

SLIDE #1-2



Over past 2.5 years, it has been my privilege to serve on the Form of Government Task Force. The ten other people I served with were a typically diverse group of individuals, but we all shared the same desire – to streamline and simplify part of our *Book of Order* that has been amended numerous times over the past 25 years.

SLIDE #3-4



What is the role of polity in the life of the Church? The first thing is that polity is not the work of the Church; participating in the mission of God is the work of the Church.

- Polity is the architecture of mission.
- A blueprint is a plan for building a house in which to live and work.
- A polity is a plan for building a church in which to serve

God and from which to participate in God’s mission in the world. It is, if you will, a blueprint for the church’s organization.

SLIDE #5



Like any good blueprint, a polity specifies:

- the dimensions of the theological foundations on which our polity rests
- the height of our ecclesiastical walls
- and the pitch of our covenantal roof ...

SLIDE #6



But it doesn’t tell us anything about the arrangement of the furniture in the room, or what pictures hang on the walls. Those decisions are left to the ones who will live in the house – or worship in the sanctuary. Making them is what helps turn a house into a home, a church building into a faith community.

SLIDE #7



It’s the same with the relationship between polity and the practice of the life of the church.

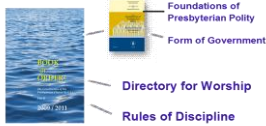
- A polity describes the interrelationship between the parts of the church,
- sets out the standards by which the church measures its ministry,
- and outlines the functions necessary to being the church.

But it should leave to individual councils the decisions about what structures best accomplish those functions, and what processes best meet those standards.

To put it succinctly, a polity should mandate functions, not structures.

SLIDE #8

The PC(USA) Constitution



The proposal sent down by this year’s General Assembly would revise the Form of Government section of the *Book of Order*. This proposal envisions no changes to either the Directory for Worship or the Rules of Discipline. The revision proposes that the church replace the current Form of Government with two documents:

- “The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity,” containing most of the contents of chapters 1-4 of the current Form of Government,
- And the “Form of Government” containing the material found in chapters 5-18 of the current Form of Government.

SLIDE #9

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity

- Nearly all of the current first four chapters preserved
- Similar themes grouped together

So what’s in this proposed revision?

First, as mentioned earlier, we propose a new document called the “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity” as a replacement for the first four chapters of the current Form of Government. The contents of the current first four chapters are almost completely preserved in the Foundations, but they are organized differently – according to theme.

SLIDE #10

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity

The Mission of the Church

- God’s mission in Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church
- Great Ends of the Church
- “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic”
- Notes of Reformed Church
- Commitment to unity in diversity

Chapter One is about the Mission of the Church, and deals with our core theological commitments.

The chapter – indeed, the entire polity of the church – begins with the confession that the Triune God is engaged through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in a mission of creation, redemption, and transformation of lives, societies, and the whole of creation. The Church created by God’s mission in the world exists to bear witness to and to participate in that mission. We affirm that Jesus Christ is the only Lord and head of the Church. We then make four statements about the Church that echo our values. We understand the Church...

- ... to be the body of Christ, and a community called to faith, hope, love, and witness
- ... to be “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” – the marks of the Church from the Nicene Creed
- ... to proclaim to all people the good news through proclamation of the Word, sharing with all people the grace of God through administration of the sacraments, and calling all people to a common life of discipleship through ecclesiastical discipline – the Notes of the Reformed Church from the Scots Confession. [These Notes are important later in the Form of Government Chapter 3, where they provide the framework for discussing the responsibilities of the four councils of the church.]
- ... to work toward the six “great ends” or purposes of the church.

The final section of the chapter focuses on the Church’s openness to God’s Spirit as it seeks constant reformation, broader ecumenicity, and greater commitment to unity and diversity.

SLIDE #11

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity

The Church and Its Confessions

- Current G -2,0000, almost verbatim
- The confessions in the life of the PC(USA)



Chapter Two is about the Church and Its Confessions.

It outlines our commitment to Christian, Protestant, and Reformed creeds and confessions, understanding them as efforts by the Church to articulate universal truths of the gospel from within particular historical moments. The contents are almost word-for-word the contents of chapter two of the current Form of Government.

SLIDE #12

Foundations of Presbyterian Polity

Principles of Order and Government

- Historic Principles of Church Order (1789)
- Historic Principles of Church Government (1797)

Chapter Three lays out the Historic Principles of Order and Government, part of our polity since 1789, and gathers the familiar “Historic Principles of Church Government” (currently G-1.0400) and the “Principles of Presbyterian Government” (currently G-4.0301) in a single statement (proposed F-3.02).

