

Frequently Asked Questions

The Change in Ordination Standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

1. How is the change in ordination standards happening?

A majority of the 173 presbyteries have approved a change in language for ordination standards recommended by The General Assembly in 2010. In all, since the General Assembly meeting, 55% of the total number of commissioners voting in presbyteries has approved the amendment.

2. Specifically, what language is being changed?

The following **old language** will be replaced by new language:

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

The **new language** (Amendment 10-A):

Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.14.0240; G- 14.0450) shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

3. What does the change in ordination standards mean?

The ordination standards have changed from "living in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness" to "joyfully submitting to the Lordship of Jesus Christ." This removes a national standard categorically prohibiting the ordination of persons in sexual relationships outside of marriage between a man and a woman.

4. What does the change in ordination standards represent?

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has shifted the authority for applying its ordination standards from the national level to the local presbytery and session level. This represents a de-centralization of the church and puts more discernment in the hands of people at the local level.

5. May congregations now ordain people who are openly gay?

The previous standards were never based on a person's orientation, but on their behavior. The new standards do not list specific behaviors that automatically exclude someone for consideration for ordination. Each examining body is responsible to look at all possible factors to determine if someone is being called into ordained ministry.

6. Specifically, what was changed?

The primary change is the removal of language requiring those ordained "to live either in fidelity in the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness." It also adds language referring to obedience to Christ, and indicates that fidelity to church standards is judged case by case by the examining body.

7. What practical changes will we see?

If pastors, elders, and deacons who are ordained in one area move to another location, they shall be examined by that ordaining body before being able to take up their office. That body may choose to apply ordination standards differently from the officer's previous body.

8. Is the ordination of sexually active gays and lesbians mandated?

No, it is not required, but it is no longer prohibited by specific Constitutional language.

9. Will a congregation be required to change anything?

A congregation cannot be forced to ordain or receive pastors or elders or deacons of whom they do not approve. The congregation retains the right to determine who will serve as officers.

10. May a congregation continue to consider sexual activity outside marriage between a man and a woman as impermissible for its officers?

Yes, as long as the application is on a case by case basis. The authority for ordaining elders and deacons is fully vested in the

local congregation. The new language calls the ordaining body to be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying ordination standards to individual candidates.

11. May a congregation or presbytery now ordain or install a sexually active homosexual?

Yes, if after a thorough examination, the congregation or presbytery believes the person to be called by God to serve as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament, elder or deacon and not to be living in violation of the church's ordination standard, its Confessions, or Scripture.

12. Does the new language give candidates who are sexually active outside the covenant of marriage between a woman and a man the "right" to be ordained?

Nobody has a "right" to be ordained. Ordination is based on a sense of God's call as confirmed by the ordaining body.

13. May a presbytery continue to function with the standard of "fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness" when examining candidates for ordination?

Yes, as long as the application is on a case by case basis. The new language calls the ordaining body to be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying ordination standards to each candidate.

14. Is a presbytery required to receive, by transfer of membership, an ordained sexually active gay or lesbian minister?

No, each presbytery determines which ministers to receive into its membership.

15. May questions about a candidate's sexuality be asked or are such questions forbidden?

All questions are allowed during an examination. The acknowledgment of being sexually active outside the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman does not automatically disqualify a person from being ordained.

16. Is a congregation required to call a pastor who is openly gay or lesbian?

No.

For further discussion of these or any other questions, please call any of the following New Covenant Presbytery staff persons, who will be glad to visit with you: Mike Cole, Lynn Hargrove, or Mary Marcotte.

Now that it has been adopted

***Frequently Asked Questions about the New Form of Government
Office of the General Assembly
June 2011
For Information: Presbytery of New Covenant (6-11-2011)***

When will the new Form of Government take effect?

The new Form of Government will take effect on July 10, 2011, which is one year after the adjournment of the 219th General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

What has changed with the adoption of the new Form of Government?

The same basic polity that has defined the core work of the councils (governing bodies) of the Presbyterian Church continues with the new Form of Government. This revision is not so much about the "what" that councils do – our essential polity – as it is about the "who" and the "how." Increased flexibility in structures and procedures in a less regulatory environment is the major change that has occurred. The new Form of Government allows councils to increase their focus on God's work and how the church can most effectively participate in that work in each situation, rather than being focused on an increasingly lengthy and burdensome list of requirements.

