

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS OF THE FORM OF GOVERNMENT TASK FORCE

December 2007

Who formed the Form of Government Task Force?

The 217th General Assembly (2006) authorized the appointment of a nine-member Form of Government Task Force. The assembly further specified that the task force include at least one clerk of session, one session moderator, one new immigrant pastor, one executive/general presbyter, one stated clerk, one committee on preparation for ministry member/staff, one committee on ministry member/staff, and one member of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution. The members of the task force were appointed by the Moderator of the 217th General Assembly (2006), Joan Gray, and the past two Moderators, Susan Andrews and Rick Ufford-Chase.

What is the task force doing?

The task force was directed by the General Assembly to prepare a revised Form of Government with five specified priorities: 1) to preserve our foundational polity; 2) to focus on providing leadership for congregations as missional communities; 3) to retain the presbytery as the central governmental unit, while providing sufficient authority and flexibility to allow the presbytery to assist congregations in addressing the changing cultural, economic, and societal challenges of today; 4) to provide flexibility at all levels, granting authority while permitting governing bodies to determine what structures are needed to carry out their mission; and 5) to be guided by the principles of discernment recommended by the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church and to incorporate this “new Presbyterian ethos” within the Form of Government.

The task force believes it has carried out the General Assembly’s directive in the two documents that we have now submitted to the 218th General Assembly for its approval in June 2008: “The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity” and the “Form of Government,” both of which are posted on this Web site.

What is missional polity?

Missional polity reflects the understanding that the church exists not so much to do “mission work” as to be an expression of God’s Word in every place, time, and culture in which the church finds itself. Mission is not what the church *does*; it is what the church *is*. Missional polity grows out of the reality that Christianity is no longer a dominant, or even a majority, voice in American culture, which in turn means the church must operate differently today than it did in the 1950s and 1960s. Missional polity seeks to create a governing structure for the PC(USA) that will enable and empower congregations, presbyteries, and synods, in proclaiming the gospel, to react and respond to the particular exigencies of their local situations. It is important to recognize that missional polity is

- biblical, with explicit biblical foundations for what we believe about the church;

- historical, acknowledging and recognizing the history and struggles of those who have gone before us;
- contextual, recognizing that the church is not an abstract entity but exists and functions in specific settings;
- eschatological, being convinced that the church is moving toward God’s promised new creation and should bear witness to that new reality in all that it does; and
- practical, in that it can be used effectively by all segments of the PC(USA).

Why do we need a new Form of Government?

As a church, we affirm, “ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda,” that is, “the church reformed, always to be reformed.” Part of that ongoing reformation involves taking a fresh look at our polity to make sure it enables us to witness to God’s Word as effectively as possible. Over the past twenty or so years, the Form of Government has gradually morphed from what it was intended to be – a constitutional document – to a regulatory primer, a manual of operations for how *every* session, *every* presbytery, *every* synod, must operate. As it is now, the Form of Government attempts to impose “one size fits all” rules and regulations on all congregations, presbyteries, and synods, even though they don’t all face the same situations and issues. The Form of Government we are proposing is what we believe it was always intended to be: a *constitution*, a document that lays out the overarching structure and standards that govern how we live together in the PC(USA), while at the same time allowing congregations, presbyteries, and synods to proclaim God’s Word in the way that is most effective in their particular corner of Christ’s kingdom.

Doesn’t the PC(USA) have more important issues?

The PC(USA), as a Christian community of faith, has one issue: to proclaim the Word of God. Doing that as effectively as possible in a time and culture that are increasingly reluctant to hear that Word requires a polity that empowers us, rather than constrains us. Toward that end, the Form of Government we propose seeks more to describe than to proscribe, seeks more to define function than to mandate structure, and seeks to encourage representative bodies at every level to adopt such processes and rules that will best serve the mission before them. Creating a polity that enables us to be more effective disciples therefore has to be an important issue.

Doesn’t flexibility mean local option?

At this time within the PC(USA), the words “local option” have become code for allowing sessions and presbyteries to determine individually whether to permit the ordination and installation of sexually active gays and lesbians. One of the two provisions within the current Form of Government that the task force was specifically precluded by the General Assembly from considering or changing was G-6.0106(b) (the other being G-8.0201, the property clause). Thus, this proposed Form of Government does not change in any way the standards regarding the ordination of gay and lesbian persons.

Our proposal does seek to give synods, presbyteries, and sessions the flexibility to respond and adapt to the particular situation in which they find themselves. For example, seeking to faithfully witness to God's Word in New York City Presbytery requires different strategies and approaches than is the case in Glacier Presbytery. Certainly there are overarching standards that will apply equally in New York City Presbytery and Glacier Presbytery, and that is what the proposed new Form of Government seeks to put into place. But the proposed new Form of Government also acknowledges that a constitutional document should not try to provide rules and structures that will be equally effective in New York City Presbytery and Glacier Presbytery.

