

Decisions Congregations and Sessions Need to Make

In light of the adoption of the new Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government, there are several items about which sessions and congregations need to make decisions in the relatively near future. There is no rush about any of this, but my advice would be to schedule these items for consideration and decisions at the earliest convenient occasion.

Decisions Congregations Need to Make

The following are matters that should be determined by the congregation, *if they are not already determined in your bylaws*. In normal practice, such matters would come to the congregation upon recommendation from the session, but they can be initiated simply by motion from the floor. The session should include in the call for the congregational meeting the matters about which congregational decisions are needed.

- ❖ *Determine quorum for congregational meetings (G-1.0501)*. This passage gives congregations the right to determine for themselves what the quorum for a congregational meeting will be. I would recommend the adoption of the previous *Book of Order* standard of not less than one-tenth of the active membership, and in no case less than three members.
- ❖ *Determine the period of minimum notice for a congregational meeting (G-1.0502)*. This passage gives a congregation the right to determine what the required minimum notice for any congregational meeting. The previous standard has been at least ten days, to include two Sundays, and that the announcement would be made both in writing and from the pulpit. Whether that continues to be a realistic standard is a matter for each congregation to consider.
- ❖ *Determine whether to adopt Robert's Rules as parliamentary authority*. The new *Book of Order*, unlike the previous version, does not mandate that congregational meetings must be conducted with *Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised (RRONR)* as the parliamentary authority. Of course, the basic form of *Robert's* is virtually second nature to our meeting style, and many will wonder whether there is any other way. It may therefore be wise simply to enact a simple provision in the congregation's minutes that, barring suspension of the rules, *RRONR* will be the parliamentary authority in meetings of the congregation.
- ❖ *Determine the size and composition of the congregational nominating committee (G-2.0401)*. The new *Book of Order* provides greater freedom to a congregation to compose its congregational nominating committee. The basic standard of the new G-2.0401 is that the CNC will be composed of no less than three active members of the congregation, at least one of whom must be a ruling elder in active service on the session. The pastor of the congregation serves as a member *ex officio*, without vote. Congregations may wish to be more specific than this basic standard, creating a larger committee or specifying other groups within the congregation's life from which one or

more members are drawn. If a congregation wishes to be specific that a majority of the CNC membership must *not* be in active service on the session, it should indicate that, as well.

Decisions Sessions Need to Make

There are also several items about which sessions should make procedural decisions. Some of these may already be in session manuals of operation or in the records of the session.

- ❖ *Whether to keep a list of inactive members (G-1.04).* The new *Book of Order* no longer requires that the session maintain a roll of inactive members. For some sessions, the inactive member roll has served a pastoral function, reminding the session of members who are no longer active but are still of concern to the congregation. It is perfectly permissible to maintain a list of such persons, if that is the session's desire. On the other hand, sessions may wish to go through the inactive roll and either remove the names of persons who have ceased to be active altogether, or restore some to active status. Bear in mind that any person restored to active status is a person for whom the session is responsible to pay a *per capita* apportionment.
- ❖ *How to prepare people for active membership (G-1.0402).* This is not a new responsibility, but the new emphasis in the *Book of Order* on membership as a covenant between God, the member, and the congregation provides an opportunity to revisit the way sessions prepare new members for their obligations as members. Please look at the responsibilities for membership listed in G-1.0304, and consider how to encourage both new and continuing members to take these responsibilities with greater seriousness and zeal.
- ❖ *How to examine those elected as deacons, ruling elders (G-2.0104b).* Again, the responsibility of sessions to examine those elected is not new. What is new is the standard of G-2.0104b, approved this year to replace the old "fidelity and chastity" language. However you may feel about the change, it is clear that the change reemphasizes the obligation on the session to do a careful and prayerful job of examining those whom the congregation elects to be deacons and ruling elders. At minimum, such examinations should cover the gifts, skills, and suitability to the responsibilities of the ministry of deacon or ruling elder, and it should assess whether the candidate is likely able to live out the commitments made in giving affirmative answers to the ordination/installation questions in W-4.4003. In making this decision, sessions are to be guided by Scripture and the confessions. Sessions may wish to draft a set of basic exam questions they will routinely pose as "discussion starters" for candidate examinations.
- ❖ *What term the session clerk will serve (G-3.0104).* The session should determine, if it has not already done so, what term the session clerk will serve. Neither the previous nor the

new *Book of Order* mandate a specific term for the clerk, but both leave the matter to the session's discretion. Practice varies, but most clerks serve terms of one, two, or three years.

- ❖ *What term the treasurer will serve (G-3.0205)* The session shall elect a treasurer for a term as decided by the session. The previous *Book of Order* required the treasurer to be elected annually.
- ❖ *Develop an administrative manual of operations, and a policies/processes for sexual misconduct and financial review (G-3.0106, 3.0113, and 3.0205).* This is a new requirement for sessions, although many congregations have had by laws and administrative manuals for years. If your session has such a manual, there is no need to change it unless you determine that you wish to do so. If your session does not have an administrative manual, it should begin the work of creating one. There is a bylaws template and list of matters to be addressed in an administrative manual available at www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment.

Also new this year is the requirement that every congregation have a sexual misconduct policy. Two sample policies are listed on the presbytery website www.shenpres.org

Financial review is not a new requirement, having been part of our *Book of Order* for many years. The requirements of the new *Book of Order* are not different from the previous requirements. However, if your session has not created a process for handling money and reviewing the congregation's finances, this would be a good time to do so.

- ❖ *Determine the quorum for session meetings (G-3.0203).* Under the previous *Book of Order*, the session could set its own quorum, provided that it was no less than the pastor (or other presiding officer) and one-third of the ruling elders, but not less than two ruling elders. The exception was that for meetings to receive new members the quorum was the moderator and two members of session. The new language states that the session determines its own quorum, but requires that the quorum include the moderator and either a specific number of ruling elders or a specific percentage of the membership of the session. The session may, if it wishes, determine a higher quorum.

Other items to note:

"Offices" are now "Orders of Ministry" G-2.01

"Ministers of Word and Sacrament" are also "Teaching Elders" G-2.05

"Elders" are now "Ruling Elders" G-2.03

"Governing Bodies" are now "Councils" when referred to collectively or generically
G-3.01

"Commissioned Lay Pastors" are referred to as "commissioning ruling elders to pastoral service" G-2.10

The Committee on Ministry has not determined if they will change this title or not.

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You are encourage to read and study the following (Basically what was found in the first four chapters in the former *Book of Order*):

“The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity”

- F – 1 Mission of the Church
- F – 2 The Church and its Confessions
- F – 3 Principles of Order and Government