Will a council need to immediately revise its manual of operations?

Existing manuals – already required of presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly, and also in use by many sessions – remain in force until changed by a council. Revisions do not have to be made immediately, affording a council time to determine what structures and procedures will work best to carry out its identified mission for Jesus Christ. The "Advisory Handbook

for Councils” identifies policies and procedures required by the new Form of Government for each council, most of which should already be in place and would be revised only if and when a council deems it necessary.

What about sessions that have no manual?

Sessions will need to create a manual of their policies and procedures that will, at the least, need to define certain discretionary powers now given to them. These are described in the Advisory Handbook and include such things as quorums, adequate notice for special meetings, any changes to the nominations process, and so forth. Many of these might already exist as standing policies (prior actions) of the session. The size of the manual will depend on how detailed the structure is that the session has in place.

What happens to existing Authoritative Interpretations under the new Form of Government?

Authoritative Interpretations (AIs) of the Constitution can only be made or rescinded by the General Assembly. All current AIs remain in effect until changed by a future General Assembly, which is precisely the situation that has always existed with any amendment to the Form of Government that has been previously interpreted. A task force is currently working to make recommendations to the 220th General Assembly (2012) on the continuing status of all AIs, based on guidelines provided by the Advisory Committee on the Constitution to the 219th General Assembly (2010).

How will accountability be enforced in the new Form of Government?

The new Form of Government continues the long-standing Presbyterian principle of right-of-review of one council by the next higher council (F-3.0206, G-3.0108). Emphasis is also placed on the need for consultation between councils on mission strategy, structures, and procedures. Enforcement of administrative and judicial directives relies even now on trust and mutual accountability, undergirded by our belief that all church power is ministerial and declarative (F-3.0107).

Our work together as Presbyterians gathered in congregations and councils of the church will continue to be guided by this important declaration: “The polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) presupposes the fellowship of women, men, and children united in covenant relationship with one another and with God through Jesus Christ. The organization rests on the fellowship and is not designed to work without trust and love” (new G-1.0102; compare to current G-7.0103). No Form of Government can legislate this trust and love, but by answering the new Form of Government’s call to work cooperatively and collegially to identify and implement the mission of each council of the church, we may find a deepened sense of commitment and connection to Jesus Christ and each other as the journey progresses.

What impact will the adoption of Amendment 10-A have on the text of the new Form of Government?

The passage of Amendment 10-A that changed the text of current G-6.0106b will also change the text of the same passage in the new Form of Government, G-2.0104b. The new language of the amendment will replace the current language in G-2.0104b. The same is true for several other amendments adopted this year. At the end of each amendment in the booklet published by the Office of the General Assembly (Booklet #3) is a statement that indicates the impact of the adoption of the amendment on the new Form of Government.

When will the new edition of the Book of Order that contains the new Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and new Form of Government be available?

It is anticipated that the print version of the new Book of Order will be in the warehouse by the second week of July, after which orders will begin to be processed.

TEN THINGS TO DO NOW AND LATER (SESSIONS & CONGREGATIONS)

Now

1. Study the Foundations (F) in Book of Order (congregation & session).
2. Provide for quorum for congregational meetings (congregation).
3. Provide policy for required meeting notice for stated/called meetings (congregation for their meetings/session for theirs).
4. Provide a process for nominating committee/nominations (congregation).
5. Establish term length for Treasurer and for Clerk of Session (session).
6. Establish supervision for Treasurer (session). [e.g., could be assigned by session to a committee, Board of Deacons or Trustees]
7. Develop a strategy for members who have ceased participation (session); “inactive roll” no longer required, although permitted.
8. Adopt a Sexual Misconduct Policy as required by Constitution (session).
9. Develop criteria for ordered ministries – election, examination, installation/ordination (session) size of session and Board of Deacons (congregation).
10. Develop/amend Manual of Operations as required by Constitution (session).

Later

1. Review the mission strategy of the congregation’s ministry (mission guides form and function) (session).
2. Ensure church’s mission is inclusive and representative (session).
3. Review financial policies and procedures; ensure insurance and liability coverage is adequate and recorded in session minutes; provide for annual financial review (session).
4. Define how to receive and nurture new members (instruction/orientation/ incorporation) (session).
5. Develop and maintain three membership rolls (session) [active, baptized, affiliate].
6. Provide schedule for observance of Lord’s Supper (session).
7. Provide schedule for regular session meetings (minimum 4X year) (session).
8. Develop a strategy for participating in the mission and ministry of the presbytery (session).
9. Develop and adopt/review/amend bylaws for congregation and corporation; establish parliamentary procedure for congregational meetings (RROO or other) (congregation).
10. Maintain and keep current the Manual of Operations (session).

