# Back to Basics: Constitutional Processes and Polity of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

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ASSISTANT STATED CLERK – MANAGER, JUDICIAL PROCESS AND SOCIAL WITNESS

# Foundations of Presbyterian Polity

- God's mission (F-1.01) is to proclaim the good news of the gospel, that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, sustains, reigns, and transforms all things and all people.
- God's mission in Christ gives form and substance to the life and work of the Church.
  - Offer God's grace to all people by inviting them to the table and the font; and by calling everyone to discipleship in Christ.
  - It offers the Church's participation in God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming the good news of God's love.
  - The primary goal is to glorify God now and forever, living in covenant relationship with God and participating in God's mission.

# Foundations of Presbyterian Polity

Jesus Christ is the head of the Church (F-1.02)

- Authority
- Call and prepare
- Life
- Hope
- Foundation

Call of the Church (F-1.03)

- Body of Christ
- Marks of the Church
- Notes of the Church
- Great ends of the Church

Receptivity to be guided by the Holy Spirit (F-1.04)

- Continuity and change
- Ecumenical
- Unity in diversity
- Openness

# Historical Principles of Ecclesiastical Order

- God Alone is Lord of the Conscience
  - It is not subject to human doctrines or commandments that are contrary to the Word
  - We do not want preferential civil benefits for any religion, but rather what is necessary for security, which is equitable and common to all.
- Corporate judgment
  - Each Church decides and does not infringe on the rights of others.
- Officials
  - Ordained ministries to preach, administer the Sacraments, and exercise discipline
- Truth and goodness
  - You will know them by their fruit
- Mutual forbereance
  - There are truths and concepts on which people of good character and principles may differ. It is our duty to exercise mutual tolerance.
- Election by the people
  - Authority comes from the Scripture and is exercised by the people in choosing Church officers.
- Power of the Church
  - Ministerial and declarative, not to submit by virtue of that authority.
- Value of ecclesiastical discipline
  - Purely moral and spiritual, without civil effects, with the force of justice, impartial public and the blessing of God

# Principles of Presbyterian Government

- One church
- Governed by presbyters
  - Ruling Elders

Chosen by the congregation to discern and guide them in their fidelity to the Word of God and to strengthen and nourish their lives and faith.

