

National Covenant Presbyterian Church

A Proposal

What's so different about this proposal?

First, let's see what lessons can be learned from the failures of the mainline denominations in the 20th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were great debates about defining the "essentials" of the faith. At the end of the debate (in the late 20's and early 30's) the choice was deliberately in favor of pluralism. However, you cannot refuse to define essentials, nor can they be negotiable (no scrupling) or they cease to be essentials. The old three "c's" of Presbyterianism are still valid – Confessional, Connectional, and Constitutional. However, the connection and constitution must be based on a common confession. The confessions in the Book of Confessions go far beyond the essentials, so the first lesson to learn is that we must recognize and agree and not compromise on the essentials, whatever they are. NCPC will have clearly stated essentials, and there need be no process for changing them.¹ NCPC's essentials reflect a basic set of essentials of the faith and form the basis of part of the foundation, which would also allow for future additions to a larger Christian body – for example, National Covenant Methodist Churches, National Covenant Episcopal Churches, etc. But "essentials" need to be essentials of the faith, and no compromise.

Having established theological essentials, the next step is agreeing upon the Ethical Imperatives² that flow from them. Orthodoxy must lead to faithful orthopraxy. While not all Christians will agree or commit to these, membership in the NCPC must be based on agreement and adherence to these imperatives. If you do not or cannot commit to and abide by the ethical imperatives of the NCPC, then God bless you on your way, but you cannot be a part of an organization that is defined by acceptance of these things. This is not "exclusive" in attitude, but definitive. These essentials and these imperatives define us. If you can't agree, by definition, you are no longer one of "us." These two things, the essentials and the imperatives form the foundation for the common confession, and therefore a basis for common connection and constitution.

On top of this firmly rooted trunk, which we would call The National Covenant (the essentials and the imperatives) are branches of "critical beliefs" or "distinctives." These are the necessary sinews for building the actual connections between and among congregations. These "critical beliefs" or "distinctives" would include technically non-essential beliefs in terms of Christian faith, but they are theological and practical distinctives that grow out of a particular heritage or branch of the Christian vine. Distinctives would include, but not be limited to, ordination and church governance.

For example, a group of people who could affirm the essentials and the imperatives might then choose to organize around the idea of church governance based on elders and deacons, while another might choose bishops. And even agreeing on that, they might differ on the question of

¹ The essentials of the Reformed Faith as New Wineskins has produced them serve well enough, but by definition, they are essentials of the Reformed (not the Catholic, not Dispensational, etc.) and therefore are not really essentials of the Christian Faith.

² The New Wineskins ethical imperatives can serve well for NCPC purposes.

42 infant baptism. These differences need not divide us on the essentials or imperatives, but effect
43 significantly how we live out the structure of the church. This provides for the eventual
44 development of National Covenant Churches from what were the old denominational differences
45 allowing real connection, but also respecting (not trying to change) the others distinctives. But
46 for now, let's concern ourselves with the particular branch of this idea we would call the
47 National Presbyterian Church.

48
49 All the Presbyterian denominations in America have organized themselves on different levels of
50 "councils" starting with the Session at the local church, Presbytery as a collection of the regional
51 church, Synod, frankly a leftover from the early days, and General Assembly on the National
52 level. Each of these "councils" has acted in some regards, independently, and in other ways, the
53 "higher" courts have had jurisdiction over the "lower" courts. Over time, this has morphed into a
54 "top-down" hierarchical approach that was not originally intended and has not served well.

55
56 The NCPC will take a different approach. The local church will continue very much as it has
57 before, but with a greater recognition of the authority to govern its own affairs, especially in the
58 case of maintaining control of its property and choosing its denominational affiliation. The
59 exercise of authority of the "higher councils" over the "lower councils" should be restricted to
60 adherence to the National Covenant (the Essentials and the Ethical Imperatives) and for each
61 "branch" those "critical beliefs" that form the basis of the connection between those
62 congregations (and pastors) within that branch. If a congregation or pastor changes their stance
63 on the National Covenant, they can leave or be removed, and if they change on their "critical
64 beliefs" they can change branches, or move on, but having an endless debate over non-essentials
65 has proven to be counterproductive to the Kingdom. Let water seek its own level.

