

TIMELINE FOR REWRITE OF FORM OF GOVERNMENT

1. Following revisions of the Directory for Worship and Rules of Discipline in the 1980's and early 1990's, attention turned to the Form of Government. Due to the amendment process, the Form of Government had grown through the decades (previous major revision was in 1961) from a "Standing Rules" size document to a major "book". Many in the denomination were in agreement that a substantial amount of the material in the FofG more closely resembled "policy statement" than "constitutional material".

Also by the mid 90's, the body of Permanent Judicial Decisions, General Assembly Authoritative Interpretations (then known as "Definitive Guidance"), and Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) statements had grown to provide a substantive set of interpretations of the meaning of the constitution. Summaries of these were incorporated into the Annotated Book of Order—and more recently, complete opinions have been available in digital format.

2. In the early 1990's, the Special Committee on the Nature of the Church and the Practice of Governance recommended creation of a polity that distinguished between national standards that should be uniform—and practices and policies that provided for diversity and freedom among congregations and presbyteries. This was approved in 1996 and the task given to the Advisory Committee on the Constitution which reported in 1999. They proposed a three-fold solution: Foundational Principles, Binding Policies, and Advisory Practices. The proposal was received with underwhelming enthusiasm (the question of the relative authority of each and what belonged where doomed the project) and referred back to the ACC. Scaling back, a major revision of Chapter 14 (the longest and, to many, most cumbersome of the chapters) was introduced in 2001, approved by General Assembly, but defeated by the presbyteries. [Most analysis of the defeat focused on resistance to the section that would have allowed Associate Pastors to become the next installed pastor.]

3. Because most the rest of the revisions were received favorably and because the church was becoming uncomfortable with the size and detail of the Form of Government, the 2002 General Assembly asked the Office of the General Assembly to pursue another revision of Chapter XIV—as part of an overall plan to revise the entire Form of Government.

4. Using the earlier revisions of Chapter XIV as a guideline; and making extensive use of focus groups of Stated Clerks, Executive Presbyters, Committees on Ministry, Committees on Preparation for Ministry, small church session, clerks of session, pastors; and sending out numerous surveys, the OGA reshaped a proposed revision of Chapter XIV which was approved by the 2006 general assembly and ratified by a majority of presbyteries. In anticipation of its possible adoption, Handbooks were prepared for Committees on Ministry and Committees on Preparation for Ministry and will be in printed format by January 2008. These handbooks incorporate much of the material removed from Chapter XIV that are more policy or guideline in nature.

5. At the same time, OGA began to recognize the ramification on polity of the movement within denominational circles toward more "missional models" of being the church. This theological orientation is critical of "regulatory functions" of organizations (a primary function

of the Form of Government) and more “permission giving” and “congregation centered” with the “mission field” redefined as the geography just outside the church. This orientation helped provide focus for why and well as what in any revision of the Form of Government.

6. Also impacting the process was a weariness in the church from two decades of fighting its battles in the polity arena with its temptation to frame debates in win/lose, majority rules terms. Leaders and members were looking for ways to move the church away from trying to resolve every issue through some new addition to the Form of Government and to begin searching for new ways of creating safe places for debate and dialogue as a means of addressing many of the seemingly intransigent issues of the church.

7. The culmination of these forces was the second recommendation from OGA to the 2006 General Assembly, which was to create a Task Force to rewrite the Form of Government with very clear objectives—not the least of which was to reduce its size and make it less of a “regulatory” tool. A Task Force was elected representing a cross section of the church familiar with polity issues and concerns.

Before being approved by General Assembly, the recommendation was amended to require the TF to make public its completed recommendations by September 2007 so that the whole church would have sufficient time to study and consider them before they went to the 2008 General Assembly.

8. Tackling the task with enthusiasm, the Task Force posted its first materials online in January of 2007. This began a very transparent process that invited and sought out comments, opinions, and ideas from across the whole church with open access to the Task Force. (Focus groups, online feedback loops, face to face meetings with constituencies.) By March, they unveiled a preliminary intent to create, in effect, two documents: the first was to be a revision of the first six chapters of the Form of Government, long considered by those most familiar with polity as the theological foundation/underpinnings of everything else. By summer, a first draft of the entire project was being circulated for comment and suggestions. The final document was posted in September, meeting the deadline set by the 2006 General Assembly.

In addition to the actual document, the Task Force also created a background paper on Missional Polity, side by side comparisons of Old to New and New to Old Form of Government, question and answer guides, and sample manuals. These have been posted at the denominational website, <http://www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment/> and available to members and churches since the first of October. All congregations will receive a printed version of the proposed document in January.

9. The intent of the 2006 General Assembly, to have the materials and study documents available to the whole church for at least 9 months of study and reflection has been met. In addition, if approved by the 2008 General Assembly, Presbyteries, Sessions, and congregations will have an additional 9 months to decide whether to support and not support the proposed revised Form of Government.