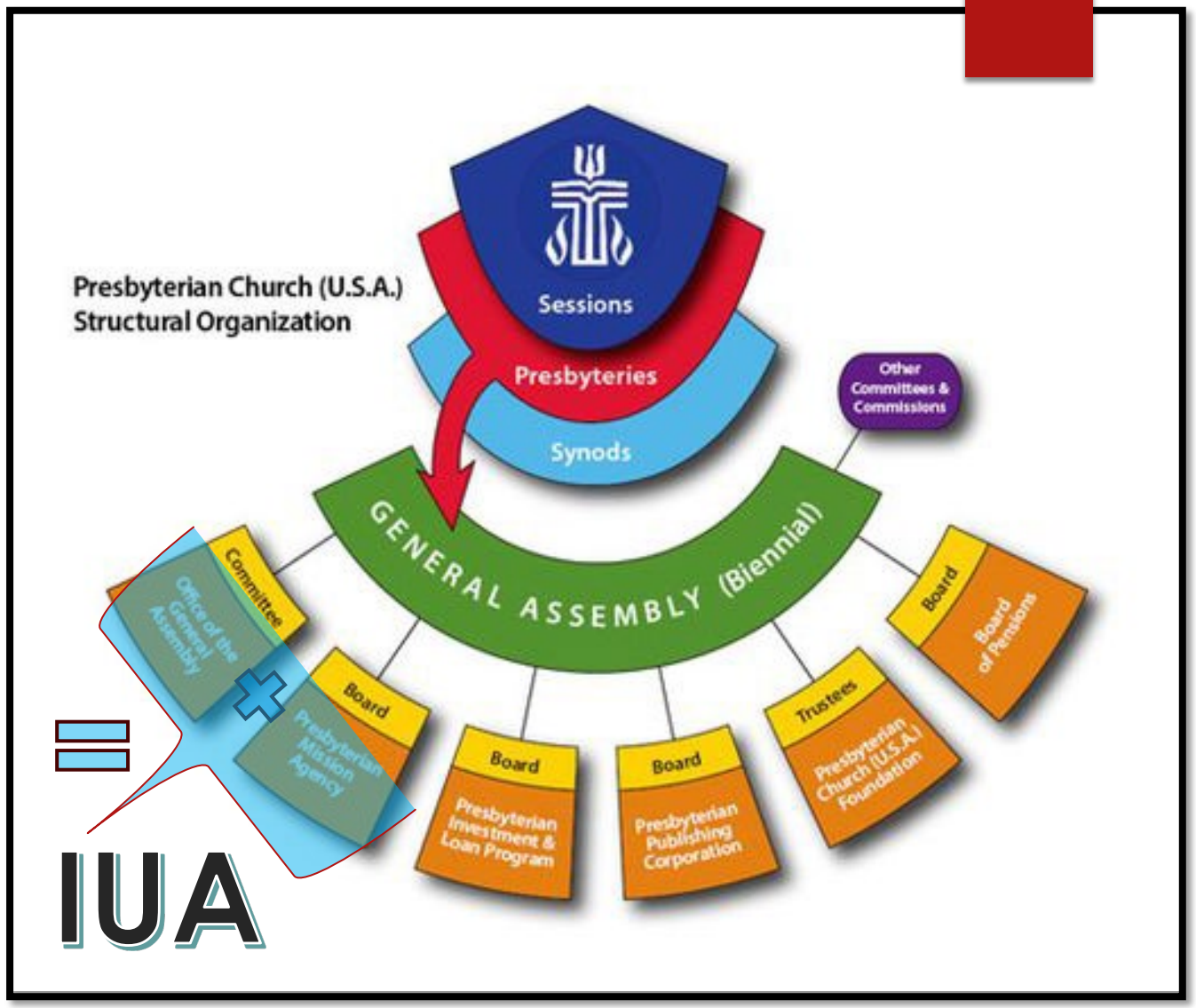
  - Ministers of Word and Sacrament (Teaching Elders)

Committed to teaching the faith in word and action, preparing people for their ministry and testimony.

- Ordained in councils
  - sessions, presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly
  - In unity by the nature of the church and in mutual responsibility, rights and powers according to the Constitution
  - Different but in mutual relationship in such a way that the action of one is an act of the whole church through the appropriate council.
  - The larger part of the church, or its representation, will govern the smaller part.

# Work structure

- COUNCILS
- AGENCIES
- COMMITTEES
- COMMISSIONS



# Principles of Presbyterian Government

- Seek and represent the will of Christ
- Decides by majority vote after an opportunity for discussion and discernment
- The higher Council has the right to review and supervise the lower. It also has the authority to resolve disputes that have been referred, complained about, or appealed.
- presbyters and deacons can only be ordained by the authority of a council.
- Ecclesiastical jurisdiction is a shared power, to be exercised jointly by presbyters gathered in councils.
- General authority of councils:
  - The councils possess the administrative authority to carry out the duties and powers conferred by the Constitution.
  - This authority is limited by the express provisions of this Constitution. Powers not mentioned herein are reserved for the presbyteries.

