

PC(USA) Structure and Governing Bodies

The governing bodies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are: sessions, presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly. They are described below. All references in parentheses are to paragraphs in the Book of Order, the Constitution of the church. (G-9.0101)



Session

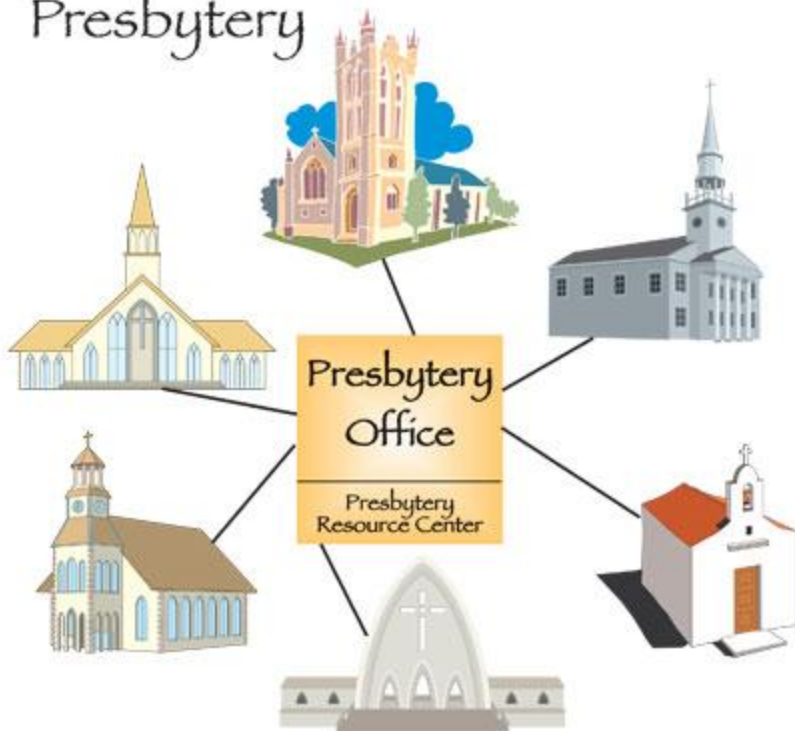
The session governs a particular congregation. It is made up of elders elected by the congregation, plus all the installed pastors on the staff, including pastors, co-pastors, and associate pastors. (G-10.0101)

The session is responsible for all decisions regarding the program and policies of its congregation, except for the two powers reserved for the congregation: the election of officers, including the pastoral staff, and the buying, selling, and/or mortgaging of church property. The constitution spells out 19 specific duties for the session. (G-10.0102, G-7.0304)

The session is composed of elders elected for specific terms of service as well as the installed pastor(s) and associate pastor(s). It is presided over by the moderator, who is the pastor or a minister member of the Presbytery when the pastor is not available. (G-10.0101, G-10.0103, G-14.0201)

The session elects its own clerk, who is called "Clerk of the Session." The clerk of the session must be an elder, but not necessarily one serving currently on the session. The session elects the clerk for such term as it shall determine. The clerk of the session has many duties regarding the records of the church, and also serves as secretary of meetings of the congregation. (G-9.0203, G-10.0300)

Presbytery



Presbytery

The presbytery is the governing body that has jurisdiction over the sessions of all Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations within its bounds and all its minister members. It is composed of "all the churches and ministers of the Word and Sacrament within a certain district". (G-11.0101)

When the presbytery meets, its members include:

- all ministers of the Word and Sacrament who are members of the presbytery,
- all elders commissioned by their sessions to attend that meeting
- any elder elected moderator of the presbytery for the duration of his or her term.

(G-11.0101)

The Constitution spells out 26 specific responsibilities of the presbytery that fall into three general categories: those relating to congregations, those relating to ministers of the Word and Sacrament, and those relating to synod and the General Assembly.

