

HANDBOOK FOR RULING ELDERS IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

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The Awesome Task of Elders

By Cindy Bolbach

Parity between Ministers and Elders

I was baptized and raised Lutheran. When I joined a Presbyterian church as an adult I gradually became aware of Presbyterian polity and the way we structure our life together. I was especially taken by the insistence on an equal division of responsibility in the governance of the church between elders and ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

That parity is reflected in the proposed new Form of Government (often called “nFOG”) that has been submitted for approval to the upcoming 219th General Assembly. The nFOG uses the terms “ruling elder” (rather than simply “elder”) and “teaching elder” (rather than “minister of the Word and Sacrament”) to underscore the fact that, although ruling and teaching elders perform different functions, they share equally in the leadership and spiritual direction of the faith community. “Ruling” elders are so named not because we “rule,” but because we are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God. Teaching elders are committed to teaching the faith and equipping the saints for the work of ministry. Together, ruling and teaching elders lead the community of faith as it seeks to proclaim the gospel with passion and integrity.

Privilege and Responsibility

For those of us who are ruling elders, this parity of leadership is a privilege and a responsibility.

It is a privilege because we are entrusted with the matchless opportunity to step out in faith—trembling as we go—to give nurture and direction to God’s people, to help them on their journeys of faith. No task set before us as Christians is more important.

It is also a responsibility—a somewhat daunting responsibility—because stepping out to lead is not easy. Discerning and measuring our faith community’s “fidelity to the Word of God” is an awesome task.

Every person who gets a call from a nominating committee needs to confront some essential questions: Am I suited to this task? Can I do it? Do I really want to do it? Let’s be honest: all who profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are called to ministry, but not all of us are called to be ruling elders, just as not all of us are called to be teaching elders or deacons.

Challenges for Ruling Elders

A critical problem in the church today is that we have allowed the role of ruling elder to be diminished. It has changed from the awesome task of measuring a congregation’s fidelity to the Word of God into the mundane task of serving on just another nonprofit board of directors, receiving reports and approving budgets.

The session is *not* just another board of directors. Every nominating committee needs to make that clear to potential ruling elders. The problem is that a nominating committee all too often feels pressure to fill a certain number of slots, so it glosses over what it really means to be a ruling elder in order to persuade someone to serve. We need to be crystal clear with candidates about the commitments that come with being a ruling elder: a time commitment, a leadership commitment, and a spiritual commitment. Being a ruling elder means much more than attending a meeting on the day of the month the session meets. Ruling elders need to be willing to take risks, to accept the fact that we will sometimes make decisions with which others disagree. Ruling elders need to be willing to confront dysfunction and dysfunctional people and need to be willing to accept that some dysfunction, to a greater or lesser degree, lurks in every congregation. Ruling elders need to be able to set aside their own predilections and preferences and instead ask, “What is best for this community of faith, even if I might not like it?”

Ruling elders need to be spiritual leaders in their congregation. This is our high calling. We need to be able to provide pastoral sustenance to the members of our community, to lead worship, and to preach as needed. We need to be confident enough about all of this so that we don’t fall back on the easy assumption that the pastor the teaching elder does all the “spiritual” stuff; because we ruling elders are as responsible for our congregation as are teaching elders.

Ruling elders also are called to be leaders not only in our congregations but throughout our connectional system: at presbytery, synod, and GA. Ruling elders often view presbytery as a somewhat mysterious “them.” The active involvement and leadership of ruling elders in presbytery can transform the amorphous “them” into a dynamic “us”—an “us” that will enable our strengths and resources to be shared imaginatively and creatively across all our congregations. Our presbyteries, synods, and GA function at their best when *all* ruling elders, not just so called presbytery “geeks” or GA “junkies,” bring their insights and experience to the table.

Following Jesus is life-changing. But following Jesus is not easy, and it can’t be done alone: one person can’t do it alone; one congregation can’t do it alone. We follow Jesus together as a community of faith, coming together with all our strengths and weaknesses. Those of us who have accepted the privilege and responsibility of serving as ruling elders walk alongside every person who makes that life-changing commitment. We say to them, “I will be there with you every step of the way.” And we find ourselves given strength for the journey. Thanks be to God.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

This document is primarily an enumeration of the responsibilities of elders (Teaching and Ruling). This is about how Presbyterians do things decently and in order, as we are often reminded. It is easy to get involved in the business of the church and forget to stop and think about the reasons behind our involvement. We are children of God and committed to doing the work of God. Our thoughts should not stray from the Word of God. Our actions need to be founded on a sound theological basis, and rooted in the Love of God.

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church is composed of two books. The Book of Confessions and the Book of Order.

The Book of Order is divided into four sections:

1. The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity
2. The Form of Government
3. Directory of Worship
4. Rules of Discipline

Relationships

However, the real place to start is with the Bible, which is our reference for faith and practice, and one place to start is to consider the question, "What does God require of me?" rather than "What does my local church, or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) require of me?" The Bible asks this question in two places and gives two complementary answers.