# ADMINISTRATIVE AUTHORITY

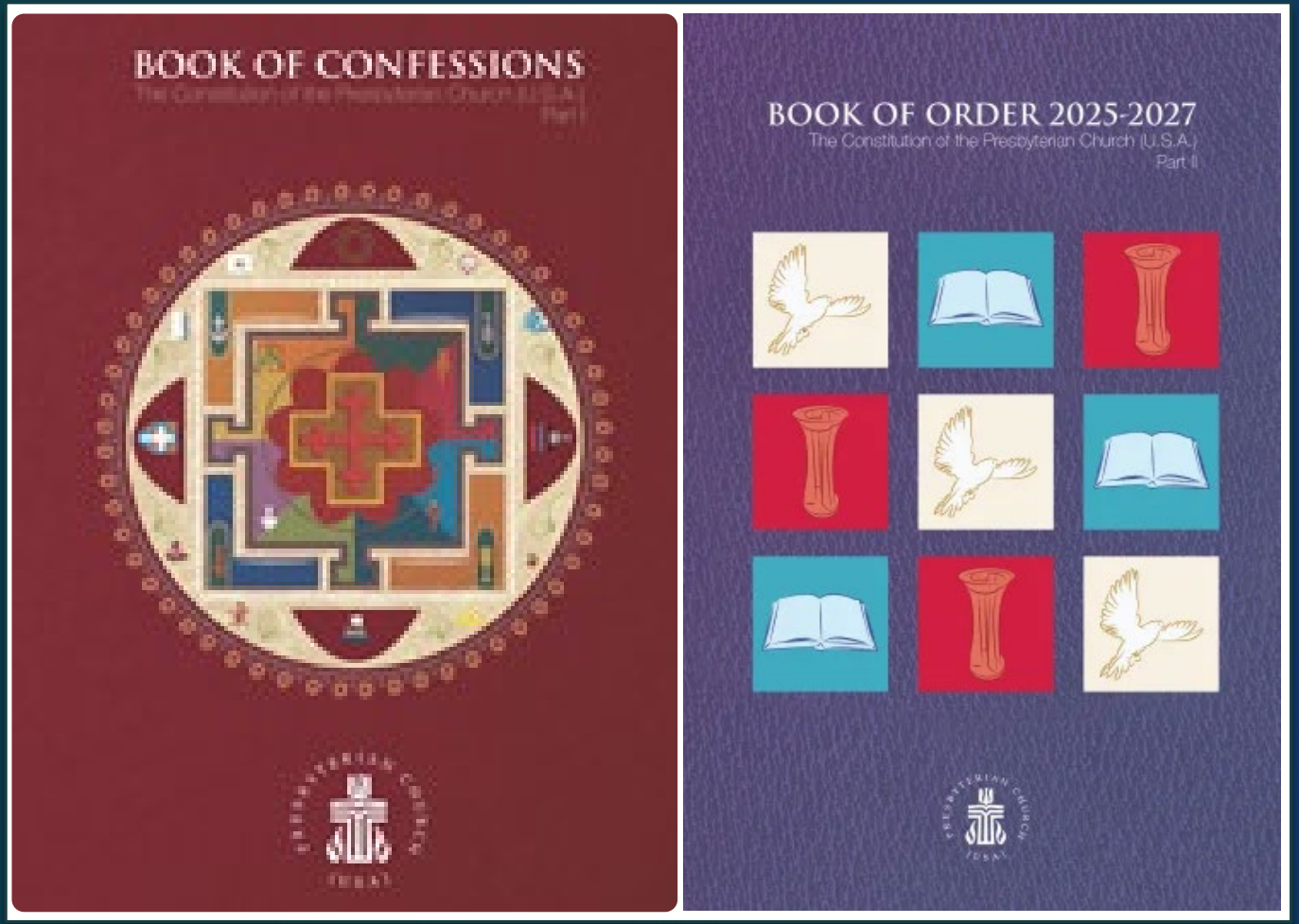
- GENERAL ASSEMBLY
- SYNOD
- PRESBYTERY
- SESSION

# Fundamental premise

- This section describes the historical and ecclesiological commitments upon which Presbyterian polity rests.
- The provisions of any part of the Constitution shall be interpreted in light of the entire Constitution.
- No provision of the Book of Order may invalidate any other provision.
- When tensions or ambiguities exist between provisions, it is the task of councils and judicial commissions to resolve them in such a way that all provisions are given force and effect.

