

# The Revised Form of Government

## AN INTRODUCTION

### General Comments

The Form of Government Task Force was charged by the 217th General Assembly (2006) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to draft a revised Form of Government.<sup>1</sup> Fulfilling this charge has required that we reexamine our ecclesiology, our way of understanding the church. We have asked two core questions throughout this work: Who does God call the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to be (the *calling* of the church)? and What does God call the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to do (the *polity* of the church)?

Our reflections on the church's calling have been shaped and guided by the ideas of *missional ecclesiology*. Missional ecclesiology begins in the confession that God has sent the church into the world to bear witness to the activity of God in reconciling and transforming the world, and ultimately in fulfilling in the world the divine creative intent. The core of the church's identity is its "sent-ness," its having been called into being as a witness to the work of God. In the words of theologian Jürgen Moltmann, it is "not so much that the church *has* a mission, but that the mission of Christ creates its own church."<sup>2</sup> Put another way, mission is not something the church does; rather, the Church is the expression of the mission of God. This idea is not new to Presbyterians. Indeed, Presbyterian polity has understood this notion clearly and expressed it in powerful language: "The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity. [It is the] sign in and for the world of the new reality ... God has made available to people in Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Polity is the architecture of mission. It defines the shape and form of the church's witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. A missional polity places the congregation in the forefront of the church's witness because it is the place where the church engages the world. In a missional polity, the councils of the church (i.e., sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly, called "governing bodies" in our current polity) exist to guide, support, and govern the work of the congregation, and to connect and coordinate that

---

<sup>1</sup> *Minutes*, 217th General Assembly (2006), Part I, p. 366; assembly action, pp. 38–39. The five elements of the task force's charge were:

- (1) The new Form of Government shall preserve our foundational polity (perhaps most concisely laid out in the first four chapters of the current Form of Government).
- (2) The focus of the Form of Government shall be on providing leadership for local congregations as missional communities.
- (3) The presbytery shall continue as the central governmental unit, as it has been throughout most of our history. The Form of Government shall provide sufficient authority and flexibility to allow the presbytery to assist congregations in addressing the changing cultural, economic, and societal challenges in our new millennial world. The FOG Task Force shall take notice of and address the institutional and structural impediments that currently cripple so very many of our presbyteries.
- (4) The new Form of Government shall provide flexibility at all levels, granting authority while permitting governing bodies to develop the structures to carry out their respective missions.
- (5) The FOG Task Force shall be guided by the principles proposed by Recommendations 1–4 from the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, using those principles as a guide for its own processes and deliberations. They shall incorporate this new Presbyterian ethos into the Form of Government so that it truly functions as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s guidebook for mission.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*. English trans., M. Kohl. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Book of Order*, G-3.0200; this same language is preserved in the proposed Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, F-1.0301.

work with other congregations so that the whole church may witness more effectively to the activity of God in the world.

A missional polity should exhibit five characteristics: *biblical, historical, contextual, eschatological, and practicable*.<sup>4</sup> The proposed Form of Government meets all these criteria. Its biblical and confessional foundations are laid out in the initial chapter of *The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity* (F-1.01–.03) in the statements on God’s activity in the world, the Lordship of Christ over the church and the world, and the calling of the church. Its historical roots are apparent not only in the confessional citations in F-1.01–.03, but also in the preservation of the classic American Presbyterian understanding of the four levels of church government (session, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly) and the relationships between them (Chapter Three, *Councils of the Church, Proposed Form of Government*, G-3.01–.05). It is contextual in that it places emphasis on the witness of congregations in their particular locations and seeks to provide maximum flexibility for congregations within the framework of Presbyterian church government. It is eschatological because it envisions a church that constantly looks forward to the new reality God is bringing into being in the world, drawing its strength from the promise of God’s kingdom. It is practicable in that it defines the mission and function of the various councils of the church without mandating particular structures that may be useful in some places and not in others.

As an operating principle in drafting this proposal, the task force has kept in mind that the Form of Government is a constitutional document, not a manual of operations. It expresses the ideas, visions, and principles that form the architecture of mission. It avoids detailed descriptions of procedures that may finally serve to hinder rather than help the church. As a result, there are numerous places in the proposed Form of Government where the councils of the church are required to provide their own standing rules or policies. The task force is preparing guides for sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly that identify policies and procedures this revised Form of Government requires them to create.

### **The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity (F-1.00 through F-3.00)**

When the 217th General Assembly (2006) created the Form of Government Task Force, among the charges it gave was to preserve the basic principles of our polity, perhaps most concisely stated in Chapters I–IV.

