

# Proposed Amendments to the Constitution—Part 1 of 3

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**Approved by the 219th General Assembly (2010)  
and recommended to the presbyteries for their vote.**




**Including:** Letter from the Stated Clerk, Recommendations from the 219th General Assembly (2010), General Information, and Study Guide

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

On behalf of the 219th General Assembly (2010), the Office of the General Assembly sends to you this proposed amendment, part 1 of 3 of the 2010 Proposed Amendments to the Constitution. If approved by a majority of the presbyteries, it will replace the current wording of the Form of Government.

This proposed amendment is a result of not only the work of the two task forces that reported to General Assemblies in 2008 and in 2010, but also the input of more than twenty years of expressed need to review and revise our Form of Government. This amendment takes into account the feedback received from the 218th General Assembly (2008), comments and suggestions from across the church over the past years, as well as changes approved by the 219th General Assembly (2010) itself.

We hope you will prayerfully read this document cover to cover. On the Web site [www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment](http://www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment) you will find additional resources, including answers to frequently asked questions about the proposed amendment to this part of our church's Constitution. Resources available on the Web site include:

[Proposed Amendments to the Constitution Part 1 of 3](#) (including Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, Form of Government, and Advisory Handbook for Councils for the Development of Policies and Procedures) 


Korean and Spanish translations of the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government are being prepared.

[Insert](#) (including Letter from the Stated Clerk, Recommendations, General Information, and a Study Guide) 

**Additional resources:**

[Frequently asked questions](#) 


[What Is Missional Ecclesiology?](#)  by Paul Hooker, a minister member of the task force.

[A letter to PC\(USA\) elders](#)  from Carol Hunley, a task force member who is a ruling elder.

[A brief reflection on the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity](#) by noted author William Chapman.

[Comparison Chart: Proposed Foundations and Form of Government to Current Form of Government](#) 

[Comparison Chart: Current Form of Government to Proposed Foundations and Form of Government](#) 

[Form of Government PowerPoint Presentation](#)  The Form of Government Task Force presented this to the Assembly Committee on the Form of Government Revision at the 219th General Assembly (2010).

Thank you for your careful attention to this and all the proposed amendments to our Constitution.

In Christ's service,

Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk

**The 219th General Assembly (2010) directed the Stated Clerk to send the following proposed amendment to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes:**

**Shall the *Book of Order* be amended by striking out the text of Chapters I–XVIII of the current Form of Government (G-1.0000–G-18.0401) and inserting two documents, Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and a new Form of Government, to read as follows:** [The text of both documents is found in the accompanying booklet.]

*Advice from the Advisory Committee on the Constitution*

The ... proposal regarding Foundations and the Form of Government represents a significant shift in the way the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) would relate to its Constitution in at least two ways.

First, the task force's proposal envisions a polity that is more missional in nature. The Church exists to bear witness to and to participate in God's work in the world. That mission takes place in particular contexts and in the life of congregations. The focus of the polity contained in the proposal is on supporting the work of the congregation. As understood in this polity, the work of the church at all levels is organized around the classical Reformed marks of the Church: that the Word of God is proclaimed, the sacraments are rightly administered, and the covenant community is nurtured through ecclesiastical discipline.

Second, the task force's proposal regarding Foundations and the Form of Government offers a document that is less regulatory in nature than the existing Form of Government. The Advisory Committee on the Constitution has often noted a tendency on the part of the church to use its constitution as if it were a manual of operations, adding through the process of amendment a large number of administrative and procedural details. The proposed Form of Government eliminates many of the passages that define in detail the procedures of governing bodies. A positive aspect of this change may be the freedom offered to governing bodies to establish policies and procedures for their work that best suit the needs of their particular contexts. A negative aspect may be that many Presbyterians may be puzzled or troubled by the silence in the Constitution concerning issues addressed in the Form of Government now in effect.

If the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is ready to make this paradigm shift, the proposed Foundations and Revised Form of Government are coherent from a constitutional perspective to function as a replacement for the existing Form of Government... (ACC Advice on Item 07-01 from as yet unpublished Minutes of the 219th General Assembly)

Advice and Counsel and other Comments were also received from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy and the General Assembly Committee on Representation. The Assembly Committee on the Form of Government Revision (07) of the 219th General Assembly (2010) agreed to a number of the ACC-recommended and other changes to the document and then recommended the approval of the revision by a vote of 37/5/0 (88 percent). The 219th General Assembly (2010) voted to send the amendment to the presbyteries by a vote of 468/204/6 (69 percent).