This chapter also clarifies the relationship between the Foundations and the rest of the Book of Order, indicating that provisions of any part of the Constitution are to be interpreted in light of the whole Constitution.

SLIDE #13

Form of Government



Turning to the Form of Government, we offer a document that takes the remaining 14 chapters of the current Form of Government (G-5 - G-18), and presents them in 6 chapters.

SLIDE #14

Form of Government

Chapter 1: Congregations and Membership

- Organization
- Meaning of membership
- Categories of membership
- Congregation meetings



Chapter One covers material currently found in G-5.0000 and G-7.0000. The chapter begins with an affirmation of our Presbyterian form of connectional government. It affirms that the congregation is the basic unit of mission in the church, and that a congregation possesses all the gifts necessary to be the church, but is of itself an insufficient form of the church. We need the relationships we have through presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly to be the church more fully.

This chapter also includes many practical matters that provide the framework for understanding the life and work of a congregation:

1. How a congregation is organized.
2. The meaning of membership, including a member’s involvement in the church’s ministry.
3. The categories of membership.
4. Matters related to congregational meetings, including business which properly may be conducted.

SLIDE #15

Form of Government

Chapter 2: Ordered Ministries, Commissioning, and Certification

all called; some ordered
deacons, ruling and teaching elders
commissioned ruling elders



Chapter Two provides the framework for understanding the call to leadership in the church. You’ll find material from three different chapters of the current book in this new Chapter. “Ordered Ministry” is the term we propose to replace “office” or “officer.” We recommend this change as a way of affirming our commitment to two basic notions in Reformed faith about the Church:

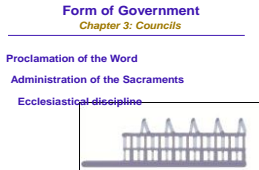
1. that all baptized persons are called to ministry, not merely those who are elected as deacons, elders, and ministers; and
2. that the Church sets aside - or “orders” - the ministry of some to equip the whole people of God for the ministry of reconciliation.

Those ordered ministries are the ones we are familiar with in the church. Each is described with a phrase summarizing the essence of the ordered ministry:

- Deacons, who exercise the ministry of compassion and service,
- Ruling elders, who exercise the ministry of discernment and governance, and
- Teaching elders, who exercise the ministry of the Word and Sacrament.

The latter two terms – ruling and teaching elders – are utilized to lift up the essential parity between the two ordered ministries. The chapter also contains provisions for preparation for all ordered ministry, as well as two additional areas of service: Commissioned Ruling Elders for limited pastoral service – what we currently call “commissioned lay pastors” – and certified church workers, including Certified Christian Educators, Musicians, and Administrators.

SLIDE #16



Chapter Three deals with the Councils of the Church, and covers material currently in G-9.000 through G-13.0000. This chapter provides the framework for understanding the role of councils in the life of the church and the specific functions of each council of the church.

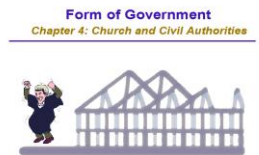
“Councils” is the name we propose to replace the term “governing body.” ‘Governing’ is only part of what sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly do; more importantly, each is a gathering of the Church’s theological and spiritual leaders for the purpose of discerning the will of Christ and guiding the church in following that will. Throughout its history, the Church has called such gatherings “councils.”

This chapter begins with a section of general principles common to all councils, such as matters of participation and representation, officers, meetings, administration and funding of mission, administrative review, committees and commissions, and other matters. Then the responsibilities of each council is presented, organized around the Notes of the Reformed Church first presented in F-1.0303 and repeated at the end of G-3.0101:

1. the proclamation of the Word,
2. the administration of the sacraments, and
3. the nurture of a covenant community of disciples through ecclesiastical discipline.

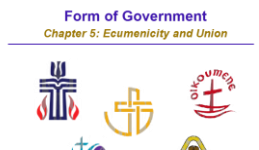
This organization around the notes of the Reformed church is meant to reinforce that we are engaged in the church’s mission given by God in all we do as Councils of the church. Instead of the current long lists of tasks of governing bodies, the work of each Council is described in terms of how it contributes to the whole.