The task force seeks to fulfill this charge by proposing a new section of the *Book of Order*, to be called *The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity*. Many in the church, especially those who have loved the current language, have asked why the task force has not simply retained intact the present first four chapters. What has the task force done in drafting this new section?

1. *The new Foundations is clearly set apart as foundational to our entire polity.* The current first four chapters are part of the Form of Government, not part of the Directory for Worship or the Rules of Discipline. Thus, it is not immediately clear that the principles articulated in the first four chapters apply to the Directory and Rules as they do to the Form of Government. Moreover, nowhere in the current text of Chapters I–IV is this material explicitly identified as foundational or basic, even to the Form of Government that includes them.

Creating a new section of the *Book of Order*, called explicitly, *The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity*, resolves this lack of clarity. Separating and re-titling this material makes clear that the church regards the content of these chapters as the underlying principles on which the structure of our polity rests.

---

<sup>4</sup> Darrell Guder, “Missional Church: From Sending to Being Sent,” in Guder, *et al.*, eds., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 11–12. Guder argues that missional ecclesiology exhibits these five characteristics. It is the conviction of this task force that the same characteristics should be true of a polity guided by missional principles.

2. *The new Foundations preserves the vast majority of the text of the current first four chapters.* There are sixty-seven paragraphs in the current G-1.0000 through G-4.0000. Of those sixty-seven paragraphs, sixty-three of them have been brought over into The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity. In thirty-five of the preserved paragraphs, the new text presents verbatim the contents of the current text. Twenty-eight of the paragraphs preserved have undergone some revision or modification, such as the combination of several smaller paragraphs into one larger one or the revision of content. Of the four remaining paragraphs, the current G-4.0104 has been transferred in substance to proposed G-1.0103, and the subject matter of the current G-4.0102 is presented in different form in proposed G-1.0101. Only the current G-4.0201 and G-4.0302 have been omitted from the new Foundations.

3. *The new Foundations improves the organization, logic, and flow of our foundational polity.* While the content of the current first four chapters has served the church well for the twenty-five years since its creation, the organization is often confusing. The proposed Foundations significantly reduces this confusion. For instance, the proposed Foundations:

- *gathers explicitly theological and ecclesiological claims*, currently dispersed in G-1.0100, 3.0300–.0400, 4.0100, and 4.0200, and places them together under the rubric, The Mission of the Church, in F-1.01–.03;
- *gathers material describing basic principles of polity and government*, currently found in G-1.0300, 1.0400, 3.0401, 4.0301, 4.0303, and 4.0304, and places it together in F-3.01–.04, Principles of Order and Government.
- *structures the whole section more clearly*: Mission of the Church (F-1.01–.03); Confessions of the Church (F-2.01–.05); and Principles of Order and Government (F-3.01–.04).

The task force believes that The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity will lend itself for use as an instructional guide for confirmation classes, new member preparation, and education of ruling elders and deacons in ways that the current first four chapters do not.

4. *The new Foundations incorporates important new material.* The new Foundations begins with a very simple but important statement on the activity of God in the world (F-1.01, God’s Activity). In doing so, it affirms that the mission of the church in the world is to bear witness to the creative, redemptive, and faith-sustaining engagement of the Triune God with the world. The statement reminds us that we have received this faith from the Bible and from the accumulated witness of our forebears through the confessions of the Church. The task force believes it is important to start our polity—the description of what the Church is called to do—with this orienting statement of what God has done and is doing in the world.

The Foundations also reflects at some length on two key statements of the calling of the church that grow out of our confessional heritage. The first is the statement in the Nicene Creed that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic (*The Book of Confessions*, 1.3). Section 1.0302 of The Foundations explores the meaning of each of these statements, using both existing sections from the current first four chapters (G-1.0302a, b, and d) and some new material (G-1.0302b and c). Section F-1.0302a–d explores each mark in turn, first defining it and then exploring how the Church is called to obedience by it. The second is G-1.0303, drawn from the familiar three “Reformation Notes” of, among other places, the Scots’ Confession (*The Book of Confessions*, 3.18). This statement reminds Presbyterians that the classical works of the church are proclaiming the Word, administering the Sacraments, and nurturing ecclesiastical discipline. These same three notes form the basic structure of the work of church councils in proposed G-3.0201 (the session), G-3.0301 (the presbytery), G-3.0401 (the synod), and G-3.0501 (the General Assembly). Together, these statements on the marks and notes of the church remind us of what the church is called to be and to do.

