

**Frequently Asked Questions**  
**Proposed Form of Government**  
September 2009

***Why do we need to change? What's better about the proposed Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government than what we have now?***

The current Form of Government has served the church ably over the past quarter century. The bedrock historic principles of Presbyterian governance will continue to order our lives together today and into the future, just as they have guided those who witnessed before us. At the same time, the world in which we as 21st-century Presbyterians proclaim the gospel is not the world of the 1950s, or even the 1980s. The proposed Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government are intended to help the church better meet the needs of mission in the 21st century.

The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity gathers together in three succinct chapters the historical and theological provisions that have defined, and continue to define, our church life together. Placing this bedrock material into a separate section of the *Book of Order* provides an excellent teaching tool to explain who and what we are.

The proposed new Form of Government reestablishes for the church a Constitution to govern us as the **whole** church. The current Form of Government has evolved over the years from a Constitution into a regulatory manual that attempts to provide a “one size fits all” answer to every situation faced by congregations and presbyteries. The problem with this regulatory approach is that the diverse, multicultural environment in which we do mission – an environment radically different from the 1980s, let alone the 1950s – no longer permits a “one size fits all” approach if we are to do mission effectively. The proposed new Form of Government lifts up the constitutional standards that are essential to our life together, while at the same time empowering councils (governing bodies) at all levels to respond more effectively to the ministry and mission needs that each faces. The proposed new Form of Government is more relevant to the current life of the church and is sufficiently adaptable so as not to require biennial modification.

***How does the proposed new Form of Government help mission?***

Our current regulatory-based way of “doing church” often leads councils to focus on doing things right rather than concentrating on doing the right things. Councils of the church have always sought to witness and serve Jesus Christ in the world. The proposed new Form of Government helps them do just that by focusing on the mission of God and how the church can most effectively participate in that mission in particular contexts and situations.

***How does this proposed Form of Government differ from the draft presented to the 218th General Assembly (2008)?***

In the fall of 2008, the newly reconstituted Form of Government Task Force issued a revised version of what had been presented to the 218th General Assembly. The revised version was

based on the feedback received during the 218th GA, including overtures, advice and counsel memoranda, and comments from the assembly committee. The task force then solicited comments from across the entire church regarding this revised version. The report and recommendations now being submitted by the task force take into account all of the feedback received: comments and suggestions ranging in length from a single paragraph to eighty pages from over 100 sessions, presbyteries, synods, other groups within the church, and individuals. Feedback was also received by task force members during presentations made to various groups.

***What exactly is this new proposed document?***

The proposed new Form of Government embodies the constitutional standards that apply across the entire church in every context. It is expressly **not** a manual of operations, nor does it define required structures and organizations for every council. It retains the essential principles of Presbyterian polity while stopping short of mandating system-wide structures and solutions to implement them.

***How does the task force address an apparent lack of trust in the denomination when it comes to a new Form of Government?***

No Form of Government can by itself create or restore trust within the church. Both the current Form of Government and the proposed new Form of Government recognize that the existence of the church at any level rests on the fellowship of its members and cannot work without trust and love (current G-7.0103; proposed G-1.0102).

Some have expressed concern that the proposed new Form of Government abandons our covenantal polity. In fact, the proposed new Form of Government restores our polity to constitutional levels. Over the past twenty-five years, that covenantal polity has been diminished by constant amendments that impose rules and regulations in the place of constitutional standards.

The task force believes that trust will grow as we as a church determine the ways in which we will be faithful together to our standards. This creation of trust, however, depends not only on the fellowship of people joined together in congregations and councils, but also upon the recognition that each of us is accountable to one another for how we conduct ourselves. Trust can be built only by working together.

***How does the proposed new Form of Government affect the ordination issue?***

The proposed new Form of Government does not change the ordination standards for the whole church. The authority to determine who shall be ordained has always resided in the session and in the presbytery, subject to review by higher governing bodies. The General Assembly's original charge to the task force in 2006 specifically excluded ordination standards (current G-6.0106b) and property trust clause (current G-8.0201) from its work. These paragraphs have been

retained in the proposed new Form of Government as G-2.0104 (ordination standards) and G-4.0203 (church property held in trust).

***Is this proposed new Form of Government local option?***

If “local option” means empowering and enabling sessions and presbyteries to accomplish mission effectively, then, yes, it is local option. If “local option” is a code word for changing or ignoring the denomination’s ordination standards, then, no, it is not local option.

***With so much flexibility in the new Form of Government, will councils have to reinvent all of the procedures?***

Individual governing bodies have always needed to decide how best to fulfill the mission of Jesus Christ within their individual contexts. A presbytery of 5,000 church members will of necessity have a different approach from a presbytery of 25,000. In some cases, the current Form of Government gives precise direction to that response. In other cases, no direction is given. In all cases, the governing body has to decide what response is appropriate. In the proposed new Form of Government, councils are empowered to decide what process will work best to carry out the mission of Jesus Christ and fulfill standards in their contexts. That decision may well be to transfer the process currently in place within the 2009—2011 Form of Government into the council’s manual of operations. But councils also will have the opportunity to rethink and perhaps reinvent procedures that are now problematic or do not serve the council well.

***There seems to be a lack of guidance for the committee on preparation for ministry (CPM) process. Is this true?***

The CPM process as outlined in chapter 14 of the current Form of Government was developed in such a way that it can easily be adopted by a presbytery as its process. The General Assembly provides manuals for CPM and committee on ministry that can be useful for this work. The proposed new Form of Government does not require presbyteries that seldom have candidates to maintain a standing committee.

***What about the committee on representation?***

The new proposed Form of Government strengthens the church’s commitment to inclusiveness and diversity. It does not specify system-wide structures, but instead empowers councils to carry out this constitutional mandate in a way that will be locally effective (see proposed new G-3.0103; F-1.0403). Councils above the session are required to establish an entity that will advocate for diversity in leadership and advise the council regarding the effective implementation of principles of diversity and unity.

***Will an interim pastor or associate pastor be allowed to become the next installed pastor of the congregation?***

The proposed new Form of Government maintains the standards of our polity while making room for adaptability in meeting those standards, allowing councils to determine how best to serve their mission and ministry needs. With regard to the possibility of associate pastors and interim pastors succeeding as the next installed pastor, the clearly expressed standard of proposed G-2.0503a and b is that such succession is prohibited. However, presbyteries are permitted, pursuant to proposed G-2.0503c, to grant particular exception to this standard if the presbytery's mission needs require it and the presbytery approves the specific exception by a three-fourths vote.

***How will accountability be enforced in the new Form of Government?***

The right-of-review of one level of council by a higher level remains part of the Constitution. In addition, as Presbyterians we pledge to be accountable to one another to uphold our constitutional standards.

***What are the long-term benefits in approving this revision?***

Our historic affirmation, "the church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God," has never been more needed than it is today. The church must change and adapt if it is to continue to proclaim God's Word into the 21st century. The proposed Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government provide the polity framework to empower and enable that change and adaptability.

In proclaiming its witness, the church needs ways to effectively explain who we are and what we believe. The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity provides an excellent teaching tool for individuals new to the Presbyterian understandings of our life together. The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and the proposed new Form of Government also provide in the training of those called to ordered ministry a context that is unified and more clearly focused on the core shared values and standards that shape the life and mission of the church.