



Did you know our church has a constitution? Two books together compose the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA: The *Book of Order* and the *Book of Confessions*. The *Book of Order* provides us with our rules of governance that our Session, our Board of Deacons, and I follow as we exercise leadership. It also includes the Directory of Worship to guide me and our Session as we plan and lead worship services.

The *Book of Confessions* is the more important book. It contains 11 different statements written over a span of almost 2,000 years which try to capture in words what we believe as we profess our faith in Jesus Christ.

The oldest Confession is the Apostles' Creed, which we use regularly in worship. In spite of its name, the original Apostles did not write it; its earliest form dates from about 150 AD and was probably written not as a Creed, but simply as words for those about to be baptized to say. It follows a Trinitarian outline, confessing faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Creed underwent numerous changes over the next few centuries; the version we use dates from the 8th century.

The Nicene Creed came next, dating from the Council of Nicae, held in 325, where leaders of the church finally agreed that Jesus Christ was, "Fully Human, Fully God". Prior to that, church leaders had debated whether Jesus was "of one substance" with God as they argued over how Jesus could be both the Son of God and God incarnate.

The Reformation in the 16th century produced the next three Statements: The Scots Confession, The Heidelberg Catechism, and the Second Helvetic Confession. These three statements are much more detailed than the Creeds as Reformers sought to distinguish Reformed Theology from that of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, and its Larger and Shorter Catechisms, provided the Presbyterian Church's principal theological framework from its adoption in the mid-17th century up through the middle years of the 20th century. Some of our long-time members may remember having to memorize at least part of the Shorter Catechism in Sunday School!

The final three Statements are from the 20th century: The Theological Declaration of Barmen, written under the shadow of the growing Nazi threat in Germany in the early 1930s; the Confession of 1967, written in response to the turmoil that shook our country during the Vietnam era; and then finally, the Brief Statement of Faith, written to mark the joining together of the Northern and Southern branches of the Presbyterian Church after more than a century of separation since the

bitter dispute over slavery fractured the church in 1859.

We regularly use the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Brief Statement in worship, especially when we celebrate a Sacrament or receive new members into our congregation. We turn to the other creeds regularly in Bible Study and other classes to help us understand complex theological questions. It is the Confession of 1967, for example, that helps us to understand that we do not read the Bible literally, but rather as the inspired Word of God. The Statements

that date back to the Reformation articulate our understanding of our Sacraments. There is much, of course, that is dated, but the Statements themselves are still sound and are wonderful teaching tools.

The next time we “say what we believe” using an affirmation of faith, I encourage you to pay attention to the words and think about what you are saying. Ask me questions about anything that sounds confusing! And remember that as we affirm our faith, we join with the entire community of saints who follow our Lord Jesus Christ.