# CONSTITUTIONAL DOCUMENTS

THEY INVOLVE MANDATES, RESPONSIBILITIES, POWERS AND RIGHTS




# CONSTITUTION OF THE PC(USA)

PART I: BOOK OF CONFESSIONS VERSION 2016

PART II: BOOK OF ORDER VERSION 2025-2027

# IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS

## GENERAL ASSEMBLY MANUAL

- ORGANIZATION FOR MISSION
- GUIDES AND POLICIES
- STANDING RULES

## PARLIAMENTARY PROCESSES

- ROBERT'S RULES OF ORDER

## AUTHORITATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

- APPROVED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
- DECISIONS OF THE PERMANENT JUDICIAL COMMISSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

# Ordained Ministries

- G-2.01
- The ministry of the Church is a gift from Jesus Christ to the entire Church.
- Only Christ reigns, calls, teaches and uses the Church according to his will.
- The basic form of ministry is the ministry of all of God's people.
- Some are called to ordained ministries to fulfill a particular function.
- God gives gifts to those who are called.
- Standards for ordination reflect the desire to joyfully submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in every aspect of life. They are applied on a case-by-case basis.
- The ministry of Christ is the foundation and model for all ministry.
- Christ serves as a model, who came to serve and not to be served.
- The government of the church is representative.
- The people of God are the ones who elect presbyters and deacons.
- The call to ordained ministry is an act of the triune God by:
  - Movement of the Spirit in individual consciousness
  - Approval of the community of the people of God
  - Concurrence of the council of the church

# Freedom of conscience

G-2.0105

Historical documents:

Union Plan of 1758

Historical Digest

- Adherence to the essential tenets of the Reformed faith and polity is indispensable, according to the Constitution.
- Freedom of conscience will be maintained in the interpretation of Scripture without seriously departing from those standards, without infringing on the rights and perspectives of others, and without obstructing the constitutional governance of the church.
- It is exercised within certain limits once we enter the ordained ministries of the IPEEUU.
- It is up to the person concerned first, but it is the responsibility of the membership council.

# Ordained Ministries

## Ruling Elder

- They share the discernment of God's Spirit and the governance of God's people.
- Elected by the congregation.
- Wise people, mature in faith, with proven leadership skills and a compassionate spirit.

## Diaconate

- Ministry of compassion, witness and service
- Sharing the redeeming love of Jesus Christ with people who are poor, sick, hungry, lost, unfriended, oppressed, burdened by unjust policies or structures, or distressed.

## Ministry of Word and Sacrament

- They teach faith in word and action
- They serve where the presbytery authorizes them.
- They preach the Word

# Ordained Ministries

## Ruling Elder

- Chosen to discern and measure fidelity to the Word of God; to strengthen and nourish the faith and life of the congregation.
- Together with Ministers of Word and Sacrament, they exercise leadership, governance, spiritual discernment, and discipline.

## Diaconate

- Exemplary people
- Individual or board commission
- Under the supervision and authority of the council

## Ministry of Word and Sacrament

- They serve Holy Communion and baptize
- They support discipleship
- They participate in governance
- They seek to discern the mind of Christ
- They seek to build up the body of Christ

# Ordained Ministries

## Ruling Elder

- They have responsibility within and outside the congregation, and in ecumenical relationships
- Life of the whole church
- They may be elected as commissioners to higher councils, with voice and vote and EQUAL AUTHORITY AS MINISTERS.
- They hold any official position

## Diaconate

- They can perform special functions.
- They can help serve the Holy Supper.
- It is up to the majority of the congregation whether they wish to utilize this ministry.