(G-11.0103)

Responsibilities to Congregations

The presbytery has the power to organize new congregations, to merge or to divide congregations, to dismiss a congregation to another denomination or dissolve a congregation, all this being done in consultation with the members of the congregation involved. (G-11.0103)

When a church is without a pastor, the presbytery takes special oversight of that church, appointing a moderator for the session, providing for the pulpit to be supplied, and doing other things necessary in the absence of an installed pastor. The presbytery

also hears and acts on requests from congregations for waivers relating to electing both women and men as officers and relating to the rotation of officers. (G-14.0202)

Responsibilities to Ministers of the Word and Sacrament

The presbytery has the power to "ordain, receive, dismiss, install, remove, and discipline ministers." It is the prerogative of the presbytery both to establish the relationship between a congregation and a minister and to dissolve a relationship when necessary. Establishing a relationship ordinarily means approving the call of the congregation to that particular minister to be its pastor and installing the pastor in that church. Before the presbytery approves the call to a particular minister, it hears the recommendations of the committee on ministry about its study and conclusions regarding the call. (G-11.0103, G-11.0502, G-14.0509)

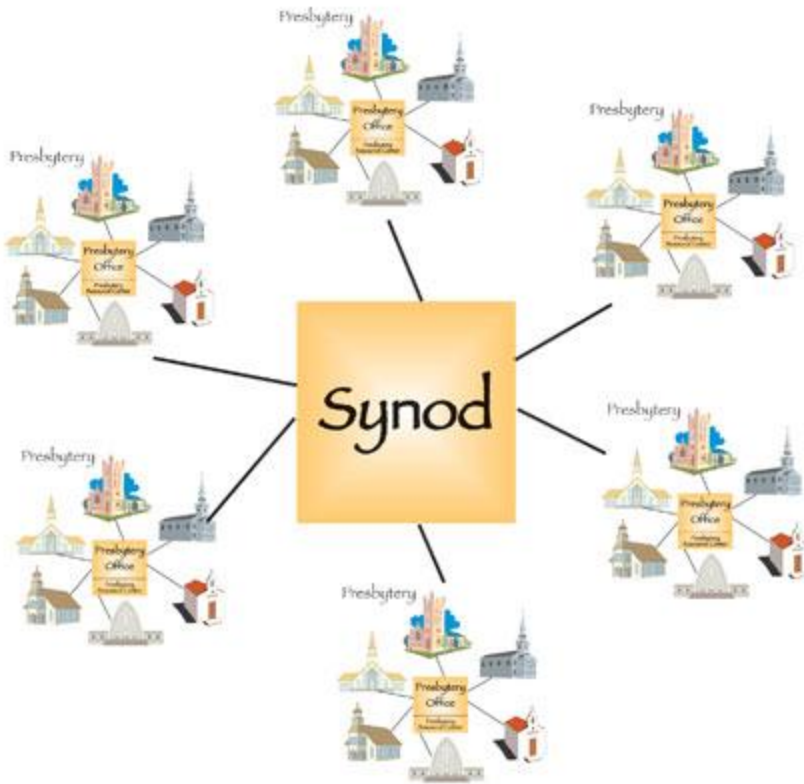
For persons to become ministers of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), they must first complete a period of candidacy, which includes supervision of the candidates' education and practice of ministry for a period of two years. The committee on preparation for ministry oversees this whole area of the Presbytery's responsibility. (G-14.0300)

Not all ministers are pastors of churches. The presbytery has responsibility for oversight of those ministers who work in other areas of ministry, such as teachers, evangelists, administrators, and in other forms of ministry recognized as appropriate by the presbytery. (G-11.0103)

Responsibilities to Synod and General Assembly

The presbytery participates in the deliberations of synod and of the General Assembly by electing commissioners to serve as members of these governing bodies at their meetings. It also hears and receives reports from the commissioners when they return from the meetings. Further, the Book of Order specifies that the presbytery is responsible for insuring that the orders of these governing bodies are carried out within the presbytery. (G-11.0103)

The presbytery has the right and the responsibility to propose to the synod or the General Assembly "such measures as may be of common concern to the mission of the whole church." This is generally accomplished through an "overture," which is a written concern adopted by the presbytery and sent to the synod or General Assembly for consideration. (G-11.0103)



Synod

The synod is the governing body that has oversight of the life and mission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) within a specific geographic region that includes at least three presbyteries. It must meet at least once every two years. It can establish a council to take care of things that arise between meetings.

