

Guidelines for Group Response

Introduction

Rationale for Changing the Form of Government

The call to revise the constitution came from recognition that while the purpose of the Form of Government is to provide standards for the whole church it has become a regulatory manual placing impractical limitations on the missional work of sessions and higher governing bodies. Giving freedom to governing bodies while maintaining denominational standards challenges us to focus on what principles of governance are clearly foundational principles, principles on which we all may stand as we respond to the call of the triune God, whom alone we worship and serve. This revision is designed to provide a constitution for the whole Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as a community of witness called into being and equipped by God and sent into the world to testify to and participate in Christ's work. The polity provides flexibility for mission in changing and variable contexts while setting standards for the whole church.

A task force was directed by the 217th General Assembly (2006) to prepare a revised Form of Government. This document was considered by the 218th General Assembly (2008), which took the following action:

[That there be] a period of consultation and study with churches and presbyteries through a system or systems designed and implemented by the Form of Government Task Force and members of the 218th General Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions. The participation of every presbytery in the period of consultation and study will be strongly urged. New members of this expanded task force are to be chosen from the 218th General Assembly (2008) Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions by the Moderator of the 218th General Assembly (2008), in consultation with the moderator and vice moderator of the 218th General Assembly (2008) Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions.

The new task force will revise the Form of Government Task Force Report, taking into account the concerns and suggestions gleaned from the consultation and study process. The guidance of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution, the overtures, and the testimony received by the 218th General Assembly (2008) Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions and the committee's comments are referred to the task force for serious and studied consideration.

The revised report of the Form of Government task force is to be submitted to the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly no later than October 15, 2009, for distribution to the church at large no later than January 15, 2010, for consideration by the 219th General Assembly (2010).

The Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions submits the following unedited comments, from subcommittees of the committee, for consideration in the continuing study and revision of the Form of Government. [That list is attached to this guide.]

Sessions and presbyteries are specifically being asked to study and respond by an action of the 218th General Assembly (2008). Your participation is vital if your views are to be heard.

Invitation to Study and Respond

This study guide is designed to help you provide the feedback that the Form of Government Task Force needs to fulfill its mandate from the 218th General Assembly (2008). The 218th General Assembly (2008) strongly urges your participation in this process. This is one way to engage in this study, but your task force looks forward to receiving your feedback through whatever process you deem most appropriate for this study in your context. Only responses submitted by governing bodies of the church will be considered in preparing the task force report to the 219th General Assembly (2010).

This guide assumes that members of your group will have completed the personal preparation recommended as part of this process prior to group discussion and will each have a copy of the most current draft of the proposed Form of Government. If the members of your group have not done that personal preparation, we encourage the addition of time for reading the “What Is Missional Ecclesiology?” paper before initiating the group discussion.

Recommended Study and Response Process

Study Resources. The list of comments provided by the Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions, the text of the proposed Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government, and other resources mentioned in this study are available online at the following address: <http://www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment>. We recommend that you print out these materials for use in your study. Paper copies are available upon request from the Office of the General Assembly. Contact Joanne Green, 888-728-7228, extension 5808.

Regarding Group Size. If this study is being done in a small existing group (of 10–12 persons), such as a session, a committee, or governing body council, this activity may work for the whole group. Larger groups or governing bodies will want to consider dividing into smaller groups for discussion and then collecting and sharing the combined small group responses with the task force.

Responding to the Task Force. Please send your responses, **by June 30, 2009**, to the Web addresses listed below. Thank you for your time and responses.

The comment form for the Foundations for Presbyterian Polity Draft can be found at <http://65.173.210.88/Survey.aspx?s=8e1bb823aa8f41caa6fac256b775d9e7&invitationID=9373>.

The comment form for the Form of Government draft can be found at <http://65.173.210.88/Survey.aspx?s=3f2d108e0b8b49be8e322de19690b8c5&invitationID=9372>.

Process:

I. To begin (10–15 minutes)

Share your reflections on how the Form of Government is an important asset to the church’s mission in your context. (In small groups of 3–5 persons. This is intended to be a contextualizing experience, not necessarily something to be reported.)

Regarding the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity (25–60 minutes)

1. Do these chapters provide a foundation on which the other parts of the Form of Government rest?
2. Can you imagine using the Foundations section in your ministry context and if so how?
3. Does the revised Foundations section provide to church officers the appropriate basis for understanding the denomination's polity?
4. From your reading of the comments section and your individual questions and comments, are there places where your group wants to offer a suggestion for revision?
5. Do you believe that it would be helpful to the church to replace the first four chapters of the current Form of Government with the three chapters of the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity?

Regarding the Form of Government (25–60 minutes)

General questions to consider:

1. Where do you see the proposed Form of Government as an asset to mission in your context? How would you compare it with the usefulness of the current Form of Government?
2. Has the proposed Form of Government addressed impediments to mission in your context and if so where?
3. How do you see the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity lived out in the parts of the Form of Government that especially relate to mission in your context?
4. Respond to any or all of the specific questions listed below for your context.
5. From your reading of the comments section and your individual questions and comments, are there places where your group wants to offer a suggestion for revision?
6. Does the “Advisory Handbook for Councils for the Development of Policies and Procedures Required by the Form of Government,” the final section of the task force report to the 218th General Assembly (2008), provide a helpful resource for identifying, reviewing, and developing the required policies for your context? If not, what additional assistance would be helpful?

Questions related to specific ministry contexts:

For Sessions:

1. Regarding G-1.04. The proposed Form of Government eliminates “Inactive” as a category of membership (although it may, of course, still define the behavior of a member) as well as the detailed process for removing a member from the rolls. How do you feel about this change?
2. Regarding G-1.0402. If the proposed Form of Government is approved, how would your session likely deal with the review of members and the maintenance of the rolls? Note

that G-1.0304b calls on individual members to evaluate their own involvement in the ministry of the church. How would you facilitate that process?