## Ministry of Word and Sacrament

Membership is in the presbytery

# CHURCH COUNCILS G-3.0101

- THEY ARE THE EXPRESSION OF THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH
- The mutual interconnection of the Church through its representative bodies is a sign of unity.
- SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITY TO NOURISH, GUIDE, AND GOVERN THOSE WHO TESTIFY SO THAT THEIR TESTIMONY STRENGTHENS THE WHOLE CHURCH AND GLORIFIES GOD.
- COMPOSED OF PRESBYTERS ELECTED BY MEMBERS
- THEY SHARE RESPONSIBILITIES, RIGHTS AND POWERS
- THEY EXIST TO ASSIST CONGREGATIONS AND THE CHURCH IN STIPULATING:
  - THAT THE WORD OF GOD MAY BE TRULY PREACHED AND HEARD
  - THAT THE SACRAMENTS MAY BE CORRECTLY ADMINISTERED AND SERVED
  - CULTIVATING A COVENANT COMMUNITY OF DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

# IPEEUU CONNECTIONAL STRUCTURE

SESSIONS

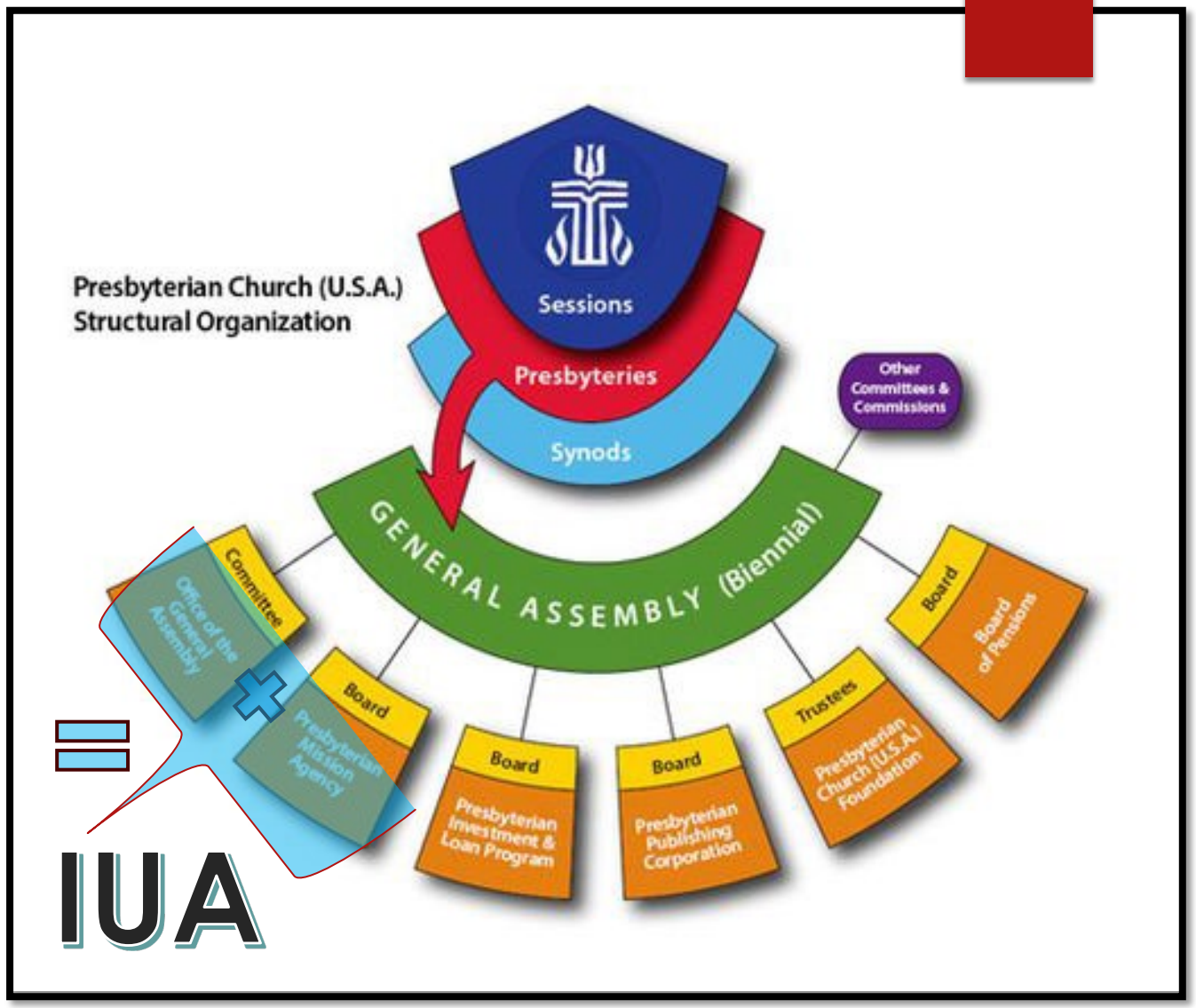
INTERMEDIATE COUNCILS

- PRESBYTERIES
- SYNODS

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

# How we relate

- SESSIONS SEND COMMISSIONERS TO THE PRESBYTERY.
- PRESBYTERIES SEND COMMISSIONERS TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY.
- GENERAL ASSEMBLY ADOPTS POLICIES, MANDATES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.
- AGENCIES OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ENFORCING, PROMULGATING AND PROMOTING THESE GUIDELINES OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY:
  - THROUGH THE WORK OF OFFICES AND PROGRAMS
  - THROUGH THE WORK OF COMMITTEES AND COMMISSIONS



# ECCLESIASTICAL JURISDICTION G-3.0102

- FOR THE PURPOSE OF SERVING JESUS CHRIST AND DECLARING AND OBEYING HIS WILL REGARDING TRUTH AND SERVICE, ORDER AND DISCIPLINE.

# SESSION

- They have the responsibility to participate in the life of the whole church through participation in other councils.
  - Elect ruling elders as commissioners to the presbytery and receive reports