- **Deuteronomy 10:12** gives as the answer: *walk in all God's ways, love him, serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and keep the commandments.*
- Later in the history of Israel, social issues had emerged and **Micah 6:8** gives as the answer: *do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.*

These passages remind us that our first responsibilities are to God. Then we must consider our interaction with our fellow human beings, showing them justice, kindness, and love. Elders (presbyters) are the servant leaders of the congregation and this means, not only to lead in matters of finance and government, but also to lead in matters of love and kindness and justice. Just as we stop to think about the wisdom of spending money for a project, we need to stop and think how we interact with our fellow church members, our family, our fellow workers, those we know casually, and others whom we do not know but come in contact with. Consider an example. The Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ, as given in the *Book of Order*, includes a section that states, "The Church demonstrates the new reality in Christ by the love of its members for one another."⁴

As members of the Church, we are called to demonstrate this love. As elders, we are called to be leaders in demonstrating this love. We are representatives first of God and then of our local church.

⁴G-2.0104

Church Government

The polity (the form of government) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is unique among the various polities of other denominations. Within a particular congregation, the pastor is just one among many serving on the local council (governing body) called the session. The next higher council is the presbytery, which generally encompasses a limited geographical area. Flint River Presbytery has forty-seven congregations and around 5,000 members.

The representatives or commissioners to the presbytery include Teaching Elders (Pastors) and an equal number of Ruling Elders representing the churches. The next council (higher governing body) is the synod. Our presbytery is located within the bounds of The Synod of South Atlantic, which encompasses a larger geographical area (all of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida). There are sixteen synods in the United States. Again, there is equal representation between Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders. The highest council (governing body) is the General Assembly, which again is composed of equal numbers of Teaching and Ruling Elders who are elected by the 171 presbyteries, and meets every other year.

Meaning of Membership and Ordination

Membership

We must begin by confessing our faith in Jesus Christ. Our baptism and public profession of faith are signs that we are Christians. The *Book of Order* lists ways in which Christians are called to be involved in the ministry of the Church.⁵

- proclaiming the good news.
- taking part in the common life and worship of a particular church.
- praying and studying Scripture and the faith of the Christian church.
- supporting the work of the Church through giving of money, time, and talents.
- participating in the governing responsibilities of the Church.
- demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the Church.
- responding to God's activity in the world through service to others.
- living responsibly in all relationships of life.
- working for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment.

Members may be unable to be fully involved in all these ways but, within our own abilities, we should strive to increase our participation and to make it more meaningful.

Ordination

Ordination is the act by which the Church sets apart persons to special specified offices; in the case under consideration here, the office is that of Ruling Elder. Prior to ordination, the persons elected to the office of Ruling Elder must undergo a period of study and preparation.⁶ This includes gaining knowledge of the doctrine, government, and discipline contained in the Constitution of the Church (*The Book of Order* is part of the constitution) and of the duties of the office.

⁵G-1.0304

⁶G2.0402

They must also be examined by the session to certify that the period of study and preparation has been completed and to inquire into their faithfulness in fulfilling their responsibilities.⁷

The service of ordination and installation⁸ is to focus on the joy and responsibility of serving Christ through the missions of the church.

During the service, the newly elected elders are asked to promise or make a covenant:

1. to affirm their faith;
2. to attest to Scriptures;
3. to be led by the Confessions of the Church;
4. to fulfill the office of Ruling Elder;
5. to be governed by the church's polity (form of government);
6. to follow Jesus and love our neighbors;
7. to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church;
8. to serve the people of the congregation with imagination and love;
9. to be a faithful Ruling Elder

A part of this service is the laying on of hands which some versions of the New Testament use as a synonym for ordination (see I Timothy 5:22).

There are some parts of these ordination questions that could be looked at more closely. The question about fulfillment of the office bothers some people. They might question their worthiness or their ability. We should look to Scripture and read about Moses and about Peter. Both felt inadequate for the job and Peter even made public denials of his relationship with Jesus. But God used them and their abilities to do wonderful things. **We need to trust God.** The question about serving the people implies your willingness to be a servant-leader. Jesus set an example that we are to follow when he took a towel and washed the feet of the disciples (John 13:1-10). To be a ruling Elder you need to have a humble spirit so that God can use you to be His voice and hands in providing the spiritual leadership necessary to build the Kingdom of God here on earth.

The Mission of the Church

We must look at the mission of the church in order to understand what is required of Ruling Elders and of sessions. Reading mission statements seems, at times, to be lessons in futility because they tend to be couched in such general terms. However, it is possible to move from the general to the specific and we will attempt to do that. The mission statement that follows about the Church of Jesus Christ is paraphrased and summarized from the *Book of Order*. Although it is taken from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Constitution, it seems to express the mission of the universal church.

The Mission of God—F-1.01

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. This one living God, the Scriptures say,

⁷G-2.0402

⁸W-4.4000

liberated the people of Israel from oppression and covenanted to be their God. By the power of the Spirit, this one living God is incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came to live in the world, die for the world, and be raised again to new life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ announces the nearness of God's kingdom, bringing good news to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are blind, freedom to all who are oppressed, and proclaiming the Lord's favor upon all creation. ***The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church.*** 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. Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God's mission.