## General Introduction

The Form of Government Task Force was created by action of the 217th General Assembly (2006) and charged to draft a Revised Form of Government.<sup>1</sup> This charge was the next step in a process of examination and revision to the Form of Government that began in the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

The task force presented its report to the 218th General Assembly (2008). The report included:

- Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, designed to replace G-1.0000–G-4.0403 in the current Form of Government;
- A revised Form of Government, designed to replace G-5.0000–G-18.0401 in the current Form of Government; and
- The Advisory Handbook for Councils, designed to assist in the development of policies and procedures for items moved from the Form of Government to the manual of operations of a council.

The 218th General Assembly (2008) referred the new Form of Government proposal to the Office of the General Assembly for a period of church-wide study and response overseen by the task force, and expanded the task force to include members from the assembly committee to which the report had been assigned. Taking into account the responses gathered, the expanded task force was directed to produce a new draft of the documents for consideration by the 219th General Assembly (2010).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Minutes*, 2006, Part I, p. 366; assembly action, pp. 38–39.

The five elements of the task force's charge:

- (1) The new Form of Government shall preserve our foundational polity (perhaps most concisely laid out in the first four chapters of the current Form of Government).
- (2) The focus of the Form of Government shall be on providing leadership for local congregations as missional communities.
- (3) The presbytery shall continue as the central governmental unit, as it has been throughout most of our history. The Form of Government shall provide sufficient authority and flexibility to allow the presbytery to assist congregations in addressing the changing cultural, economic, and societal challenges in our new millennial world. The FOG Task Force shall take notice of and address the institutional and structural impediments that currently cripple so very many of our presbyteries.
- (4) The new Form of Government shall provide flexibility at all levels, granting authority while permitting governing bodies to develop the structures to carry out their respective missions.
- (5) The FOG Task Force shall be guided by the principles proposed by Recommendations 1–4 from the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, using those principles as a guide for its own processes and deliberations. They shall incorporate this new Presbyterian ethos into the Form of Government so that it truly functions as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s guidebook for mission.

<sup>2</sup> *Minutes*, 2006, Part I, pp. 368–371.

<sup>3</sup> [\*Minutes, 218th General Assembly \(2008\), Part I, pp. 391–450.\*](#) (Link is to PC-Biz report). The referral was that the recommendation be referred to the Office of the General Assembly with comment:

The referral to the Office of the General Assembly is for a period of consultation and study with churches and presbyteries through a system or systems designed and implemented by the Form of Government Task Force and members of the 218th General Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions. The participation of every presbytery in the period of consultation and study will be strongly urged. New members of this expanded task force are to be chosen from the 218th General Assembly (2008) Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions by the Moderator of the 218th General Assembly (2008), in consultation with the moderator and vice moderator of the 218th General Assembly (2008) Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions.

The new task force will revise the Form of Government Task Force Report, taking into account the concerns and suggestions gleaned from the consultation and study process. The guidance of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution, the overtures, and the testimony received by the 218th General Assembly (2008) Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions and the committee's comments are referred to the task force for serious and studied consideration.

The revised report of the Form of Government task force is to be submitted to the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly no later than October 15, 2009, for distribution to the church at large no later than January 15, 2010, for consideration by the 219th General Assembly (2010)... [Note: The referral also appended a list of recommendations from the assembly committee that were considered in the revision of the Form of Government documents.]

With one exception, all of the members of the original task force chose to remain part of the new task force. Carol Hunley, Grace Bowen, and Daniel S. Williams were added to the task force from the 217th General Assembly (2006) Committee on Form of Government Revision.

The task force met in August 2008, under the leadership of the Moderator of the 218th General Assembly (2008), the Reverend Bruce Reyes-Chow, to reorganize and begin its work. Cynthia Bolbach and Daniel S. Williams were elected co-moderators of the task force. The task force divided itself into three work teams focused on writing the document, creating study materials, and designing communication tools.

The task force produced an interim version of the proposed Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government documents based on the feedback received through the 218th General Assembly (2008)—all of the overtures, advice and counsel memoranda, and comments from the assembly committee. These documents were made available online in mid October 2008 for a period of study and response across the church until June 30, 2009. The task force also developed three papers to guide the study process: an overall description of the objectives of the study process, a guide to assist individuals in studying the documents in preparation for participation in a group response, and a guide for groups to use in discussing and responding to the documents. In addition, the paper, “What Is Missional Ecclesiology?,” written by task force member Paul Hooker, was made available to stimulate discussion of missional polity.