SLIDE #17



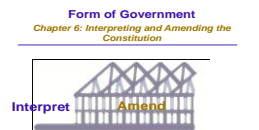
Chapter Four deals with the relationship between the Church and Civil Authority. Its contents are the same as those of current G-8.0000 – matters related to incorporation and trustees, as well as church property – and the addition of the language about confidentiality and mandatory reporting that is currently in G-6.0000.

SLIDE #18



Chapter Five is about Ecumenicity and Church Union, the material covered in chapters 15, 16, and 17 of the current Form of Government. Included here are the various ways in which the Presbyterian Church relates to other denominations: correspondence, full communion, and ecumenical statements; full organic union; union presbyteries; and various forms of joint congregational witness.

SLIDE #19



Finally, Chapter Six covers Interpreting and Amending the Constitution, and is the same material as G-18, with the addition that the description of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution has been moved to this chapter from its current location in G-13.0112. The specifics for amending the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order* may be found in this chapter.

SLIDE #20



Members of the Form of Government Task Force have made many visits across the church to present the document and respond to questions about its contents. We have heard a number of questions on more than one occasion. Some of these “questions from the road” are:

SLIDE #21

Do we have to write new session/presbytery manuals?

- Current manuals remain in effect until changed by council
- Opportunity to review and refresh
- How much change is up to you!

Will we have to write new manuals if the proposed Foundations and Form of Government are adopted?

- No, not necessarily.
- The Task Force expects that most councils will be able to keep the great majority of their current manuals in place after the adoption of the new Form of Government, adding policies to cover items that those policies do not currently cover
- However, we hope that the adoption of the new Form of Government will provide

the occasion for councils across the church to reevaluate their manuals with an eye toward adapting their ministries to their contexts and using the flexibility created by the revision.

SLIDE #22

How can we know if ministers who transfer are qualified if presbytery structures differ?

- Ordination standards have not changed
- Presbytery exam procedures already vary widely

How can we be sure that ministers are equally qualified if all presbyteries don't have the same preparation or supervision processes?

1. The standards for ordination and installation have not been changed in the proposed Form of Government.
2. The processes by which presbyteries assess the "fit" between ministers and congregations or by which candidate examinations are conducted already vary considerably across the church. In addition, each presbytery has responsibility for examining any minister

or candidate for membership in the presbytery. This is the case in both our current and the proposed Form of Government.

SLIDE #23

Does F-1.01 introduce a universalist creed into the constitution?

- The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people.

Some have contended that the first sentence of the Foundations introduces a universalist creed into our Constitution. Here is the text of this sentence: *[read]*.

SLIDE #24

Does F-1.01 introduce a universalist creed into the constitution?

- Would not interpret Scripture in this way
- Must be read in context of entire Constitution
- In same spirit as Rev. 21:9 — "See, I am making all things new." [NRSV]

This contention lifts a single sentence out of the document and attempts to play it against the whole of the Constitution, something those making this charge would never allow to be done when interpreting Scripture. While the Foundations and new FOG at times speak using theological terms, it is not in this part of our Constitution where we "do theology." That is the role of the Confessions in our Constitution. The first sentence in F-1.01 is consistent with the witness of Scripture, such as Revelation 21:5, where God proclaims, "See, I am making all things new."

SLIDE #25

Universalist creed?

F-1.0302d — "The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirms the Gospel of Jesus Christ as received from the prophets and apostles, and stands in continuity with God's mission through the ages. The Church strives to be faithful to the good news it has received and accountable to the standards of the confessions. The Church seeks to present the claims of Jesus Christ, leading persons to repentance, acceptance of Christ alone as Savior and Lord ..."

It also must be read in the context of the rest of the Foundations, such as F-1.0302d, which proclaims: *[read]*.

SLIDE #26

What about Authoritative Interpretations?

- Determined only by the General Assembly
- 219th GA action: Special Committee to recommend status of AIs to 220th GA (Item 07-11)

What happens to Authoritative Interpretations of the current Form of Government if we adopt the revision?

1. The task force does not believe it lies within our authority to answer this question. In the end, only the General Assembly can determine the disposition of its own interpretive statements.
2. The 219th GA did address this issue by creating a special committee to review all the current AIs, and, should nFOG be adopted, recommend the status of them to the 220th GA for its action.

SLIDE #27 – Five Options

ACC: Five Options

- nFOG language incorporates existing AI
- nFOG language identical to/essentially same as current: AIs continue in force
- nFOG language substantively different from current: clarification needed from GA
- nFOG language contradicts existing AI: no continuing effect.
- nFOG language totally removes a constitutional provision for an AI: AI removed as well

This special committee will be guided by what the ACC has said on this subject in their report, “Effect of a Major Revision of the Book of Order on Previous Authoritative Interpretations.”