3. Regarding G-2.00. The proposed Form of Government preserves the changes already approved in the current Chapter 14 and seeks to provide denominational standards while allowing as much flexibility as possible for sessions and presbyteries to prepare and order those ordained to ministry in the church. It does not assume that current presbytery committee structure of COM and CPM nor does it preclude the possibility of a presbytery continuing those committees. Review the relevant sections of G-2.00 for the session and congregation. What concerns or recommendations do you have for the task force? Consider particularly Sections 2.01, 2.02, 2.03, 2.04, 2.06, 2.07, 2.09, and 2.10.
4. Regarding G-3.0107. Does the proposed language relating to the responsibility of presbyteries to raise their own funding for mission alter your view of a congregation's responsibility to share in the stewardship of mission funding through what is currently known as per capita?
5. Regarding G-2.0103 and G-4.0203. The 217th General Assembly (2006) directed that these sections remain unchanged.

For Presbyteries:

1. Regarding G-3.0104. Share your thoughts on the pros and cons of establishing committees on representation in every presbytery. Is this requirement currently a helpful resource for achieving fair and equitable representation in your presbytery, and do you feel a committee is necessary to enforce accountability for the diversity and inclusiveness principle in F-3.0303? Are there other places in the life of your presbytery where this responsibility might be lodged so as to be sure that nominations to leadership represent the diversity of the membership of the presbytery and if so, where?
2. Regarding G-3.0107. Discuss the options for mission funding. Does your presbytery apportion *per capita* contributions? How would your mission funding pattern be impacted by this proposed paragraph?
3. Regarding G-3.0301. Consider together whether this way of describing the responsibilities of the presbytery aids your understanding of how each function contributes to the mission of the church in your presbytery.
4. Regarding G-2.0103 and G-4.0203. The 217th General Assembly (2006) directed that these sections remain unchanged.

Especially for COM and CPM:

5. Regarding G-3.0308. The Form of Government Task Force was charged to provide for flexibility for presbyteries of all sizes to be able to apply the standards of the denomination in ways appropriate to their context. For that reason, this paragraph describes the functions of the committee on ministry (COM) and the committee on preparation for ministry (CPM) without specifying or prohibiting the existence of such committees. Discuss together the most appropriate way of providing for these functions in your context. Does the fact that this constitution provides for function and not for

mandatory committees raise concern for your group? Will your presbytery want to mandate the committees using the handbooks provided by Church Leadership Connections? Will your presbytery want to request amendment of the report to include these committees?

6. Regarding G-2.00. The proposed Form of Government preserves the changes already approved in the current Chapter 14. Review the relevant sections of G-2.00 for your committee. What concerns or recommendations do you have for the task force? COMs should consider particularly Sections 2.03, 2.05, 2.06, 2.07, 2.08, 2.09, and 2.10. CPMs should consider particularly Sections 2.04 and 2.05.
7. Specifically regarding G-2.0302. The requirement that to be valid a ministry must include proclamation of the Word and administration of the Sacraments has been removed. Do you agree with that decision?
8. Specifically regarding G-2.0303 a and b. In the current draft, the provisions regarding the possibility of an associate pastor or a person in a temporary pastoral relationship becoming the installed pastor has been changed to eliminate that possibility. Do you agree with this change and with the prohibition or would you prefer the Form of Government to permit greater flexibility?

For Synods:

1. Regarding G-3.0104. Share your thoughts on the pros and cons of establishing committees on representation in every synod. Is this requirement currently a helpful resource for achieving fair and equitable representation in your synod? Are there other places in the life of your synod where this responsibility might be lodged so as to be sure that nominations to leadership represent the diversity of the membership of the synod and if so, where?
2. Regarding 3.0107 and 3.0110. Because the proposed Form of Government does not require a common organizational structure across councils, discuss how the potential lack of consistency in the names of the committees and other structures at presbytery, synod, and General Assembly level would your synod. How might you choose to organize your synod differently if there were no constitutional requirements?
3. Regarding G-3.0107. Discuss the options for mission funding. Does your synod apportion *per capita* contributions? How would your mission funding pattern be impacted by this proposed paragraph?
4. Regarding G-3.0401. Consider together whether this way of describing the responsibilities of the synod aids your understanding of how each function contributes to the mission of the church in your synod.
5. Regarding G-3.0404. Discuss your reactions to this provision. Acknowledging that synods vary widely across the denomination now, including some that could be described as having “reduced functions,” does this provision provide useful flexibility?

For General Assembly (GAC and OGA and related bodies, not the biennial meetings):

1. Regarding G-3.0104. Share your thoughts on the pros and cons of establishing committees on representation at every level beyond the session. Is this requirement currently a helpful resource for achieving fair and equitable representation in General Assembly units and committees? Are there other places in the life of General Assembly where this responsibility might be lodged so as to be sure that nominations to leadership represent the diversity of the membership of the church and if so, where?
2. Regarding 3.0107 and 3.0110. Because the proposed Form of Government does not require a common organizational structure across councils, discuss how the potential lack of consistency in the names of the committees and other structures at presbytery, synod, and General Assembly level would affect the General Assembly. How might you propose to organize General Assembly differently if there were no constitutional requirements?
3. Regarding G-3.0107. Discuss the options for mission funding. How would your mission funding pattern be impacted by this proposed paragraph?
4. Regarding G-3.0501. Consider together whether this way of describing the responsibilities of the General Assembly aids your understanding of how each function contributes to the mission of the church at this level.