The Mission of Your Presbyterian Church

The mission of your Presbyterian Church is to be determined by your session. It is important to ask your pastor and other members of the session to review with you the mission or vision statement for your congregation. These two statements should be complementary. The mission of the local church should encompass the mission of the whole Church but can emphasize one or more aspects of that mission. Look at your church's mission statement and compare it to these statements. Does it emphasize what you believe to be important to your session and to your church in your local context and culture?

Responsibilities of Teaching and Ruling Elders, Session, and Congregation

Ruling Elders as members of the Session—G-2.03 and 3.02

The Book of Order outlines the duties of Ruling Elders both individually and jointly as the session.

Generally, Ruling Elders together with the pastor (Teaching Elder) are to strengthen and nurture the faith and life of the congregation through their leadership and service.

- Encourage the people in the worship and service of God.
- Equip and renew the people for their tasks within the Church.
- Equip and renew the people for their mission in the world.
- Visit, comfort, and care for the people with special attention to the sick and the lonely and to those who are oppressed.
- Inform the session and the Pastor of those who may need special attention.
- Cultivate the ability to teach the Bible.

All Christians have duties they are bound to perform by the law of love. These are especially incumbent upon ruling elders because of their calling to the office.

In addition, Ruling Elders are to:

- Exercise leadership.
- Have responsibility for both the particular church, which they serve, and the Church at large.
- Serve faithfully as a member of the session.
- Serve as commissioner to higher councils when so elected.
- In addition, Ruling Elders and Deacons are to be persons of faith, dedication, and good judgment.

While members of the church have a great deal of freedom of conscience, officers of the church must adhere to the essential tenets of the Reformed faith and polity⁹.

Essentials of the Reformed Faith (not inclusive)¹⁰

- *The Mystery of the Trinity*
- *The Mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God— Jesus*
- *Justification by Grace through Faith*
- *The Authority of the Scriptures*
- *The Sovereignty of God*
- *The Election of God's People*
- *The Covenant Life of the Church*
- *Stewardship of God's Creation*
- *Total Depravity*
- *Obedience to God's Word directs us to work for justice and the transformation of society*

In becoming a candidate or officer of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the exercise of freedom of conscience is placed under limitations. ***The officer is captive to the Word of God as interpreted in the standards of the church¹¹.***

Teaching Elder - G-2.05

Teaching Elders who are called to be pastors are responsible for:

- Studying, teaching, and preaching the Word.
- Administering Baptism and the Lord's Supper.
- Praying with and for the congregation.
- Equipping and enabling the people for their tasks within the church and their mission to the world.
- Exercising pastoral care, devoting special attention to the poor, sick, troubled and the dying.
- Participating in governing responsibilities including leadership of the congregation in implementing the principles of participation and inclusiveness in the decision making of the church, and its task of reaching out in service to the life of the human community as a whole.
- Sharing in the ministry of the church in councils above the session.
- Encouraging the people in the worship and service of God.

The Teaching Elder has responsibilities with respect to the worship of the people that is not subject to the authority of the session or the congregation:

- The selection of Scripture to be read, and its translation.
- The preaching of the sermon or the exposition of the Word.
- The prayers to be offered.
- The music to be sung.
- The use of drama, dance, and other art forms.

⁹G-2.0105

¹⁰F-2.01-2.05

¹¹F-3.0101

The Session—G-3.02

The session is the council for the congregation. It is composed of those persons elected by the congregation to active service as Ruling Elders, together with all installed pastors and associate pastors. **All members of the session are entitled to vote.** The pastor shall be the moderator of the session, and the session shall not meet without the pastor or designated moderator. If there is no installed pastor, or if the installed pastor is unable to invite another moderator, the presbytery shall make provisions for a moderator. **Presbyteries shall provide by rule for moderators when the session is without a moderator for reasons of vacancy or inconvenience.**

The session is responsible (through the clerk) to keep accurate minutes and membership rolls. The session elects a clerk for a specified period of time, such as one year as determined by the session. The clerk must be a Ruling Elder but **does not** need to be an active member of session. In the absence of the clerk at a meeting of the session, one of the session members is elected to be acting clerk for that meeting.¹³

The session as a council of the church is responsible for the mission and government of the particular church and has the responsibility and power, as summarized here, to:

- receive members into the church
- lead the congregation in participation in the mission of the church
- provide for the worship of the people of God including preaching and the sharing of the Sacraments
- provide for the spiritual growth of its members
- develop and supervise the educational program
- lead the congregation in ministries of personal and social healing
- challenge the people of God in stewardship of money and time
- establish the annual budget and other special offerings
- lead the congregation continually to discover God's working in the world
- instruct, examine, ordain, install, and welcome new elders (and deacons, where applicable)
- supervise the board of deacons (where applicable) and all other organizations within the congregation
- provide for the administration of the church's program
- provide for the management of the church's property
- maintain regular and continuing relationships with higher governing bodies
- establish and maintain all necessary ecumenical relationships
- serve in judicial matters in accordance with the *Rules of Discipline*
- keep an accurate roll of members

MEETINGS—G-3.0105 and G-3.0203

Regular meetings of the session are called stated meetings. A session is required to have at least four stated meetings (once each quarter). Special meetings, or called meetings, can be held upon request of the pastor (the moderator) or in writing by two members of the Session. Reasonable notice of all special meetings must be given when other than routine business is to be

¹³G-3.0104 and 3.0204

transacted¹⁴. The most common agenda for these special meetings is to receive new members.