Attentive readers will note that, in exploring the Nicene “marks of the Church” in F-1.0302a–d, the Foundations deals with those marks in the opposite order from the traditional presentation.<sup>5</sup> The task force chose this approach as a way of highlighting the missional calling of the Church. The Church is *apostolic*—that is, it is sent to bear witness to God’s love and justice. From its “sentness” flows its catholicity (that it embraces all those whom Christ has called into new relationship with God), its holiness (that it is called apart by Christ who is holy), and its unity (that it is the community of those who belong to one Lord). The task force offers this reading of the Nicene marks as a foundation of a missional theology.

## **The Form of Government (Chapter One through Chapter Six)**

One might suggest that the six chapters of the proposed Form of Government describe the church’s life both within and without. Chapter One (Congregations and Their Members), Chapter Two (Ordered Ministry, Commissioning, and Certification), and Chapter Three (Councils of the Church) deal with matters internal to the life of the church. Chapter Four (The Church and Civil Authority) and Chapter Five (Ecumenicity and Union) deal with the church’s interface with the larger world of civil society and of ecumenical and interfaith cooperation. Chapter Six concludes the Constitution with provisions for interpreting and amending both *The Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*.

### *Chapter One: Congregations and Their Membership*

This chapter combines the subject matter and much of the language of present G-5.0000 (The Church and Its Members) and G-7.0000 (The Particular Church). The task force presents this material this way for two reasons. First, in a missional polity, the basic form of the church is not the individual member, but the congregation. It therefore follows that the first chapter of the Form of Government should describe the congregation, rather than individual members. Second, in a missional polity, believers most effectively bear witness to God’s new creation when they are joined together by proclamation, sacramental practice, and covenanted life. Consequently, the ministry of individual members can best be understood as part of the ministry of the congregation, rather than as a separate chapter.

The first chapter has five parts: a statement on the nature of the congregation (G-1.01); the role of the presbytery in organizing a congregation (G-1.02); a statement on the meaning of membership (G-1.03); the categories of membership (G-1.04); and a section on congregational meetings (G-1.05).

Some notes on particular sections:

- G-1.0101: The opening sentence of the proposed Form of Government (G-1.0101) goes to the heart of a missional polity: “The congregation is the church engaged in mission in its particular context.” Founded on the calling of the church to be the “provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity” (F-1.0301), this statement reminds every congregation that it has all it needs to be the church, while at the same time affirming that it is not the church in isolation from other gatherings of believers called to the same purpose and work. The second paragraph then describes the work of the particular congregation in terms of the three Reformation notes and the six great ends of the church.
- G-1.0301: Our theology of membership in proposed G-1.0301 begins with the affirmation that membership is the result of God’s call given to the believer in Baptism and answered throughout the life of faith. It then explores some of the meanings of Baptism for the baptized and for the Church as a whole. The implication of this statement is that the church is not a voluntary society, but a community chosen by God.

---

<sup>5</sup> This reading of the Nicene marks was suggested by Darrell Guder, “The Nicene Marks in a Post-Christendom Church,” in *Bearing the Marks of the Church*, ReForming Ministry Occasional Paper Series, no.1, 2007. pp. 28–33.

- G-1.0303: The task force has heard from many people who regard the items in proposed G-1.0303 (currently G-5.0102) as essential teaching tools in membership classes. More importantly, perhaps, we understand these obligations as the terms of covenanted behavior binding members to one another in effective witness to Christ. Because that covenant is essential to the health of a congregation, the task force has moved to a position of greater prominence in the chapter the call to members to regularly review and evaluate the integrity of their membership (G-1.0303b; currently G-5.0500).
- G-1.04: This section eliminates the category of inactive membership (currently G-5.0203). The task force has taken this step primarily because the notion of inactivity seems antithetical to God’s call to participation in the church. Those who are members of the church are those who are committed to its support and to the disciplines of worship, study, service, and prayer. Persons who are not in any way committed to these disciplines are not meaningfully members of the congregation. As a way of strengthening this understanding of membership, the task force has added a sentence to the language of current G-5.0203; the sentence refers back to the covenant obligations of members in proposed G-1.0303: “Active members shall regularly, after prayerful consideration, recommit themselves to the disciplines and responsibilities of membership outlined in G-1.0303” (proposed G-1.0402).
- G-1.0501: The description of congregational meetings drawn from current G-7.0300 eliminates the minimum two-Sunday notice for calling such meetings (currently G-7.0303b). This is the first of a number of such decisions throughout the proposed Form of Government intended to provide flexibility for congregations and councils to adapt the polity to their own needs. It may be that the current requirement of eight days’ notice of a meeting is adequate for most congregations; it may also be that in some situations a congregation can reasonably conduct its business on less notice or may require more. Rather than mandate a minimum notice, the provision here calls on congregations to establish such minimums by their own rule.