Throughout its work, the task force reduced its number of face-to-face meetings by using conference calls, Go-to-Meetings online, Project Path (a Web-based editing tool), and email. Individuals and groups across the church submitted responses to the proposed documents, which were collected by Research Services and forwarded regularly to the task force. Task force members also made themselves available to a wide variety of governing bodies and other groups to interpret their work and gather additional input. This included communications from and/or visits to at least sixty-six presbyteries, seven synod gatherings, eighteen individual sessions or congregations, six PC(USA)-sponsored gatherings, and sixteen other groups.

At the conclusion of the study period, the task force produced its final version of the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and the proposed Form of Government. The group met in August 2009 to finalize and approve its recommendations to the 219th General Assembly (2010).

Members of the Form of Government Task Force (2008–2010): Elder Diana J. Barber, Elder Cynthia J. Bolbach, Rev. Grace E. Bowen, Rev. Gemechisa Guja, Rev. Paul K. Hooker, Elder Carol A. Hunley, Rev. James H. Y. Kim, Rev. Neal E. Lloyd, Rev. Paige M. McRight, Rev. Stephen W. Smith, and Rev. Daniel S. Williams. Elder Sharon M. Davison served on the original task force (2006–2008).

### ***Rationale provided by the Form of Government Task Force***

God calls the church to be in mission in God’s world. In Christ, the church participates in God’s mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God’s love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ.

The recommended revisions to the *Book of Order* do not change the constitutional standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Rather, these revisions return the Form of Government to its original intent—a constitution rather than a manual of operations. By so doing, it establishes a polity that empowers the church to engage effectively in the mission of God in the twenty-first century. This revised polity lifts up and enhances the core values that shape and govern the whole church. This polity enables the councils of the church to establish the processes through which they can effectively serve God’s mission in their own contexts. As we the church know, affirm, and live out these overarching standards that shape our life together, the work we do will be clearer, more easily understood, and more united in serving our Lord in mission.

The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity lays out the principles that are basic—or foundational—to government, worship, and discipline for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Preserving the vast majority of the material in the first four chapters of the current Form of Government, this section organizes the material into three chapters:

- The first focuses on the activity of God in the world in which the church participates. It describes what the church is called to be and do in terms of the Nicene Creed and the Reformation notes from the Scots Confession and the six Great Ends of the Church. It concludes with a section on the church’s openness to the guidance of the Holy

## General Introduction

Spirit, which calls the church to reform, to ecumenicity, to unity in its diversity, and to openness to God's mission in the world.

- The second describes how the Confessions function in the life of the church.
- The third outlines the historic principles of church order and government.

The proposed Form of Government spells out the constitutional framework for government of this denomination as it seeks to respond to God's call to life in mission.

- Chapter I defines the structure of the congregation and the call to membership in a congregation.
- Chapter II details the orders of ministry (formerly called "offices" of deacon, elder, and minister of the Word and Sacrament) and lifts up our distinctive commitment to parity between ruling elders and teaching elders in the church's work of government and mission.
- Chapter III reclaims the ancient name of "councils" for those bodies in the church that order its life through deliberation and decisions. This chapter emphasizes the requirement for diversity at every council more inclusive than the session. It describes the work of councils using the marks of the true church: proclamation of the Word, administration of the Sacraments, and right ministrations of discipline.
- Chapter IV provides for those places where the government of the church engages with civil government.
- Chapter V describes the church's involvement in church union and ecumenicity.
- Chapter VI provides for interpretation and amendment of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

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In addition to the proposed changes to the Form of Government, **"the 219th General Assembly (2010) commends to the councils of the church the "Advisory Handbook for Councils for the Development of Policies and Procedures Required by the Form of Government."** [The text of the handbook follows the wording of the revised Form of Government in the accompanying booklet.]

### *Rationale provided by the Form of Government Task Force*

The 217th General Assembly (2006) instructed the task force to provide handbooks to the councils of the church for developing required policies and procedures to carry out their mission. This handbook is an aid to developing those policies and procedures. It should be noted that in the event that councils wish to continue operating with the same structures and procedures they already have, compliant with the current Form of Government (*Book of Order 2009–2011*), there is no requirement for procedures to change under the revised Form of Government.