66
67 Another critical lesson to learn from the Church of the 20th century, is that "membership" needs
68 to be a better defined term. The idea that membership in the local church is equivalent to
69 membership in the Church Universal³ is unbiblical. Therefore, "denying" membership in the
70 local church is not the same as "denying the Body of Christ." A person wishing to join a local
71 church with his three wives (or woman with her three husbands) cannot be made a full voting
72 member of the church. However, the person desiring to be a part of the Church who is yet
73 ignorant of the requirements of the gospel is a person whom we want to welcome. How can we
74 do both? Historically, a person who expressed interest in joining a local church received the
75 status of "catechismal" member. Many times, this catechismal status lasted a year while the
76 person was instructed in the way of Jesus Christ, and then was examined by Session for full
77 membership. With some different words, NCPC will recognize the same distinction.

78 79 **Membership in the local church:**

80 Baptized Members: normally children who have been baptized, but are not yet old
81 enough to make a decision for themselves. They have the privilege of participating in
82 communion (at the discretion of their parents) and the life of the church, however, without vote
83 or leadership responsibilities.

84 Communicant Members: This would be the category for adults who wanted to join the
85 church, but who were unable to affirm the Essentials and the Imperatives (and at least for the
86 Presbyterian branch) the Critical Beliefs. This would also include those adolescents who had

³ The Church as God sees it and the God who alone can measure hearts.

87 been baptized (or not) as infants, who want to join the church of their own choice, but who are
88 frankly not ready to make all the commitments incumbent on full members. These
89 Communicant members would have the privilege of the sacraments, and full participation in the
90 life of the Church, except for voting and holding leadership positions. If you can't affirm the
91 National Covenant and the Critical Beliefs, you aren't really "in" the covenant, and we are not
92 going to lie and say you are.

93 Covenant members: This would be the category of those adults who are ready to affirm,
94 without mental reservation, the National Covenant (the essentials and the imperatives) and the
95 Critical Beliefs. These are people who are truly within the Covenant and the Branch, because
96 these are the things that define us. This also solves the problem of the consistency of the
97 leadership. Only Covenant Members are eligible for leadership, but all Covenant Members have
98 already qualified for leadership from the standpoint of theology, so calling to positions of
99 leadership becomes a matter of discerning God's gifts of leadership, not the theological
100 suitability of the candidate.

101

102 **Regional Church Bodies and Pastors**

103 Presbytery: A collection of churches for the purpose of shared ministry (missions) and
104 support (best practices) NOT administrative functions. As a connectional church, every
105 congregation will be part of a Presbytery for mutual ministry and support. And while
106 Presbyteries will normally be those churches geographically close, in a world of cell phones,
107 computers, video conferencing and the internet, this is not a requirement. Each local church will
108 choose which Presbytery to be a part of, and they can change Presbyteries at their discretion.

109 Presbyteries shall not exceed 50 congregations in size. As most administrative functions
110 (such as overseeing candidates, certification, ordination, and discipline) will be done on a
111 national level, there is little reason for a lot of Presbytery bureaucracy and meetings. Presbytery
112 meetings shall be set by the Presbytery, for the purpose of shared mission and support and shall
113 be held at least 4 times a year. Each ordained pastor serving at a church and an equal number of
114 elders from the member churches shall be the voting members at any Presbytery meeting.

115 Certified pastors, as well as ordained pastors not currently serving a church but having been
116 received as a member of the Presbytery shall be eligible to attend and participate, but without
117 vote.

118 Each ordained pastor serving within a Presbytery shall be part of a covenant group of not
119 more than 10 pastors who will meet at least twice a year for mutual support and accountability.
120 These meetings will be at the expense of the local congregation.

121 Ordained pastors serving in a local church will continue to be members of the Presbytery
122 of which they are a part, not the local church where they are serving. Calling or removing a
123 pastor in the local church will no longer be the purview of Presbytery. Since adherence to the
124 National Covenant and Critical Beliefs is overseen at the National level, there is no need to
125 involve Presbytery. If the dispute is theological in nature, the National Covenant can serve as the
126 defining factor. However, to protect pastors and congregations, both will have recourse through
127 the Judicial system in the event there is a dispute concerning the pastoral relationship between
128 the minister and the Church. The courts will provide binding arbitration in the dispute. Having
129 an impartial third party able to mediate is one of the real benefits of a connectional system.