The mandate the task force was given by the General Assembly stressed the need for flexibility – “provide flexibility at all levels.” We have sought to do just that. It is our hope, and prayer, that the PC(USA) is not so caught up in the issues regarding gay and lesbian ordination that we ignore the very present realities facing our congregations, presbyteries, and synods.

Why did the task force take out all the committees?

One of the main goals of the task force is to reclaim the Form of Government as a constitution – as a charter that proclaims the vision and principles that make us who we are as the PC(USA). A love of committees may be ingrained in every Presbyterian, but specifying particular committees is not the task of a constitution. How a presbytery or session chooses to carry out a particular constitutional mandate should be the prerogative of that presbytery or session, always recognizing, however, that each presbytery or session must adhere to the constitutional standards and must establish a defined set of procedures that it will follow. Just as the U.S. Constitution does not specify particular committees to carry out particular functions, so too the Constitution of the PC(USA) should not define particular committees. The Constitution – including the Form of Government – should set out standards and functions. Each session or presbytery can then determine how it can best carry out those standards and functions.

Why do we have a separate Foundations of Presbyterian Polity?

The task force believes that our foundational principles – as currently contained in the first four chapters of the existing Form of Government – are of sufficient importance to warrant setting them apart in a discrete section of the *Book of Order*. This separation also affirms and emphasizes that these foundational principles apply not just to the Form of Government, but to the entire *Book of Order*.

Why not simply retain the current first four chapters of the Book of Order as the foundational principles?

Much of the text of the existing first four chapters of the current *Book of Order* is contained within the proposed Foundations of Presbyterian Polity. Of the sixty-seven paragraphs in the current G-1.000 through G-4.000, sixty-three have been brought over into the proposed Foundations.

While retaining much of the content of the current first four chapters, the Foundations improves, we believe, the organization, logic, and flow of our foundational principles. Our proposal gathers the explicitly theological and ecclesiological claims together in F-1.00, “The Mission of the Church,” just as it gathers together the material dealing with basic principles of polity and government into F-3.00, “Principles of Order and Government.”

Why eliminate inactive members?

We believe the concept of “inactive member” to be antithetical to God’s call to participation in the church. When you join the church, you commit yourself to its support and to the disciplines of worship, study, service, and prayer. In fact, the proposed Form of Government includes a new sentence (G-1.0403b) emphasizing the covenant obligations of members: “Members shall regularly review and evaluate the integrity with which they are involved in the ministry of the church and consider ways in which their participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.”

“Inactive member” is, in our view, bureaucratic and unhelpful to our mission to be faithful disciples.

Why bring back the titles “ruling elder” and “teaching elder”?

These terms – previously used in both the Presbyterian Church in the United States and the United Presbyterian Church of North America – highlight the fact that Presbyterian polity values both elders and ministers of the Word and Sacrament as presbyters who share equally in carrying out the responsibility for the health and well-being of the church. The terms “ruling” and “teaching” also highlight vital functions. “Ruling” does not mean “ruling over” or “governing,” but “measuring.” The ruling elders are those who measure the faithfulness of the congregation in their charge. “Teaching” reminds us that the central work of the minister of the Word and Sacrament is to teach the faith – in classes, in preaching, in leading worship, in administering the Sacraments, in pastoral care, and in virtually all aspects of congregational life.

What happened to the current G-6.0106?

The directive of the 217th General Assembly (2006) authorizing the revision of the Form of Government specified that the current G-6.0106 not be altered. Accordingly, the language of the current G-6.0106 is preserved intact in the proposed G-2.0103.

What about the property clause?

The General Assembly similarly mandated that the text of the current G-8.0201 not be included in the revision process. It is found in the proposed Form of Government at G-4.0203.

What is the Advisory Handbook for Councils?

Just because the proposed Form of Government eliminates most rules, processes, and committees doesn't mean they won't exist. Proposed G-3.0107 provides that each council – session, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly – “shall develop a manual of administrative operations that will specify the form and guide the work of mission in that body.” Our Advisory Handbook for Councils identifies for sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly the proposed constitutional provisions calling for the establishment of rules and procedures by each of those bodies. Each manual must adhere to the constitutional standards set forth in the Form of Government. But, operating within those overarching constitutional standards, each session, presbytery, and synod is enabled and empowered to adopt the processes and rules that are most effective where it is located.

Why “councils” and not “governing bodies”?

The first meeting of Christians, as recorded for us in Acts 15, was the Council at Jerusalem. From that time forward, council was the term used to refer to representative assemblies that seek to order the faith and life of the church. In reclaiming the use of this term rather than governing body as a general descriptor for sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly, the task force hopes to diminish the sense that serving in the forums of church leadership is equivalent to serving on a board of directors of a non-profit organization, and to enhance the sense that such service is a calling to the ministry of spiritual discernment and guidance.