

REVISED FORM OF GOVERNMENT—A STUDY OUTLINE FOR SESSIONS

Form of Government Task Force

Background Information

The 217th General Assembly (2006) authorized the appointment of a nine-member Form of Government Task Force 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.

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*. 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 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Constitution—which includes the Form of Government—should set out standards and functions. 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.

As a task force, we have spent the past year thinking, and praying, about how our polity can help us be more effective disciples of Christ in this time and place. But we don’t pretend to have all the answers. *We need your help*. The sessions of our congregations are the real experts on the polity that will serve to strengthen the ministry of those congregations. The process that follows will take about an hour of preparation before a session meeting and an hour of conversation during the meeting. The task force members want to hear what you think about the draft that is before you for study and what, if any, changes you would suggest be made before the final draft goes to the 218th General Assembly (2008) next June.

Thank you in advance for your help with the task to which we have been commissioned.

The Form of Government Task Force

Elders Cynthia J. Bolbach and Sharon M. Davison, Co-Moderators
Elder Diana J. Barber, Rev. Gemechisa Guja, Rev. Paul K. Hooker, Rev. James H.Y. Kim, Rev. Neal E. Lloyd, Rev. Paige M. McRight, Rev. Stephen W. Smith

PREPARATION

In preparation for your session's study:

Please view the report of the Form of Government Task Force online at www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment. We hope you will read all of the revised Form of Government and the background information. For this study, it will be most important for you to be familiar with:

1. Foundations of Presbyterian Polity
2. Form of Government
 - Chapter 1
 - Chapter 2
 - Chapter 3
3. Advisory Handbook for Councils
4. Frequently Asked Questions

As you read, keep in mind these questions:

- How does this section help me think about church as the agent of God's mission?
- Can I find here a constitutional framework for the church's life?
- What insights do I gain about the life of the congregation from reading this material?
- What seems to be missing or unclear?

CONVERSATION

1. Section G-1.0101 of the proposed revised Form of Government begins describing the government of the church by describing the life of a congregation in this way:

The congregation is the church engaged in mission in its particular context.

Through the congregation God's people carry out their ministries of proclamation, sharing the Sacraments, and living in covenant life with God and each other. In the life of the congregation, individual believers are equipped for their ministry of witness to the love and grace of God in and for the world. The congregation reaches out to people, communities, and the world to share the good news of Jesus Christ, to gather for worship, to offer care and nurture to God's children, to speak for social justice and righteousness, to bear witness to the truth and to the reign of God that is coming into the world.

How do you see this definition inspiring and challenging the life of your congregation to follow God's call for your life and ministry?

2. Sections G-1.0301–.0303 describes the meaning of membership in a congregation. Does this section effectively say that the response to God's saving grace in Jesus Christ is a life lived in acceptance of Christ's Lordship over all of life? Could it be useful for new member orientation?

3. Chapter Two defines “ordered ministries” in the church. The current *Book of Order* refers to these as “officers.” The task force has chosen the phrase “ordered ministries” to lift up the fact that God gives the church these functions to order its life so that “the ministry of the whole people of God may flourish”(G-2.0102). The ordered ministries are those of deacon, ruling elder, and teaching elder (also called minister of Word and Sacrament).

As you read G-2.0101–G-2.0104, what do you notice about the relationship of the ministry of members and of ordered ministers to the ministry of Christ? What do you notice about the gifts and qualifications expected of those called to ordered ministries and about their responsibilities?

4. How can the material in G-2.0101–G-2.0104 and the material in G-2.0201–G-2.0207 be useful for preparation for these ministries and for your session’s use in examining those called to ordered ministries?

5. Chapter Three defines the work of “councils” of the church. These bodies are called “governing bodies” in the current *Book of Order* and have previously been called “judicatories” and “courts.” The task force is reclaiming the ancient title of councils to help us remember that the work of the church councils is focused on the calling of congregations to be the concrete and visible sign of God’s presence and purpose in the world. As you look at G-3.0101–G-3.0103, do these paragraphs describe well the value of the mutual responsibilities we share in the ordering of the church’s life?

6. Sessions have responsibility to govern and guide the witness of congregations. Section G-3.0201 defines the responsibilities of the session in terms of the notes of the Reformed church: to “provide that the Word is truly proclaimed and heard,” to “provide that the Sacraments are rightly administered,” and to “nurture the covenant community through the upright ministry of ecclesiastical discipline.” In the current *Book of Order*, these responsibilities are listed in G-10.0102 as Items a. through s. Is it helpful to your understanding of your responsibilities as a session to see them organized in this way?

7. Separating The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity as the first section of a four-section *Book of Order* affirms and emphasizes that these foundational principles apply not just to the Form of Government, but to the entire *Book of Order*. This separate section includes almost all of the material in the current four chapters of the *Book of Order* reworked and reorganized for a logical flow into three chapters: “The Mission of the Church,” “The Church and Its Confessions,” and “Principles of Order and Government.” As you consider these three chapters together, can you find the principles of Presbyterian polity that undergird your understanding of our church? Can you see this section as useful in the life of your congregation? If so, how?

8. Just because the proposed Form of Government eliminates most rules, processes, and committees doesn’t mean that they won’t exist. Proposed G-3.0107 provides that each council—session, presbytery, synod—“shall develop a manual of administrative operations that will specify the form and guide the work of mission in that body.” As you review the section of the Advisory Handbook that is for sessions, have you already established policies as a session that guide your leadership of the congregation? What new policies will you need to consider, if any? Is this format helpful to you for that work?

REPORTING

Following the session’s study, the task force requests that the clerk of session report the results of your discussion online at www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment or by sending a written report to Form of Government Task Force, Research Services, Room 1007A, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202.