Meetings of councils shall be opened and closed with prayer. Meetings shall be conducted in accordance with the most recent edition of *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*, except when it is in contradiction to this Constitution. Councils may also make use of processes of discernment in their deliberations prior to a vote as agreed upon by the body.¹⁵

Typical Session Agenda

1. The meeting is opened with prayer, and there should also be a brief devotional, Scripture reading, and time of sharing.
2. The roll is taken and a quorum declared.
3. Session is then asked to approve granting excused absences to those elders who have requested them.
4. Minutes of previous session meetings are approved as well as minutes of any congregational meetings (unless previously approved by the congregation).
5. For stated meetings, the agenda must be approved; changes can be made in the
6. agenda, by session vote, at any time during the meeting. For called meetings, the purpose of the meeting must be declared and that is the agenda.
7. The Pastor's Report is received and action taken on items in the report, as appropriate.
8. The clerk's report is received. Action is taken on recommended items, as appropriate.
9. Committee or Ministry Team Reports are received. Committees should be encouraged to have written reports submitted in advance and items that require session action should be clearly marked. Committee or Ministry Team Chairpersons should not read their reports; it should be assumed that each Ruling Elder has read the report and is familiar with its contents.
10. Old and New Business. Any items not previously considered may be brought before the session at this time. Ruling Elders are encouraged to bring up only items of a pressing nature. Other issues should be submitted to the appropriate Committee or Ministry Team for due consideration before being brought to session.
11. Closing: Session meetings are closed with prayer.

MEMBERSHIP ROLLS—G-3.0204a

There shall be three rolls of members

1. **Baptized:** Those who have not professed their Faith in Christ publicly.
2. **Active:** Those who have professed their Faith in Christ publicly.
3. **Affiliate:** Those whose membership are in another church.

[If a session determines it is important to maintain a register for inactive members it is their option with the understanding that the names on the inactive register are no longer considered to be members of the congregation and in order to be restored to active membership they must be received into the life of the congregation by a re- affirmation of their faith.¹⁶

¹⁴G-3.0203

¹⁵G-3.0105

¹⁶G-3.0204b

Session Organization

The sessions of different churches can have different ways of organizing themselves. Some sessions have moved to Ministry Teams rather than Committees. Each church adapts its own structure or no-structure to suit its own needs and available resources. **The only committee required by the Book of Order is a Nominating Committee.**¹⁷

If a session determines that Committees or Ministry Teams are needed they will be organized by an action of the session to enhance the mission of the church. Different churches organize themselves in different ways; no one way is the best for everyone. In most, but not all, churches, each of the Standing Committees or Ministry Teams will have an active Ruling Elder as the chairperson and usually one or more active Ruling Elders serving on the committee or team. In addition, each Committee or Ministry Team can recruit other church members or friends to serve as the Holy Spirit gifts them.

Each Committee or Ministry Team carries out the business related to its area of responsibility and oversees its budgeted line items. Committees or Ministry Teams should report to the session as directed by the session and seek permission for items not specified in their budget or agreed upon responsibilities.

Every session will create a **Manual of Operations** that should include the following:¹⁸

1. The Articles of Incorporation
2. Church Bylaws
3. Standing Rules or Church Policies: i.e. personnel (including job descriptions), weddings, funerals, memorials, property use, etc.
4. Sexual Misconduct Policy for Staff and Volunteers
5. See Appendix A for a sample of a Manual of Operations

A copy of the **Manual of Operations** should be kept in the office and be made available to anyone who wants to see it.

Responsibilities of Being a Good Ruling Elder

- **Absences.** If you need to be absent from a stated session meeting, notify the pastor, the clerk of session, or the church office, you will be given an "excused absence".
Note: Sessions can make a rule or policy that if a Ruling Elder has more than three or more unexcused absences that Ruling Elder will be counseled by his or her peers and be requested to step down for a lack of commitment if their absences continue.
- **Decisions and Actions.** It sometimes takes a while after a new class of ruling elders joins the session for the group to learn how best to work together. We are all working toward the same goals so our discussions should take place in an atmosphere of Christian love and respect. We will not always agree but we all have agreed to abide by the church's polity which is that we abide by *the majority's vote*. **Sometimes we need to agree to disagree.**¹⁹

¹⁷G-3.0111

¹⁸G-3.0106

¹⁹F-3.0205

Required Session Actions

The *Book of Order* is written so that a council's actions can be done decently and in order. The intent is to ensure that the church's government functions fairly and efficiently with careful consideration being given to all issues and that biblical principles are followed.

