

Constitutional Musing - # 20 Unicameral Boards

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BACKGROUND

Technically, there is no bicameral or tricameral system possible in the Presbyterian Church. A board of trustees or a diaconate has never been a decision making “house”. The Presbyterian system has always been a “unicameral” system because only the session governs. That history is clear from G-6.0404¹ and G-7.0401².

There is often confusion over the functions of the office of deacon. In the PCUS, deacons could have “compassion functions” (*Book of Church Order*, 12-2) and/or property management functions (*Book of Church Order*, 12-2 & 12-3). In practice the property management functions often overshadowed the compassion functions. In the UPCUSA the deacons exercised almost exclusively compassion functions. When the session did not directly manage the property, that responsibility was normally vested in a separate board of trustees.

In our current system, all three boards may be present, but only a session is required by the Form of Government. Some time ago the Constitutional Services Department sent out a request seeking input regarding the experiences of congregations that had gone from bicameral or tricameral to a unicameral. What follows is a compilation and distillation of those responses.

ADVANTAGES to adopting a unicameral system

- The functions of deacons and trustees are kept closely related to the central concerns of the congregation.
- The avoidance of a sense of hierarchy results in better Christian fellowship.
- The potential conflict between session and deacons/trustees in pursuing divergent visions of the church’s mission is alleviated.
- The sense of deacons being “second class” officers or offices that are merely a “stepping stone” to session (i.e. a training ground) is eliminated.
- Organizationally, one body is simpler, requiring fewer officers, which often will alleviate the difficulty of coming up with a full slate of sometimes scarce human resources (especially in smaller congregations).
- Strong committee structure is required to work efficiently, so often the session is able to utilize the gifts and talents of persons not willing to serve as officers (since it is sometimes easier to recruit committee members than officers).
- Paradoxically, this sometimes results in expanding the number of church members who are actually involved since session committees take on greater importance.

DISADVANTAGES to adopting a unicameral system

- When merging deacons with session the compassion functions are often lost.
- Persons who are good deacons or trustees are not necessarily good elders.
- Bicameral or tricameral systems best provide for the different roles (i.e. session: internal

affairs, deacons: external, reaching out; trustees: property issues).

PROCESS for converting to unicameral system

- While there appear to be many specific processes that have been utilized, several characteristics seem to be common to successful transitions.
- That the impetus for going unicameral comes from the deacons or trustees themselves.
- That all current deacons/trustees are elected, ordained, and installed to an expanded board (at least temporarily) until terms run out to bring the board to its optimum size.
- Care is taken to fully inform and educate the congregation before they are called upon to vote. (The congregation must vote to approve the change.)
- Agreements need to be carefully written down and bylaws and/or charter checked and perhaps amended, including checking the legal status of the congregation.
- The structure of the new session is designed to assure that deacon/trustee programs and functions are continued and respected. (Careful design of strong broadly representative session committees and their responsibilities is critical.)

Endnotes

1. G-6.0404 Supervised by Session

As the whole church is under the jurisdiction of the session, the board of deacons shall be under its supervision and authority. The records of the board of deacons shall be submitted to the session at least annually and at other times upon the request of the session. The session may void or amend any action of the board of deacons, or direct the board to reconsider such action.

2. G-7.0401 Incorporation and Trustees

Whenever permitted by civil law, each particular church shall cause a corporation to be formed and maintained. Only members on the active roll of the particular church shall be members of the corporation and eligible for election as trustees. The elders in active service in a church who are eligible under the civil law shall, by reason of their office, be the trustees of such corporation, unless the corporation shall determine another method for electing its trustees. Any such alternate method shall provide for a nominating committee elected by the corporation, and for terms for trustees the same as are provided for elders. Any particular church which is not incorporated may select trustees from the members on the active roll of the church. The power and duties of such trustees shall not infringe upon the powers and duties of the session or of the board of deacons. (G-10.0102, G-6.0402)