

# **The Session and the New Form of Government**

## ***Building a Community of Faith, Hope, Love and Witness***

### **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**

With **greater freedom and flexibility**, the new Form of Government encourages congregations and councils to **focus on God’s mission and how they can faithfully participate in this mission**. In offering a structure that is more horizontal than hierarchical, the new Form of Government encourages the church to **be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit** as it seeks **to be Christ’s body and live out its calling as a community of faith, hope, love and witness**.

#### **THE SESSION: A COUNCIL OF THE CHURCH AND EXPRESSION OF UNITY & MUTUALITY**

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is governed by councils, which “exist to help congregations and the church as a whole be more faithful participants in the mission of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> The councils of the church are the session, the presbytery, the synod and the General Assembly.<sup>2</sup> The session is the council for the congregation and is composed of ruling elders, elected by the congregation to active service, as well as all installed pastors and associate pastors.<sup>3</sup>

Councils serve as an expression of the unity of the church and “all councils of the church are united by the nature of the church and share with one another responsibilities, rights and powers as provided by the Constitution.”<sup>4</sup> Along these lines, each council remains subject to the review of the next higher council.<sup>5</sup> Our polity envisions a system of unity, mutuality and accountability where councils communicate and work together to make important decisions impacting the faith and mission of the whole church. Our polity presupposes a fellowship of love and trust where important constitutional matters are not decided unilaterally, but where lower councils collaborate with higher councils to prayerfully discern the mind of Christ and work through decisions that will impact the mission of the church. Through dialogue and working together on important and often difficult decisions, sessions, presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly can help the whole church understand more fully what it means for us to be a community of faith, hope, love and witness (F-1.0301).

#### **THE SESSION: DISCERNING LEADERS ATTENDING TO THE HOLY SPIRIT**

The session is responsible for governing the congregation and guiding its witness to the sovereign activity of God in the world so that the congregation is and becomes a community of faith, hope, love and witness.<sup>6</sup> In seeking to help the congregation be and become this community, the session has an important role as it engages in prayerful discernment and attends to how God’s Spirit may be at work in the congregation and in the broader community. Along these lines, we recognize that ruling elders are provided “with particular gifts to share in discernment of God’s Spirit and governance of God’s people” and that “together with teaching elders, exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment and discipline and have responsibilities for the life a congregation as well as the whole church...”<sup>7</sup>

#### **THE SESSION’S RESPONSIBILITIES (G-3.0201)**

As it seeks to lead and guide the congregation, the session is to keep before it the Marks of the Church,<sup>8</sup> the Notes of the Reformed Church,<sup>9</sup> and the Great Ends of the Church.<sup>10</sup> The session’s main responsibilities and powers fall within three broad categories tied to the Notes of the Church: 1) **Providing the word of God may be truly preached and heard;** 2) **Providing the Sacraments be rightly administered and received;** and 3) **Nurturing the covenant community of Christ’s disciples.**

**SESSION RESPONSIBILITIES INCLUDE:**

<b>Word Truly Preached</b>	<b>Sacraments Rightly Administered</b>	<b>Nurture Covenant Community</b>
Provide a place for regular worship, education & spiritual nurture.	Authorize the Lord's Supper at least quarterly	Receive & dismiss members Review active member rolls at least annually
Provide for regular preaching of the Word	Administer Baptism as appropriate	Train, examine, ordain & install ruling elders and deacons
Plan & lead events in community focused on evangelism, social healing & reconciliation	Exercise pastoral care among the congregation	Lead congregation in participating in the mission of the whole church. Encourage generosity & faithful stewardship of personal & financial resources
Initiate & respond to ecumenical efforts bearing witness to God's love & grace	Do the above responsibilities so that the sacraments may be received as a means of grace & so that the congregation may live in the unity represented in the Sacraments.	Manage physical property of the congregation for the furtherance of its mission Bear witness against error in doctrine & immorality in congregation & community
		Serve in judicial matters in accordance with Rules of Discipline

**SESSION MEETINGS (G-3.0203 AND G-3.0201)**

- **Stated Meetings**--The session shall hold stated meetings at least quarterly.
- **Special Meetings**
  - Special meetings can be called by the moderator, or when two members of the session request the meeting in writing;
  - Special meetings shall cover business pertinent to the special meeting only;
  - Special meetings require reasonable notice; and
  - The presbytery can direct the session to meet
- **Quorum**--Sessions shall designate a quorum for meetings. The quorum must include:
  - At least the moderator and either a specific number of ruling elders or a specific percentage of ruling elders serving session
- **The Moderator**—The installed pastor serves as moderator of the session and the session shall not meet without the pastor or designated moderator.<sup>11</sup>

**SESSION MINUTES AND RECORDS (G-3.0204):**

- The session shall keep full and accurate records of all proceedings;
- The session shall keep membership rolls of baptized, active, and affiliate members; and
- The session shall keep registers of baptisms, installed pastors, and other registers deemed necessary.