In this *Book of Order*

- (1) **SHALL and IS TO BE/ARE TO BE** signify practice that is mandated, (2) **SHOULD** signifies practice that is strongly recommended,
- (3) **IS APPROPRIATE** signifies practice that is commended as suitable, (4) **MAY** signifies practice that is permissible but not required.
- (5) **ADVISORY HANDBOOK** signifies a handbook produced by agencies of the General Assembly to guide synods and presbyteries in procedures related to the oversight of ministry. Such handbooks suggest procedures that are commended, but not required.

Some Special Cases

There are times when it is the duty of session to see that all requirements of the *Book of Order* are met. This is sometimes difficult because the requirements may be distributed in various places. There are four important examples.

1. **Receiving New Members.** Members are received into a congregation by session action. Session may not deny membership to anyone if the basic condition is met, namely profession of faith in Christ. This condition can be met by actual profession of faith, by reaffirmation of faith, or by letter of transfer from another Christian church. It is assumed that a person who is a member of another Christian church has previously made a profession of faith. The procedure by which a new member is received includes welcoming and recognizing that person during a service of worship.²¹
2. **The Lord's Supper.** The session is given the responsibility to authorize the Lord's Supper at appropriate times. While there is a lower limit to the number of times in a year (once per quarter) the Lord's Supper is to be observed, there is no upper limit other than what is reasonable. The responsibility of the session is to see that this sacrament is observed, and is observed in an appropriate atmosphere and setting. Other requirements include the following. The bread and cup may be served by those in the ordered ministry of the church, **or by other church members on invitation of the session or authorizing council.**²² Also, when both wine and grape juice are served (if wine is served, grape juice must also be served), the *Book of Order* requires that they be clearly distinguished. Some churches place a statement in the bulletin "light is wine, dark is juice" (using white wine and regular grape juice, of course). The Sacrament must be administered by an ordained minister or commissioned ruling elder (when approved by Presbytery).²³ The observance must be announced at least one week in advance.²⁴ The procedure for the actual ceremony is given with parts of that being suggested and parts mandatory. This means that many variations in the ceremony are possible. The Lord's Supper may be taken to shut-ins by the pastor, ruling elders, deacons, and members of the congregation authorized to represent the church.²⁵

²¹G-1.0301-G-1.0303 and F-3.0102 Corporate Judgment; W-4.2000 - services of welcome and reception

3. **Baptism:** The session must authorize all baptisms.
 - * A person is to be baptized only once;
 - * the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) accepts all forms of baptism with water;
 - * the Sacrament is to be administered in a public service of worship (but other arrangements can be made in exceptional situations as long as the congregation is represented);
 - * baptism must be administered by an Teaching Elder or Commissioned Ruling Elder approved by presbytery;
 - * the procedure for the sacrament is set and is mandatory;
 - * at least one of the parents (or the person exercising parental authority) should be a member of the church;
 - * the *Book of Order* lists the session's responsibilities and the Church's responsibilities for the person just baptized.²⁷
4. **Examination of Ruling Elders–Elect and Deacons-Elect.** The congregation elects church officers (Ruling and Elders and Deacons) but before ordination/installation the session is charged with examining those persons to ascertain that they are ready, willing, and able to serve. It is appropriate to use the nine questions in the ordination/installation service as a guide to cover the pertinent topics of personal faith, knowledge of doctrine, government, and discipline contained in the Constitution of the Church, and duties of the ministry appropriate to the order.²⁸

The Congregation

The session has full responsibility for the areas of the church listed in the previous section. The congregation cannot usurp those responsibilities. For example, the Session is responsible for the finances of the church and the congregation cannot tell the Session how to set the annual budget or how to spend, or not spend, funds. If the congregation has serious concerns, the session would be wise to listen to the congregation's counsel.²⁹

Business to be transacted at meetings of the congregation shall be limited to matters related to the following:

1. electing ruling elders, deacons, and trustees;
2. calling a pastor, co-pastor, or associate pastor;
3. changing existing pastoral relationships, by such means as reviewing the adequacy of and approving changes to the terms of call of the pastor or pastors, or requesting, consenting to, or declining to consent to dissolution;
4. buying, mortgaging, or selling real property;
5. requesting the presbytery to grant an exemption for terms of service as permitted in this Constitution (G-2.0404).

²²W-3.3616d

²³W-2.4012

²⁴W-3-3609

²⁵W-2.4010

²⁷W-2.3000 and W-3.3600

²⁸G-2.0402

²⁹G-3.0205

Whenever permitted by civil law, both ecclesiastical and corporate business may be conducted at the same congregational meeting.

The pastor moderates all congregational *meetings without vote* since the pastor is not a member of the congregation, *and the clerk of session is the secretary of all meetings.*³⁰ If it is impractical for the pastor to moderate the meeting (the most common occurrence of this is when changes to the pastor's call are discussed), another pastor or a member of the session may preside at the invitation of the moderator.

General Information: (annual and called)

Just as there are two kinds of session meetings (***stated and called***), there are two kinds of congregation meetings (***annual and called***). While stated session meetings can consider almost any topic on the agenda, the annual congregation meeting has definite limitations (see list above) G-1.0504 and G-1.0505.