130

131 **National Church Body** – General Assembly – meets annually.

132 Supports and coordinates national ministries. Each Presbytery will send two pastors and two
133 elders from their Presbytery to the meeting. Changes to the Constitution (which does not include
134 the National Covenant – the essentials and the imperatives) may be proposed by Presbyteries and
135 adopted by majority vote of the General Assembly. Changes in the constitution will then be
136 ratified by a vote of a majority of those Presbyteries at a meeting no later than 3 months
137 following the General Assembly.

138
139 The NCPC will maintain its National Offices for the work of the denomination and will be
140 divided into three “branches” of government.

141
142 Administrative: ordination, certification, medical/pension, adherence to essentials and
143 imperatives (membership of congregations and clergy). This will require the following standing
144 committees.

- 145 1) Ordination/Certification committee
- 146 2) Presbytery and Congregational Relations committee
- 147 3) Board of Pensions

148
149 Clergy will be both “certified” and “ordained” (ordained once they receive a call), but this will
150 be done on the National level (via video conference). Ordination and certification must be
151 renewed each year on the anniversary date of the person’s ordination/certification. Either or both
152 can be renounced by the individual, or revoked by the National Office for failure to affirm the
153 essentials and imperatives.

154
155 If a congregation no longer wishes to remain in the Covenant, they can be dismissed at their
156 request at any time. Likewise, a congregation can be removed for failure to adhere to the
157 essentials and imperatives, even without their consent. The same applies to clergy.

158
159 The general principle remains: we must have a way of truly connecting in a meaningful way that
160 provides the support and wisdom of the body larger than the congregation, while at the same
161 time providing a way to truly disconnect, if it comes to that, without demonizing one another.

162
163 Judicial – for when things go wrong – and they will. This court system may eventually need to
164 include a Presbytery/Regional level structure.

165
166 Global Missions Network – The Global Mission Network will facilitate partnerships with
167 mission agencies and international mission structures. The Global Mission structure will be a
168 resource for the local congregation focused on connecting individuals, congregations and
169 networks with agencies, structures, and resources appropriate to their calling.

170 171 **Funding**

172 All will be paid for by dues – straight up dues. The dues for a congregation will be \$___ per
173 covenant member per year. These dues will provide the funds for the National Covenant
174 Administrative Offices. The dues for an ordained pastor will be \$___ per year and for certified
175 pastors, \$___ per year. In addition, congregations will provide a \$___ per covenant member
176 to their Presbytery to fund the meetings and coordinated ministry of their Presbytery. Any
177 additional funding for coordinated ministry is strictly voluntary.

178

179 **Inclusive Not Exclusive Connection**

180 Finally, to get this all going, we need to provide, a means of “dual citizenship.” For some this
181 would be a temporary or transitional reality. For others, it would be the new state of things. A
182 church or pastor can be a covenant member of NCPC while still also being a member of another
183 denomination. While the other denomination might not be so willing, we want to welcome all
184 those who can truly affirm the National Covenant with us, and provide real support and
185 connection. The other denominational affiliation might mandate participation in their pension
186 plan, etc, but NCPC will allow pastors and congregations to choose. Aside from the National
187 Covenant, we want to facilitate connection, not mandate it. In the end, you cannot compromise
188 or “scruple” on essentials (they are essential!) and you need not worry on the non-essentials. If a
189 person or congregation no longer can affirm the “distinctives” of a particular branch, one would
190 hope they would form (or find) another branch with different distinctives but the same essentials.
191 Toward that end, NCPC would help foster such new branches. We should stop trying to change
192 each other’s minds about things we deem non-essential and respect each other’s distinctives. If
193 we change our position, then switch to another branch, don’t keep fighting.

194

195 **In Conclusion**

196 These ideas are offered to help in the current conversation about how we might move forward as
197 a healthier and less contentious church in the 21st Century. We invite your comments and your
198 ideas. These ideas are offered respectfully and we ask that you comment on them respectfully.
199 Name calling and derogatory remarks will not be responded to. Otherwise, we welcome your
200 input. For more information you can see a draft constitution on this website.

201

202 We have left the line numbers for easier reference to specific parts of this document and the
203 proposed constitution.

204

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206 Presbyterian Church, Houston, Texas.