  - NOMINATE ELDERS TO THE PRESBYTERY FOR CONSIDERATION AS COMMISSIONERS TO THE SYNOD AND THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY; AND TO SERVE ON COMMITTEES AND COMMISSIONS.
  - ENSURE THAT GUIDANCE AND COMMUNICATION FROM THE PRESBYTERY, SYNOD AND GENERAL ASSEMBLY ARE CONSIDERED AND THAT BINDING ACTIONS ARE OBSERVED AND CARRIED OUT
  - RECEIVE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PRESBYTERY
  - PROPOSE MEASURES THAT MAY BE OF COMMON INTEREST FOR THE MISSION OF THE WHOLE CHURCH
  - SUBMIT REQUIRED STATISTICAL REPORTS AND ALL OTHER REQUIRED INFORMATION ANNUALLY IN ADDITION TO VOLUNTARY FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS.

# SESSION

- MANDATE TO ADOPT AN ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE MANUAL WITH POLICIES FOR:
  - SEXUAL MISCONDUCT
  - HARASSMENT
  - PROTECTION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH
  - ANTI-RACISM
  - BOUNDARY TRAINING
    - SEXUAL MISCONDUCT
    - PROTECTION AND PREVENTION OF CHILDREN AGAINST SEXUAL ABUSE
    - AT LEAST EVERY 36 MONTHS

# PRESBYTERY G-3.0302

- RESPONSIBILITY TO MAINTAIN A REGULAR AND CONTINUOUS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SYNOD AND THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY:
  - To elect elders and ministers as commissioners to the synod and the general assembly, and to receive their reports
  - CHOOSING READERS FOR ORDINATION EXAMS
  - ENSURE THAT SYNOD GUIDELINES/COMMUNICATIONS ARE CONSIDERED AND LIAISON ACTIONS ARE OBSERVED AND CARRIED OUT
  - PROPOSE TO THE SYNOD MEASURES THAT MAY BE OF COMMON INTEREST TO THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH AND THAT HAVE THE CONCURRENCE OF ANOTHER PRESBYTERY
  - SEND TO THE SYNOD AND THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY THE STATISTICS AND OTHER REQUIRED INFORMATION.
- WITH THE COUNCILS:
  - COORDINATE, GUIDE, ENCOURAGE, SUPPORT AND FACILITATE THE CONGREGATIONAL WORK