Called congregational meetings are limited to the topic for which the meeting is called.

The annual meeting of the congregation is also the annual meeting of the corporation. If there is not a quorum present, the meeting must be adjourned and rescheduled in order to meet legal requirements.

Congregations shall provide by rule the quorum necessary to conduct business; normally this should be stated in the church bylaws. The same is true for the meeting at which officers are elected, if the election is not held at the annual meeting.

Special meetings may be called for any of the purposes listed above or to conduct other business *as appropriate*.

Sample Agenda for a Congregational Meeting

1. Opening—Congregational meetings always open with prayer.
2. There is a count of members present and a quorum declared by the clerk of session.
3. Minutes of previous congregational meetings are approved unless they have been approved by session (see church bylaws).
4. The agenda is approved. If the meeting is the annual meeting, the agenda can include any or all of the items listed above and the agenda may be modified (by vote) during the meeting.
5. If the meeting is a called meeting, the agenda is limited to the topic announced in the call.
6. The Business. Reports are received, elections held, and so forth as appropriate. The Book of Order is rather specific at times, such as the voting procedure for electing officers.
7. Closing: The meetings are closed with prayer.

³⁰G-1.0504 and G-1.0505

G-2.04 GENERAL PROVISIONS FOR RULING ELDERS

G-2.0401 Election of Ruling Elders

Ruling elders are men and women elected by the congregation from among its members. The nomination and election of ruling elders shall express the rich diversity of the congregation's membership and shall guarantee participation and inclusiveness (F-1.0403). Ruling elders shall be nominated by a committee elected by the congregation, drawn from and representative of its membership. Congregations may provide by their own rule for a congregational nominating committee, provided that the committee shall consist of at least three active members of the congregation, and shall include at least one ruling elder who is currently serving on the session. The pastor shall serve ex officio and without vote. When elections are held, full opportunity shall always be given to the congregation for nomination from the floor of the congregational meeting by any active member of the congregation. A majority of all the active members present and voting shall be required to elect.

G-2.0402 Preparation for Ministry as a Ruling Elder

When persons have been elected to the ordered ministry of ruling elder, the session shall provide a period of study and preparation, after which the session shall examine them as to their personal faith; knowledge of the doctrine, government, and discipline contained in the Constitution of the church; and the duties of the ministry. ***The session shall also confer with them as to their willingness to undertake the ministry appropriate to the order.*** If the examination is approved, the session shall appoint a day for the service of ordination and installation.

G-2.0403 Service of Ordination and Installation

The service of ordination and installation shall focus upon Christ and the joy and responsibility of serving him through the mission and ministry of the church, and shall include a sermon appropriate to the occasion. The moderator of session or person authorized to preside shall state briefly the nature of the ministry of ruling elder. The act of ordination and installation takes place in the context of worship. The order for that service of worship in the Directory for Worship (W-4.4000) shall be followed.

G-2.0404 Terms of Service

Ruling elders shall be elected to serve terms of no more than three years on the session, and may be eligible for reelection according to congregational rule. However, no ruling elder shall be eligible to serve more than six consecutive years, and a ruling elder or deacon who has served six consecutive years shall be ineligible for election to the same board for at least one year. Election shall be to classes as nearly equal in number as possible, with the term of only one class ending each year. The presbytery may, upon written request and by majority vote, grant a congregation a waiver of this limitation on terms. Once ordained and while they are active members of any congregation of this denomination, ruling elders not in active service on a session continue to bear the responsibilities of the ministry to which they have been ordained, except as provided in G-2.0406, G-2.0407, or in accordance with the Rules of Discipline.

G-2.0405 Dissolution of Relationship

A ruling elder may resign from the session with the session's consent. On ceasing to be an active member of a congregation, a ruling elder ceases to be a member of its session. When a ruling elder, because of change of residence or disability, is unable for a period of one year to perform the duties of the ministry to which he or she was installed, the active relationship shall be dissolved by the session unless there is good reason not to do so, which shall be recorded.

G-2.0406 Release from Ministry as a Ruling Elder

If a ruling elder who is in good standing, against whom no inquiry has been initiated, and against whom no charges have been filed, shall make application to the session to be released from the exercise of the ordered ministry, the session of the congregation in which he or she holds membership, upon granting the release, shall delete that person's name from the register of ruling elders of the congregation. No judgment of failure on the part of the ruling elder is implied in this action. Release from the exercise of the ministry of ruling elder requires a discontinuation of all functions of that ministry. The status of one so released shall be the same as any church member. Should a person released under this section later desire to be restored to that ordered ministry, that person shall make application to the session that granted the release, and upon approval of the session, that person shall be restored to the exercise of the ministry from which he or she was released without re-ordination.

