

A Guide to Moderating a Session Meeting

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Resources:

The Book of Order, 2023-2025. The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II;

Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised in Brief, 2nd Edition. Henry M. Robert III, Daniel H Honemann, and Thomas J Balch; with the assistance of Daniel E Seabold and Shmuel Gerber; 2011.

What Principles Guide the Work of a Moderator with a Session?

F-1.0303 The Notes of the Reformed Church

Where Christ is, there is the true Church. Since the earliest days of the Reformation, Reformed Christians have marked the presence of the true Church wherever:

the Word of God is truly preached and heard,

the Sacraments are rightly administered, and

ecclesiastical discipline is uprightly ministered.

In our own time, we affirm that, in the power of the Spirit, the Church is faithful to the mission of Christ as it:

Proclaims and hears the Word of God,

responding to the promise of God's new creation in Christ, and
inviting all people to participate in that new creation;

Administers and receives the Sacraments,

welcoming those who are being grafted into Christ,
bearing witness to Christ's saving death and resurrection,
anticipating the heavenly banquet that is to come, and
committing itself in the present to solidarity with the marginalized and the hungry; and

Nurtures a covenant community of disciples of Christ,

living in the strength of God's promise and
giving itself in service to God's mission.

And

G-1.0304 The Ministry of Members

Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is a joy and a privilege. It is also a commitment to participate in Christ's mission. A faithful member bears witness to God's love and grace and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's Church.

Such involvement includes:

proclaiming the good news in word and deed,
taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation,
lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support,
studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life,
supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,
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 the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment,
caring for God's creation,
participating in the governing responsibilities of the church, and
reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one's membership, and
considering ways in which one's participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.

What is the moderator's role, according to the Book of Order?

G-3.0104 "The moderator possesses the authority necessary for preserving order and for conducting efficiently the business of the body. He or she shall convene and adjourn the body in accordance with its own action."

G-3.0105 "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."

G-3.0203 "The session shall hold stated meetings at least quarterly. The moderator shall call a special meeting when he or she deems necessary or when requested in writing by any two members of the session. The business to be transacted at special meetings shall be limited to items specifically listed in the call for the meeting. There shall be reasonable notice given of all special meetings. The session shall also meet when directed by presbytery. Sessions shall provide by rule for a quorum for meetings; such quorum shall include the moderator and either a specific number of ruling elders or a specific percentage of those ruling elders in current service on the session."

Stated Meetings:

When?

I recommend revisiting a stated meeting time with each change in the session membership, at the time one class of elders rotates off session, and another class is installed. Stated meetings must be held at least quarterly, and the session may schedule these at a set time on a specific day of the week/month (for example, the 4th Monday at 6pm). Sessions may also schedule all of the stated meetings based on other events happening in the life of the congregation and the community around them, but should set them for a year at a time.

What Business?

Any and all business appropriate for a session to consider may be taken up and acted upon at a stated session meeting.

Called Meetings:

A session may meet in a called meeting at the discretion of the moderator, with reasonable notice (a session with the moderator shall determine what is “reasonable”), but at a called meeting may only attend to the business for which the meeting was called. For example, if you call a meeting to receive a new member, you cannot discuss or take action on approving plumbing repairs at that same meeting.

Parliamentary Procedure, Robert’s Rules of Order

- “Parliamentary procedure is the name given to the tradition of rules and customs that has grown up in the civilized world for dealing with” the challenges presented by the need of a group of people to make decisions.”(p.5)
- “A Prime value of parliamentary procedure is that it provides processes through which an organization, large or small, can work out satisfactory solutions to the greatest number of questions in the least amount of time.” (p.7)
- “A [Moderator] should never be stricter than is necessary for the good of the meeting.” (p.8)

(Ch. 1, Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised, In Brief)

The Organization of a Meeting

- Call to Order, by the Moderator, with prayer
- Simplified Standard Order of Business
 - Reading and Approval of Minutes
 - Reports
 - Unfinished (Old) Business
 - New Business

- Or, the body may adopt an agenda
 - Agendas are typically prepared and presented by the Moderator, but it is also appropriate in our polity for a clerk to prepare an agenda (especially when a session is without an installed pastor serving as moderator).
 - To be binding an agenda must be adopted by the group at or soon after the start of the meeting.