[Read from slide]

1. Example: F-3.03 – incorporates *Londonderry* and other GAPJC interpretations; G-3.0106 (last sentence) – GAPJC ruling on Session’s authority re: per capita
2. Examples include AIs attached to current G-6.0108, G-8.0201, and G-9.0404d
3. Most famous example: 1978/1979 DG/AI on ordination standards – retained in

1983, even though specific language based upon disappeared in reunion Book of Order.

SLIDE #28

Why a new Form of Government?

- Connects our belief with our actions
- Clarifies standards for the whole church
- Provides flexibility appropriate to each context

So why should we adopt this proposed new Form of Government? Three key reasons:

- First, this revision does a better job than our current Book of Order in connecting what we believe about the church with how we accomplish the church’s mission. The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity is an effort to lay out in a single, well-organized document the basic ecclesiological and historical commitments on which our polity rests.
- Second, this revision clarifies standards for the whole church. It reduces the amount of “manual-of-operations” language and emphasizes what is important - what the whole church must do to carry out God’s mission at every level.
- Third, this revision provides flexibility appropriate to each context. It allows sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly to create, reorganize, and dismantle structures as needed without having to amend the Book of Order to do so. This flexibility makes the church more nimble as it seeks to adapt its ministry to the changing contexts of our world.

SLIDE #29

A Polity “Re-Boot”

- Familiar characters
- New direction/story
- Freed from ‘canon’
- Imperfect analogy: precedents and interpretations remain



As an analogy of this proposed revision, consider the Hollywood trend of “re-boots” for certain movie franchises. As shutting down computer or pulling battery on BlackBerry ‘flushes’ and refreshes the operating system, a film re-boot differs from sequels or prequels. They retain the familiar characters – like the recent James Bond, Batman, and Star Trek movies – but free the story from the ‘canon’ established by the earlier films, allowing the story to be taken in new directions. This is the intent of the proposed FOG: to reboot our Form of Government, and allow councils to move in new directions, in terms of structure, process, and utilization of resources,

both financial and human. It is an imperfect analogy, however, as some of the ‘canon’/story – previous authoritative interpretations and GAPJC decisions – will be along for the journey.

SLIDE #30

nFOG = Flexibility

- Not about ‘what’
- Basic principles of polity unchanged
- Flexibility: ‘how’ and ‘who’
- “Playing between the hedges”



Consider it from this perspective: the proposed new Form of Government is not about the ‘what’ of our polity. The basic principles of our polity remain unchanged by this proposal. It is all about working more flexibility than the current FOG provides into our system – it is about the ‘how’ (how are we going to do things as we move into the future) as well as the ‘who’ (who will do this new thing; i.e., what new structures might we employ). In the terminology of many southern university football programs that play their games “between the hedges,” this proposal outlines

the polity boundaries inside which the ‘game’ will be played. Every time I use this analogy, with the picture of the University of Georgia football stadium, I get in trouble with somebody. So, let me change the picture ...

SLIDE #31

Over the past 2.5 years, I have invariably ended presentations like this one with these words which are in both our current and proposed Forms of Government. This wording is from new G-1.0102 ...

Much is made of the low levels of trust that we seem to have for one another in our church today. I have been as guilty as the next person in forgetting this important principle of our polity.

The question is, what will we do about it? No Form of Government will solve this issue for us – amending the current Book of Order over 300 times in the past quarter century certainly hasn't done it. Perhaps if we move into this new reality, and begin to talk about what type of congregations and what type of presbyteries we would like to be, we will begin to build new bonds of trust and love as we talk, plan, work, and pray together.

Within the FOG TF, when we would talk about the trust issue, we would also raise a related factor – one of accountability. We are accountable to Jesus Christ, the head of the church, and to one another for how we put to use our Form of Government – whichever one we use going forward. We are accountable to use it as it is intended to be used, and not to play games with the language in it, or pick and choose what we like against what we do not. What has troubled me is that the ones who raise the trust issue as an impediment for moving forward with the new Form of Government often are also the ones least willing to invest their trust in our system.

God has sent Jesus Christ into our world, gathering the church as his mission moves forward. The proposed Form of Government is a call to join anew in this mission, working to rebuild our denomination towards the goal of one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

SLIDE #32 – QUESTION AND ANSWER TIME