G-2.0407 Renunciation of Jurisdiction

When a ruling elder submits to the clerk of session a written statement renouncing the jurisdiction of this church, the renunciation shall be effective upon receipt. When a ruling elder persists in work disapproved by the session, the session shall consult with him or her and shall give notice of its disapproval. If, after having been provided opportunity for consultation and upon written notice of its disapproval, the ruling elder persists in the work, the session may then conclude that the ruling elder has renounced the jurisdiction of this church. Renunciation of jurisdiction shall remove the ruling elder from membership and ordered ministry and shall terminate the exercise of the ministry. The renunciation shall be reported by the clerk of session at the next meeting of the session, which shall record the renunciation, delete the name of the ruling elder from the register, and take such other administrative actions as may be required by this Constitution.

ORDINATION AND INSTALLATION SERVICE

What is a vow? What are the commitments you are vowing or promising to make when you are ordained or ordered ministry?

1. **W-4.4003a. Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?**
2. **W-4.4003b. Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?**

3. **W-4.4003c. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?**
4. **W-4.4003d. Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?**

2 Creeds = What We Believe

- ⊗ 4 Confessions = Why we believe and what we believe.
(what we believe will affect our interpretation of scriptures)
- ⊗ 3 Catechisms = A study of what we believe by asking questions and providing Scriptural answers.
- ⊗ 2 Statements of Faith = declarations of faith.

The Book of Confessions includes the following:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. The Nicene Creed | 4 th C |
| 2. The Apostles Creed | 2 nd .C |
| 3. The Scots Confession | 1560 |
| 4. The Heidelberg Catechism | 1563 |
| 5. The Second Helvetic Confession | 1566 |
| 6. The Westminster Confession | 1647 |
| 7. The Shorter Catechism | 1647 |
| 8. The Larger Catechism | 1647 |
| 9. The Barmen Declaration | 1934 |
| 10. The confession of 1967 | 1967 |
| 11. Brief Statement of Faith | 1991 |
| 12. The Belhar Confession | 2016 |

5. **W-4.4003e. Will you be governed by our church's polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit?**
6. **W-4.4003f. Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?**
7. **W-4.4003g. Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?**
8. **W-4.4003h Will you seek to pray for and serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?**
9. **W-4.4003i (1) (For ruling elder) Will you be a faithful ruling elder, watching over the people, providing for their worship, nurture, and service? Will you share in government**

and discipline, serving in councils of the church, and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

Appendix A

LIFE TOGETHER IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH: STANDARDS OF ETHICAL CONDUCT FOR ORDAINED OFFICERS IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

As an ordained officer in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture and guided by our Confessions, I affirm the vows made at my ordination, confirm that Jesus Christ is the pattern for my life and ministry and, relying on God's grace, commit myself to the following standards of ethical conduct.

I will conduct my life in a manner that is faithful to the gospel and consistent with my public ministry. Therefore I will:

1. Practice the disciplines of study, prayer, reflection, worship, stewardship, and service;
2. Be honest and truthful in my relationships with others;
3. Be faithful, keeping the covenants I make and honoring marriage vows;
4. Treat all persons with equal respect and concern as beloved children of God;
5. Maintain a healthy balance among the responsibilities of my office of ministry, my commitments to family and other primary relationships, and my need for spiritual, physical, emotional, and intellectual renewal;
6. Refrain from abusive, addictive, or exploitative behavior and seek help to overcome such behavior if it occurs;
7. Refrain from gossip and abusive speech; and
8. Maintain an attitude of repentance, humility, and forgiveness, responsive to God's reconciling will.

II

I will conduct my ministry so that nothing need be bidden from a governing body or colleagues in ministry. Therefore I will:

1. Preach, teach, and bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ with courage, speaking the truth in love;
2. Honor the sacred trust of relationships within the covenant community and observe appropriate boundaries;
3. Be judicious in the exercise of the power and privileges of my office and positions of responsibility I hold;
4. Avoid conflicts of interest that might compromise the effectiveness of my ministry;
5. Refrain from exploiting relationships within the community of faith for personal gain or gratification, including sexual harassment and misconduct as defined by Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) policy;
6. Respect the privacy of individuals and not divulge information obtained in confidence without express permission, unless an individual is a danger to self or others;
7. Recognize the limits of my own gifts and training, and refer persons and tasks to others as appropriate;
8. Be a faithful steward of and fully account for funds and property entrusted to me;
9. Accept the discipline of the church and the appropriate guidance of those to whom I am accountable for my ministry;

III

I will participate as a partner with others in the ministry and mission of the Church universal.
Therefore I will:

1. Participate in the mission and governance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and work for the unity of the holy catholic church;
2. Recruit church members responsibly, respect existing congregational relationships, and refrain from exploiting persons in vulnerable situations; and
3. Cooperate with those working in the world for justice, compassion, and peace, including partners in ministry of other faith traditions.