**SESSION RELATIONS WITH OTHER COUNCILS (G-3.0202):**

- The session shall elect commissioners to the presbytery;
- Nominate to the presbytery commissioners for the synod and General Assembly;
- Consider guidance from higher councils and carry out binding actions;
- Welcome representatives from the presbytery;
- Propose to the presbytery measures concerning mission; and

- Send to the presbytery and General Assembly required statistics and information.

### **FINANCES (G-3.0205)**

- The session shall prepare and adopt a budget;
- Determine distribution of benevolences;
- Offer full disclosure of decisions to the congregation; and
- Elect a treasurer and supervise the treasurer or delegate supervision of the treasurer.
- Additionally, financial records shall be kept and shall be open to inspection;
- No less than annual reports of all financial activities shall be made;
- Those in charge of funds shall report to the session at least annually; and
- Offerings shall be counted and recorded by at least two duly appointed persons, or by one fidelity bonded person.

### **THE SESSION'S ROLE IN DEVELOPING MANUALS, POLICIES & OBTAINING INSURANCE**

- The session is required to develop a manual of operations, including a sexual misconduct policy, and a process for financial review. (*see* G-3.0106, G-3.0113, & G-3.0205)
- The session must obtain property & liability coverage (*see* G-3.0112)

### **SOME QUESTIONS THE SESSION MUST PRAYERFULLY DISCERN AND CONSIDER**

1. Will your session keep a list of inactive members? (G-1.04)
2. How will you train and examine those elected as deacons and ruling elders? (G-2.0104b)
3. What term will the session clerk serve? (G-3.0104)
4. What will be the quorum for session meetings? (G-3.0203)

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR YOUR SESSION**

1. How does your session engage in communal discernment and prayerfully attend to the Holy Spirit at work in your congregation and community?
2. How does your session prepare people for active membership (G-1.0304)? How does the session review and counsel those who have neglected the responsibilities of membership (G-3.0201c)? How may the session better encourage members to be faithful participants in Christ's mission?
3. What opportunities for education, spiritual nurture and Christian formation does your session provide? How does your session plan and lead regular efforts to reach into the community and the world with the message of salvation and the invitation to enter into committed discipleship? How does your session plan and lead ministries healing and reconciliation in the community in accordance with the prophetic witness of Jesus Christ?
4. Has your session developed a manual of operations, a sexual misconduct policy and a process for financial review? Has your session obtained property and liability insurance?

### **RESOURCES FOR COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT**

- Victoria G. Curtiss, *Guidelines for Communal Discernment* (PDS & OGA) available at: <http://store.pcusa.org/2435808007>
- Danny E. Morris Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Upper Room Books, 1997)
- Charles M. Olsen, *Transforming Church Boards Into Communities of Spiritual Leaders* (Alban Institute, 1995).
- Valerie K. Isenhower and Judith A. Todd, *Listen for God's Leading: A Workbook for Corporate Spiritual Discernment* (Upper Room Books, 2009).
- Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

- Ruth Hayley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practices for Leadership Groups* (IVP Books, 2012).
- Lou Fendall, Jan Wood, Bruce Bishop, *Practicing Discernment Together: Finding God's Way Forward in Decision Making* (Barclay Press, 2007).
- Rose Mary Dougherty, *Discernment* (Paulist Press, 2009).
- Suzanne G. Farnham, et. al. *Listening Hearts* (Morehouse Publishing, 1991).
- Suzanne G. Farnham, et. al. *Grounded in God* (Morehouse Publishing, 1999).

---

<sup>1</sup> G-3.0101

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> G-3.0201

<sup>4</sup> F-3.0203; G-3.0101

<sup>5</sup> *See* G-3.0101

<sup>6</sup> G-3.0201

<sup>7</sup> G-2.0301

<sup>8</sup> F-1.0302

<sup>9</sup> F-1.0303

<sup>10</sup> F-1.0304

<sup>11</sup> *See* G-1.0504.