the Taskforce felt that updating the language of the Reformation-era statements could make these confessions more easily understood and more useful for worship, teaching, and personal devotion. In particular, having two edited versions of the Westminster standards is confusing.

4. Adding this line to 2.0101 confers a clearer status to the confessions in our constitution, and brings the qualifications for officers in line with their ordination vows. In our current Polity, the only mention of confessions is the ordination vow to be “guided by our confessions” (2.0103d). This wording is a vestige from the PCUSA.

The taskforce felt it was valuable to refer to the Foundational Statements of Faith somewhere in the Polity, and one natural place is in the qualifications for officers (2.0101). The word “affirm” is drawn from our Essential Tenets, section I. It communicates a less stringent requirement than “adhere to the Essential Tenets.” This relationship parallels the vows, where officers pledge to “receive, adopt, and be bound by” the Essential Tenets and to be “guided by our confessions.” (This is different from the confessions’ status in the PCUSA, where the Book of Confessions is part of the constitution.)

5. These footnotes were added after several decades of positive ecumenical dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. They lead to greater acceptance, understanding and love within the kingdom of God.

Sincerely,

Richard P. Zimmerman  
State Clerk, Presbytery of the Northwest