APPENDIX B

SUGGESTED MANUAL OF OPERATIONS

1. ***Originating Documents***
 - a. organizing covenant,
 - b. list of charter members,
 - c. articles of incorporation,
 - d. bylaws,
 - e. mission and vision statement
 - f. core values
2. ***Nominating, Electing, and Ordaining/Installing***
 - a. description of the work of the church officer nominating committee,
 - b. elements in the examination by the session of those elected,
 - c. procedure on the day for ordination/installation.
3. ***Membership***
 - a. procedures for contact and invitation for membership,
 - b. procedures for removing names from the roll.
 - c. procedures for notifying members who were on the inactive roll that they are no longer members of the church
 - d. baptismal policies for infant or adult baptisms
4. ***Committees or Ministry Teams and other Organizations i.e. PW, Sunday school, Youth, VBS, choir***
 - a. job description of the work of each committee and organization,
 - b. description of annual sequence of the work required for each committee and organization,
 - c. time, place, and frequency of meetings of each committee and organization,
 - d. expectations of persons serving on committees and organizations.
5. ***Contact with the Presbytery (call the Presbytery to get these forms if you include in your manual)***
 - a. description of the procedure and report from the Congregational Care Visit
 - b. catalogue of resource library,
 - c. directory of committee membership, (d) list of presbytery commissioners,
 - d. form to nominate persons to serve on presbytery committees.
6. ***Personnel***
 - a. position description for each church staff position—paid or volunteer,
 - b. personnel policies,
 - c. forms used in hiring, including disclosure forms for prior charges or conviction in sexual misconduct and sexual abuse,
 - d. criminal background check for all volunteers
 - e. description of performance review and compensation review procedure.
 - f. sexual misconduct policy for church staff and volunteers

7. *Finances*

- a. church budget,
- b. description of procedure for stewardship and pledging,
- c. procedures for counting the offering.
- d. procedures for annual financial review (we have a samples at the presbytery)

8. *Calendar*: church calendar of events during the year.

9. *Annual Meeting Instructions*: description of preparation for the annual meeting with copy of last meeting.

10. *Property*

- a. church building use policy
- b. key control policy
- c. maintenance policy
- d. insurance coverage policy

11. *Worship and Sacraments*

- a. instructions for ushers,
- b. instructions for greeters,
- c. instructions for those serving communion,
- d. instructions for those preparing communion,
- e. procedure for elder assisting in baptism.
- f. funeral policies or guidelines
- g. wedding policies or guidelines

Appendix C

Basic Parliamentary Procedures

RANKING MOTIONS AND THEIR FIVE SALIENT PARLIAMENTARY POINTS. THE ORDER IN WHICH THE THIRTEEN MOTIONS ARE LISTED. FIVE PRIVILEGE MOTIONS	Must be Seconded 1	May Be Debated 2	May Be Amended 3	Vote 4	May Be Reconsidered 5
13 TO FIX THE TIME TO WHICH TO ADJOURN	Yes	No	Yes	maj	Yes
12 TO ADJOURN	Yes	No	No	Maj	No
11 TO TAKE A RECESS	Yes	No	Yes	Maj	No
10 QUESTIONS OR PRIVILEGE	No	No	No	--	No
9 CALL FOR ORDERS OF THE DAY	no	no	no	--	No
SEVEN SUBSIDIARY MOTIONS					
8 LAY ON TABLE	Yes	No	No	Maj	No
7 PREVIOUS QUESTIONS	Yes	No	No	2/3	Yes
6 MODIFY DEBATE	Yes	No	Yes	2/3	Yes
5 TO POSTPONE DEFINITELY	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj	Yes
4 TO COMMIT OR RECOMMIT	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj	Yes
3 TO AMEND	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj	Yes
2 POSTPONE INDEFINITELY	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj	Yes Affirmative only
1 MAIN MOTION	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj	Yes

Examples of Incidental Main Motions: Rescind....Ratify....Amend By-Laws

*Only re. desirability of referral or details of referral. The merits of the question *cannot* be debated

Chart #2

RANKING MOTIONS AND THEIR FIVE SALIENT PARLIAMENTARY POINTS. THESE MOTIONS (INCIDENTAL MOTIONS) HAVE NO RANK AMONG THEMSELVES. THEIR BEING IN ORDER DEPENDS UPON THEIR NECESSITY AT THE TIME	Must be Seconded 1	May Be Debated 2	May Be Amended 3	Vote 4	May Be Reconsidered 5
APPEAL	Yes	Yes**	No	maj	Yes
SUSPEND RULES	Yes	No	No	2/3	No
POINT OF ORDER, CALL TO ORDER	No	No	No	Mod	No
OBJECTION TO CONSIDERATION OF A QUESTION	No	No	No	2/3	Yes No vote
REQUESTS	No	No	No	Maj	No
DIVISION OF ASSEMBLY	No	No	No	--	No
TO READ A PAPER	Yes	No	No	Maj	Yes
TO WITHDRAW A MOTION (TO BE USED ONLY BEFORE DEATH)	No	No	No	Maj	Yes No vote
TO DIVIDE THE QUESTION	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maj	NO
TO CLOSE NOMINATIONS OR POLLS	Yes	Yes	Yes	2/3	No
TO CONSIDER SERIATIM	Yes	yes	Yes	Maj	No
TO UNCLASSIFIED MOTIONS					
RECONSIDER	Yes	Yes**	No	Maj+	no
TO TAKE FROM THE TABLE++	Yes	No	No	Maj	No
RESCIND	yes	yes	yes	Maj	Neg

+ same presbytery meeting

* with previous notice
++before the end of the next regular presbytery meeting
**if main motion is debatable