# SYNOD G-3.0402 AND G-3.0403

- WITH THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY:
  - CONSTANT RELATIONSHIP, SEEKING TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE GUIDANCE AND COMMUNICATION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY, AND CARRYING OUT BINDING ACTIONS
  - PROPOSING MEASURES OF COMMON INTEREST TO THE MISSION OF THE WHOLE CHURCH
- WITH THE PRESBYTERIES:
  - SUPPORT THE WORK OF THE PRESBYTERIES BY JOINTLY DEVELOPING PLANS AND OBJECTIVES FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE MISSION, PROVIDING ENCOURAGEMENT AND GUIDANCE, AND SUPERVISING THEIR WORK
  - DEVELOP AND PROVIDE RESOURCES
  - ORGANIZE/DIVIDE/UNIT/COMBINE PRESBYTERIES

# GENERAL ASSEMBLY G-3.05

- COUNCIL OF THE WHOLE CHURCH
- Representative of the Unity of Synods, Presbyteries, sessions and Congregations of the PC(USA)
- IT CONSTITUTES THE BOND OF UNION, COMMUNITY AND MISSION BETWEEN ALL ITS CONGREGATIONS AND COUNCILS, SO THAT THE WHOLE CHURCH MAY BECOME A COMMUNITY OF FAITH, HOPE, LOVE AND TESTIMONY.
- CONSULTATION AND PROVIDES RESOURCES-CONSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES
- SUPPORTING THE WORK OF THE SYNODS

# GENERAL ASSEMBLY

## AGENCIES

INTERIM UNIFIED AGENCY

BOARD OF PENSIONS

PRESBYTERIAN FOUNDATION

Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program

Presbyterian Publishing Corporation

## STANDING COMMITTEES AND COMMITTEES

PERMANENT JUDICIAL COMMISSION

COMMITTEE ON REPRESENTATION

COMMITTEE ON NOMINATIONS

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON LITIGATION

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE CONSTITUTION

PRESBYTERIES' COOPERATIVE COMMITTEE

## SPECIAL COMMITTEES AND COMMISSIONS

SPECIAL COMMITTEE STANDING RULES

Working Group to Explore the Theology and Practice of Ordination

UNIFICATION COMMISSION

TEAM FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A FINANCING MODEL

# ACTIONS OF THE PCUSA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

- POLICIES
- AMENDMENTS TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE PCUSA
  - BOOK OF CONFESSIONS
  - BOOK OF ORDER
- EXHORTATIONS
  - RESOLUTIONS

# WHAT DOES DISCIPLINE MEAN?

PREAMBLE-PRINCIPLES OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE D-1.0000

# HOW IS DISCIPLINE CARRIED OUT?

## CORRECTIVE/REMEDIAL CASES

- RESPONSIBILITY OF THE COUNCILS
- ADDRESSES IRREGULARITIES AND DELINQUENCIES
- IT DOES NOT INVOLVE INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS BUT BODY DECISIONS
- MAY LEAD TO CHANGES IN THE COUNCIL'S ACTION

## DISCIPLINARY CASES

- RESPONSIBILITY OF INDIVIDUALS
- BEHAVIOR/ACTIONS OFFENSIVE TO Scripture AND/OR THE CONSTITUTION OF THE IPEEUUA
- MAY LEAD TO CENSORSHIP
- PERMANENT JUDICIAL COMMISSIONS/COUNCIL

# JURISDICTION IN REMEDIAL CASES

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

SYNOD

PRESBYTERY

SESSION

# JURISDICTION DISCIPLINARY CASES

## ORIGINAL

- SESSION
  - MEMBERS
  - DEACONS/ISACS
  - Ruling Elders
- PRESBYTERY
  - MINISTERS OF THE WORD AND SACRAMENTS
  - RULERS ELDERS COMMISSIONERS
- REFERENCE REQUEST

## APPELLATIVE

- PERMANENT JUDICIAL COMMISSION OF THE PRESBYTERY
- PERMANENT JUDICIAL COMMISSION OF THE SYNOD
- PERMANENT JUDICIAL COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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# QUESTIONS?