The Revised Book of Order

PART I (F): The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity

A. Chapter One (F-1): The Mission of the Church

- F-1.01 God's mission
- F-1.02 Lordship of Christ
- F-1.03 The Calling of the Church
 - Church as the Body of Christ
 - Church as One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic
 - Church called to proclaim the Word, administer the Sacraments, nurture the community of disciples through ecclesiastical discipline
 - Great ends of the Church
- F-1.04 Openness to the Spirit

B. Chapter Two (F-2): The Church and Its Confessions

- Mostly the contents of Chapter II in 2009/2011 Book of Order on the Confessions
- Two additions:
 - Reflection on the confessions as attempts to articulate the truths of the gospel imperiled by their times
 - *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei* ("the Church reformed, always being reformed according to God's word")

C. Chapter Three (F-3): Principles of Order and Government

- F-3.01 - Historic Principles Of Church Order (1789)
- F-3.02 - Principles of Presbyterian Government (1797)
- F-3.03 - The Nature of Foundational Statements
- F-3.04 - Contents of the Constitution

PART II (G): The Form of Government

- G-1: The Congregation and Its Members (former concerns of chapters 5 and 7)
- G-2: Ordered Ministry, Commissioning, and Certification (formerly chapters 6 and 14)
- G-3: The Councils of the Church (formerly chapters 9-13)
- G-4: The Church and Civil Authority (formerly chapter 8)
- G-5: Ecumenicity and Church Union (formerly chapters 15-17)
- G-6: Interpreting and Amending the Constitution (formerly chapter 18)

(G-1) The Congregation and Its Members

- G-1.0101 - Mission of the Congregation
- G-1.0301 - The Meaning of Membership
- G-1.04 - Categories of Membership
 - No "Inactive Member" category
- G-1.05 - Congregational Meetings

(G-2) Ordered Ministry, Commissioning, & Certification

- Ordered Ministry - replaces "office"
- Deacons: The Ministry of Compassion and Service
- Ruling Elder: The Ministry of Discernment and Governance
- Teaching Elder: The Ministry of the Word and Sacrament
- G-2.0104b = new language of Amendment 10-A, adopted by presbyteries in 2011
- Preparation for Ministry (G-2.06)
- Ordination (G-2.07)
- Ruling Elders Commissioned to Particular Pastoral Service (G-2.10)
- Certified Church Service (G-2.11)

(G-3) Councils of the Church

- "Councils" rather than "governing bodies" - the church's name for the gathering of its leadership to make theological decisions

- Work of Councils organized around Reformed Notes: proclamation, sacraments, covenant community
- Mandates functions, not structures
- 219th GA restored the requirement that councils have a “committee on representation” but did not list a required membership

(G-4) The Church and Civil Authority

- Most of the contents of G-8.0000 in 2009/2011 Book of Order are here.
- G-4.0203 = “Property trust clause” of 2009/2011 Book of Order G-8.0201
- Moved language about mandatory reporting from G-6.0000 in 2009/2011 Book to G-4.03 in 2011/2013 Book

(G-5) Ecumenicity and Church Union

- Definitions of
 - “Correspondence” (G-5.0201)
 - “Full Communion” (G-5.0202)
 - “Ecumenical Statements” (G-5.0203)
- Joint Congregational Witness (G-5.03)
- Union councils (G-5.04)
- Joint congregational witness with other churches (G-5.05) - replaces “union” and “federated”

(G-6) Interpreting and Amending the Constitution

- G-6.02 - Advisory Committee on the Constitution (moved from G-13.0112 in the 2009/2011 Book of Order)
- Process for amending Book of Confessions and Book of Order remains the same

DECISIONS CONGREGATIONS NEED TO MAKE

- Determine the quorum for congregational meetings. (G-1.0501)
- Determine the period of minimum notice for a congregational meeting (G-1.0502)
- Determine whether the congregation wishes to adopt Robert’s Rules as parliamentary authority.
- Determine the size and composition of the congregational nominating committee (G-2.0401)