(G-12.0101, G-12.0102)

Synods are regional in nature, enabling the presbyteries within their region to discover, design,

and implement ministries that are common to the area. Depending on a number of things, including population and the number of churches in the region, a synod's boundaries may be one or more states. Each synod must be composed of at least three presbyteries. When the synod meets, its members include an equal number of ministers and elders elected by its presbyteries. (G-12.0101)

The Constitution spells out 20 specific responsibilities of the synod that fall into two general categories: those relating to its member presbyteries and those relating to the General Assembly. (G-12.0102)

Responsibilities to the Presbyteries

The synod has the power to "organize new presbyteries and to divide, unite, or otherwise combine presbyteries or portions of presbyteries previously existing." This includes the opportunity to organize non-geographic presbyteries to serve the needs of racial ethnic or immigrant congregations. (G-12.0102)

The synod has the responsibility "to provide services and programs for presbyteries, sessions, congregations, and members within its area that can be performed more effectively from a broad regional base." It is the synod's right and duty to provide

programs that will help its presbyteries do ministries together that would be difficult or impossible to do alone. (G-12.0102)

Synods are also charged to "develop and provide resources as needed to facilitate the mission of its presbyteries.." Synods will often offer programs that facilitate leadership training, campus ministry, or other kinds of ministry that transcend the bounds of their presbyteries. (G-12.0102)

Responsibilities to the General Assembly

The synod has limited responsibilities with regard to the General Assembly. They do not elect commissioners to the General Assembly, for instance. However, synods are charged with seeing that the orders of the General Assembly are communicated and carried out within the synod.

Synods, like presbyteries, are responsible for proposing to the General Assembly "such measures that may be of common concern to the mission of the whole church." This responsibility enables the synod to be a communication link between the presbyteries and the General Assembly. Not only does synod facilitate the General Assembly's understanding of the concerns of the presbyteries, but it also assures the presbyteries of what the General Assembly has decided. (G-12.0102)

General Assembly



Commissioners
173 Presbyteries
Equal Number of Ministers & Elders
16 Synods

General Assembly

The General Assembly is the most inclusive governing body in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It is made up of equal numbers of ministers and elders elected by the presbyteries, and it also has a number of Advisory Delegates--such as Youth Advisory Delegates, Theological Seminary Advisory Delegates, Ecumenical Advisory Delegates, and Missionary Advisory Delegates--who have voice but not vote on the floor of the Assembly. This body meets every 2 years. (G-13.0102)

The General Assembly "constitutes the bond of union, community, and mission among all its congregations and governing bodies." (G-13-0103)

The General Assembly sets parameters for the mission of the entire denomination, determining priorities, developing objectives and strategies, and providing resources to carry out the work of the whole church. The Constitution lists 24 specific responsibilities of the General Assembly, including programs and ministries of evangelization, service, and prophetic witness. These programs should foster diversity and balance within the mission of the whole church. The General Assembly also has the right and duty to establish the administrative systems needed to carry out this mission. (G-13.0103)

The General Assembly is responsible for mission to the whole world. Other governing bodies may engage in projects elsewhere in this country or overseas, but the Assembly coordinates the overall national and international mission program of the church. The General Assembly commissions fraternal workers and missionaries for their ministries with churches in other countries. It also maintains relationships with our partner denominations throughout the world, and coordinates our work with them. (G-13.0103)