### *Advice from the Advisory Committee on the Constitution*

One of the common misconceptions about the Proposed Form of Government is that its approval will cause the existing manuals of each of the governing bodies to become null and void, requiring the councils across the church to spend substantial time writing new manuals. There is no provision in the Proposed Form of Government that would void the existing manuals. If manuals of governing bodies or councils include citations to nonexistent provisions or to provisions in a defunct Constitution, those citations merely indicate that the governing body or council adopted the rule to accord with a constitutional provision formerly in effect. The rule would not be invalidated unless it was in conflict with the new Constitution, an unlikely event in a Form of Government written to increase flexibility."

## What's In the New Form of Government?

### *Recommendations to Sessions and Presbyteries for Studying the Proposed Form of Government<sup>4</sup>*

It may be helpful for congregations, sessions, and presbyteries to plan for a time of study of the proposed Form of Government prior to the presbytery's vote. This study can be done individually, but will be most effective when done with others so that different perspectives can be shared and the theology and understanding of the church expressed in the document can be discussed together. **It is suggested** that presbyteries plan to allow at least an hour on the docket of a stated meeting for the purpose of this study.

1. Read the rationale for Recommendation One in the report to get an overview of the purpose of this revision and a summary of its contents.
2. Read the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and consider these questions:
  - The rationale for recommending this revision says that the first chapter of the Foundations focuses on the activity of God in the world in which the church participates. As you look at that chapter, particularly F-1.01 and F-1.02, how do you see the relationship between God's mission, Christ's Lordship, and the church's calling?
  - Where in these sections do you find God's call to the church to share God's saving love with the world?
  - Of the several ways we have historically understood the call of the church that are in section F-1.03, which best describes your personal understanding of the church? Which challenges you most to a new or expanded understanding?
  - F-1.04 reminds us that the power of the Spirit is at work in the church calling us to engage in God's work in the world. As you read this section, how do you see the work of the Spirit related to ecumenicity, diversity, and openness?
  - What does F-2.0 say to you about how the Confessions function in the life of the church?
  - How does F-3.0 help you understand what it means to be Presbyterian and how the way Presbyterians make decisions in the church is different from other denominations?
  - How would you imagine using the Foundations? (e.g., in officer training, confirmation, new member orientation, commissioner orientation, etc.)
3. Read the Form of Government and then consider these questions as you reflect on each chapter.

#### *Chapter 1*

- Summarize in your own words what it means to be a congregation based on G-1.0.
- Summarize what it means to be a member of a congregation based on G-1.03.

#### *Chapter 2*

- Having read this chapter, what do you understand to be the purpose of Ordered Ministry in the life of the church?
- Summarize or describe the ministries of deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders. How is this the same or different from the understanding you had before you read this chapter?

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<sup>4</sup> As its final act the task force prepared this study guide for use by session and presbyteries in evaluating this proposal.

## What's in the New Form of Government

For committees on ministry and presbyteries, especially:

- How would your presbytery provide for the relationship between the presbytery and teaching elders as described in this chapter in sections G-2.05 and G-2.07–G-2.09?
- Will it be helpful in your presbytery to permit exceptions as described in G-2.0504c?

For committees on preparation for ministry and presbyteries, especially:

- Does the process you now have in your presbytery and committee for guiding inquirers and candidates through the preparation process work well in your context? Will you need to add policies or procedures to your manual to guide that work?
- Does G-2.1001 - G-2.1004 give you the flexibility you need as a presbytery to prepare and commission ruling elders for particular service in congregations?

### *Chapter 3*

- Read G-3.01 for an overview of the work of councils in the church. Then, turn to the sections relevant to the session (G-3.02) and/or presbytery (G-3.03) where you serve.
- How does organizing the responsibility and power of each council by the Notes of the Reformed Church help you to understand the role each has in carrying out the mission of the church?
- How would the flexibility in strategy and process provided in the proposed Form of Government allow your congregation or fellowship to witness more effectively in your setting?

### *Chapter 4*

- How does Chapter 4 help you understand where the government of the church engages with civil government?

### *Chapter 5*

- What provisions from the current Form of Government would you want to preserve in your manuals to guide the organization of a union presbytery or union or federated congregations?

### *Chapter 6*

- Is it clear to you how changes to and interpretation of the Constitution (the *Book of Order* and *The Book of Confessions*) would be accomplished in the proposed Form of Government?