(from Ch. 2, Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised, In Brief)

It may be helpful to organize an agenda either by committee areas of responsibility, or elder areas of responsibility, for example:

- Christian Education and Nurture
 - including: all bible studies, fellowship events, and congregational care matters;
- Worship and Sacraments (
 - Including: worship time, place, sanctuary adornments, pulpit supply, stated supply contracts, service musicians or recorded music resources, approving the sacrament of baptism and communion to be celebrated, changes to the order of service, the hymnals and Bible translations provided and regularly used, etc.);
- Finance, Stewardship, and Benevolence
 - Including: income and expense reports, budgeting, stewardship campaigns, capital campaigns, expressions of gratitude, monetary gifts from the congregation to other individuals or organizations, grant applications, etc.;
- Communications, Service and Outreach
 - Including: the congregation's online/social media presence, opportunities to serve the needs of the congregation's community, and community outreach opportunities;
- Building and Grounds
 - Including: any and all decisions which may be made by a session about a congregation's property or meeting space, renting space, cleaning the space, authorizing improvements or repairs, granting outside groups permission to use any of the space the congregation uses on an occasional or regular basis, etc.

Every congregation will have its own breakdown or grouping of related responsibilities, and system for individual or committee oversight. This is just an example.

What is the purpose of Minutes?

Minutes provide a written record of actions considered and decisions made by a session. Minutes, once approved, are a matter of public record for a congregation, and it is recommended that minutes be made available to a congregation regularly.

Approving the minutes from the previous meeting gives the session the opportunity to review their previous work and decisions, and determine if there is any “postponed” or “tabled” business which they will need to address at this meeting.

Transacting Business

- *Motions*
 - “To begin the process of making any decision, a member offers a proposal by making a motion. A motion is a formal proposal by a member, in a meeting, that the group take certain action.” (p.19)
 - “Strictly speaking, there should be no debate on a matter before a motion regarding it has been made.” (p.19)
 - “I move that . . . It is very important to say precisely what the words of the motion are to be. The group votes on exact language, not on a vague idea. In the end, each motion has to be written down in the minutes.” (p.20)
- *Seconding a Motion*
 - “When one member has made a main motion, it must be seconded in order to be considered by the group, This shows that at least two members want the proposal considered. It does not necessarily mean the seconder agrees with the motion. If there is no second, the motion is not put before the group for discussion or decision.” (p.21)
- *Stating the Question*
 - “When a motion has been moved and seconded, the chair then states the question on the motion . . .” (p.21)
 - The Moderator says, “‘It is moved and seconded that’ and then repeats the exact words in which the motion was made.”
 - The Moderator states the question in this way
 - First, to ensure that “everyone in the group knows exactly what proposal is before it.” (p.22)
 - Second, to determine if the motion is in order at the time it is made, and
 - Third, to ensure that the motion is clearly phrased, if not, the Moderator may help the mover reword the motion before stating it. (p.22)
- *Debate*
 - Once a motion has been made, seconded, and stated for the group, debate, or discussion, on the motion may begin.

- “Debate means discussion on the merits of the question – that is, whether the proposed action should or should not be taken.” (p.23)
- Typically the person making the motion speaks about it first.
- Debate or discussion which does not specifically address the motion “pending” or “on the floor” may be ruled out of order by the moderator as a way to ensure that the meeting stays focused on the matter at hand.
- *Putting the Question*
 - When it has become apparent to the Moderator through the means of debate, discussion, or other means of discernment, that the session has come to a decision, and further discussion, debate, and discernment is no longer required, the Moderator may ask, “Are you ready for the question?” or “Is there any further debate/discussion?”
 - The Moderator states the exact motion before the session, and then gives the necessary directions or the group to vote on the motion.
 - The most common form of voting, especially for a small group like a session, is voice voting.
 - To call for a voice vote, the Moderator says, “Those in favor of the motion, say *aye*.” “Those opposed, say *no*.” (p.24)
 - It is the Moderator’s responsibility to ensure that all those participating in the meeting understand the question before the body, and have sufficient time to vote. This is even more important when the body is meeting electronically. In those situations extra time should be given to ensure that all the voice votes may be heard by the Moderator.
 - It is also the Moderator’s responsibility to determine whether the “ayes” or the “nos” “have it, “to declare the motion adopted or lost,” and indicate “the effect of the vote, if needed or appropriate.”(p.25)

(References from: Ch. 3, Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised, In Brief)

Moderator’s Discretion

It is always at the moderator’s discretion whether debate should continue. If the moderator senses that session members have made up their minds about how they will vote, the moderator may ask, “Are you ready to vote?”

It is always at the moderator’s discretion whether a particular line of discussion is relevant (in order) at a particular point in the meeting. If the moderator is unsure, the moderator may use the question, “How does this relate to the motion at hand?”

If a session is unhappy with a moderator’s decision, a session member may “move to reverse the decision of the moderator.” Then the moderator must ask for a second, and immediately take a vote (this motion is not debatable).

In general, motions about a specific action the session is considering on behalf of the congregation (or how to consider that action, such as a specific

process of discernment, whether to refer a matter, etc.) is debatable, and a motion about a parliamentary matter is not debatable (whether to adjourn, table or postpone a matter, etc.).