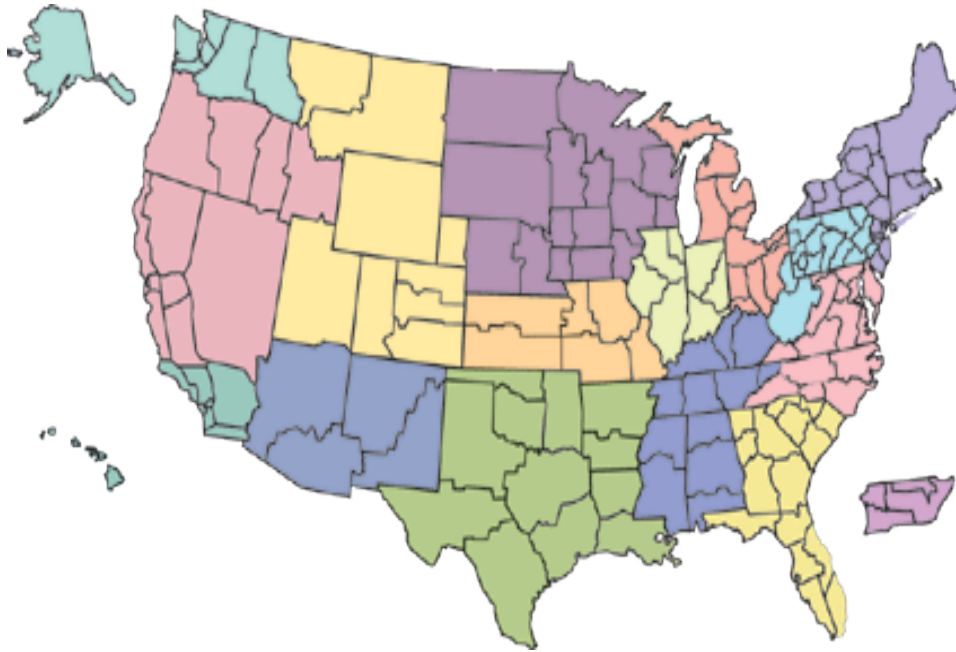
Another duty of the Assembly is "to provide services for the whole church that can be performed more effectively from a national base." These services may include developing a curriculum for the educational programs of the churches in the denomination, providing publishing houses to produce books of particular interest to Presbyterians, and devising and overseeing systems for coordinating the movement of ministers within the church. (G-13.0103)

In order to fulfill its responsibility to provide for communication, the General Assembly supports a denominational magazine and certain other news outlets. It maintains a service that allows anyone to contact the General Assembly by mail, telephone, or computer to have their questions about the church answered or to gather other information. It also provides resources and direction for the evangelism, justice, and service ministries of less inclusive governing bodies. As with presbyteries and synods, the General Assembly has the right and responsibility to form and oversee any agencies necessary to carry out its work. (G-13.0103)

On behalf of the whole church, the General Assembly maintains relationships with bodies of other faiths and denominations. (G-13.0103)

As the most inclusive governing body of the church, the General Assembly is given the power "to decide controversies brought before it and to give advice and instruction in cases submitted to it, in conformity with the Constitution." In cases of judicial process, the General Assembly exercises this function through its Permanent Judicial Commission. The rulings of the Permanent Judicial Commission are final. (G-13.0103, D-5.0000)

In addition to the use of overtures from presbyteries and synods, issues of concern to the denomination will be brought before the General Assembly by resolutions from commissioners to the General Assembly. The decisions and advice of the General Assembly on these matters are printed in its minutes. From time to time, in carrying out this duty, the General Assembly will also authorize statements or study papers on current issues to be written and distributed to the churches. (G-13.0103)



Synod and Presbytery Map

The Unity Found in Relationships

Churches do not carry out their mission in isolation nor for their own satisfaction. "The nature of Presbyterian order is such that it shares power and responsibility. The system of governing bodies, whether they have authority over one or many churches, sustains such mutual relationships within the structures as to express the unity of the Church."
(G-4.0302)

Contributors to this resource:

Rev. Charles L. Stanford, Jr., Retired Exec. Presbyter, Louisville Presbytery
Doska Ross, Assistant Stated Clerk / Manager of Polity Guidance and Training,
Office of the General Assembly
Kate Cannon, Production Manager, Presbyterians Today Magazine
Edna Sinnock, Associate for Churchwide Communication Services