DECISIONS SESSIONS NEED TO MAKE

- Whether to keep a list of inactive members (G-1.04)
- How will you prepare people for active membership? (G-1.0402)
- How will you examine those elected as deacons and ruling elders? (G-2.0104b)
- What term will the session clerk serve? (G-3.0104)
- Develop a manual of operations, including a sexual misconduct policy and a process for financial review. (G-3.0106, 3.0113, and 3.0205)
- Obtain property and liability coverage (G-3.0112)
- Determine the quorum for session meetings. (G-3.0203)

DECISIONS PRESBYTERIES NEED TO MAKE

- What titles and terms shall we use for temporary pastoral relationships? (G-2.0504b)
- Shall the presbytery permit interim/ associate succession?(G-2.0504c)
- Who will preside at presbytery in the absence of the moderator? (G-3.0104)
- What term will the stated clerk serve? (G-3.0104)
- What plan will we use to determine how many commissioners each session should elect?(G-3.0301)
- What mechanisms and processes will we use to serve as pastor, advisor, and counselor to teaching elders and congregations? (G-3.0307)
- What mechanisms and processes will we use to guide, nurture, and oversee the process of preparing to become a teaching elder? (G-3.0307)

THE CHALLENGE: A CHANGE OF MINDSET

- Can we learn to approach our polity not as a set of rules but as a description of our common life?
- Can we change the pattern of creating a rule to address every uncertainty, and learn to apply the broad principles of our polity with creativity and flexibility?

CLERK'S COLUMN

This column includes a significant amount of research conducted by former stated clerk, Julie MacLemore, in preparation for the February meeting of the presbytery when the new Form of Government was considered by New Covenant. Thank you, Julie!

I am writing this on June 7, the day the new Form of Government (nFOG) received the 87th positive vote for adoption – by Trinity Presbytery. This means changes are ahead regarding how we order ourselves as presbyteries, congregations and sessions. In printed format the new Book of Order will be available by the end of July, although it will go into effect on July 11. In the meantime, you can download the full text of the new Form of Government (nFOG) from the presbytery's website, as well as materials that will be helpful to sessions during the transition. Once on the website find "Office of the Stated Clerk" in the navigation bar on the left, click, and you'll see these materials listed. In particular, the side-by-side comparison of the current FOG with nFOG is a resource that we should all keep handy. The following has been prepared as another resource for our transition to nFOG.

ITEMS THAT WILL REQUIRE CONGREGATION AND SESSION ATTENTION

With the adoption of nFOG there are a number of decisions congregations and sessions will have to make that are currently spelled out in the Book of Order. The following list is not all-inclusive but can serve as a guide. Some of these items may already be addressed in a congregation's by-laws, so it is wise to review them before taking any action.

Congregations will have to

1. determine how meetings of the congregation will be handled w/re: parliamentary procedure. This can be done by adopting a rule that meetings will be conducted according to the most recent version of Roberts Rules, or define another process.
2. provide by rule for minimum notification requirements for a congregational meeting.
3. provide by rule the quorum necessary to conduct the business of a congregational meeting.
4. define by rule the composition of a nominating committee, how often this committee will be elected and what the term of service of a nominating committee member will be.
5. provide by rule who will moderate the session in congregations served by co-pastors.
6. provide by rule the quorum required to conduct business in meetings of the congregation.

Sessions will have to

7. provide by rule the quorum required to conduct business at its meetings.
8. develop a manual of administrative operations that specify the form and guide for mission and ministry in that council (formerly governing body). Current administrative or operations manuals may serve as the bases for the new manuals.

New Vocabulary Includes

Council: formerly "governing body" i.e., sessions, presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly will be councils of the denomination, no longer "governing bodies."

Teaching Elder: formerly "Minister of Word and Sacrament"

Ruling Elder: formerly "elder"

Commissioned Ruling Elder (to particular pastoral service): formerly "Commissioned Lay Pastor"

Ordered Ministries: formerly "offices in ministry" – Ordered Ministries will include deacons and presbyters (teaching and ruling elders)

I will be offering a workshop on transitioning to nFOG at FOCUS on October 1 at St. Philip Presbyterian Church for clerks and moderators of sessions and any other interested ruling elders. A similar workshop will be developed for presbytery leadership, time and location TBA.