*Chapter Two: Ordered Ministry, Commissioning, and Certification*

There are two core principles in this chapter. First is the commitment that the ministry of the Church’s offices is the gift of Jesus Christ (see F-3.0103), and should therefore follow the example of servanthood that Christ himself provided (cf. current G-6.0101). Second is the commitment that the election of ruling elders, deacons, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament is the inalienable prerogative of God’s people (see F-3.0106; cf. current G-6.0107 and 6.0102). True to its mandate, the task force has preserved intact current G-6.0106a and b (G-2.0103). It has also preserved current G-6.0108a and b, but has combined them into a single paragraph (G-2.0104).

Two obvious and closely related changes of nomenclature feature prominently in this chapter. The first is the replacement of the terms “office” and “officer” with “ordered ministry” and “ordered minister” (or similar language). The task force proposes this change out of the conviction that our use of office/officer carries with it subtle implications that leadership in the church is about the exercise of power and authority, and that such authority or power is vested in individuals whose calls to the office of ministry elevate them above other members of the church. In fact, our theology of ordination would hold almost the precise opposite. Leadership in the church is the leadership of the servant, in imitation of the one who “came not to be served but to serve” (Matt 20:28). Those called to leadership roles in the church do not “hold office”; they do ministry. Moreover, every believer is called through Baptism to a ministry of witness to the love and grace of God. Some believers are called to particular ministries of discernment, compassion and justice, and proclamation. The exercise of such ministries is “ordered”—that is, prescribed or defined—by the church so that it serves to build up the whole people of God. The language of ordered ministries throughout this Form of Government is a means of reminding us that the distinction between the ministry of congregational members and that of leaders is not one of kind but of qualification, preparation, and function.

The second change in nomenclature is the use of “ruling elder” and “teaching elder” to describe those elected and ordained to service on the session and in the councils of the church. These terms are not new. Presbyterians from both the Presbyterian Church in the United States and the United Presbyterian Church in North America streams will recall their use in previous polities. The task force has recovered them for use in this polity for two reasons. First, they highlight the essential sharing of responsibility for the health and well-being of the church that is the calling of both elders and ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Historically, our polity—alone among all forms of church government—has valued the service of the elder alongside that of the minister of the Word and Sacrament; they are both presbyters on whom rest the responsibility for guidance and spiritual discernment for the encouragement of the church. Second, the use of the terms “ruling” and “teaching” each highlight vital functions of the work of the presbyter. Ruling does not mean governing or reigning over, but “measuring”; the ruling elders are those whose work it is to measure the faithfulness of the congregation in their charge. Teaching reminds us that the central work of the minister of the Word and Sacrament is to teach the faith—in classes, in preaching, in leading worship, in administering the Sacraments, in pastoral care, and in virtually all aspects of congregational life. While it has not tried systematically to replace minister of the Word and Sacrament with teaching elder, the task force believes that the recovery of this essential function of ministry in “equipping the saints” is central to a missional polity.

As it drafted this chapter, the task force based its work on the revised G-14.0000 proposed by the 217th General Assembly (2006) and adopted in 2007 by a majority of presbyteries. Like that revision, this proposal relegates to the status of optional handbooks or presbytery policy many previous provisions that seemed more to describe process than to add substance.

Some notes on particular sections:

- G-2.0207: The language of this section includes the affirmation that ordination to the ministries of elder and deacon is unique to each office. This is not a provision currently explicit in our polity, although it is reflective of our practice.
- G-2.0302: This section describes all ministries, whether within or beyond the congregation, as validated ministries. It further assumes that the work of ministers of the Word and Sacrament fall into one of three categories: validated (within or beyond the parish), at-large, or honorably retired. It thus makes no provisions for inactive ministers. The logic here is parallel to that for the removal of inactive membership in G-1.04.

This section adds to the list of required functions of validated ministries that of the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. This is a step beyond the requirements of current G-11.0403, which make no reference to the Sacraments. The task force reasoned here that ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is ministry *of the Word and Sacrament*, and thus it is reasonable to expect that ministers in validated calls should be engaged in some way in proclaiming the Word of God and administering the Sacraments. The presbytery is left to determine how to interpret this provision, but task force conversation suggested that most presbyteries have several congregations without installed pastors where pastors in non-validated ministries might provide occasional preaching and sacramental leadership.

- G-2.0304: This section on temporary pastoral leadership provided a dilemma for the task force. The wording of proposed G-2.0304 would permit an interim minister to become the next installed pastor of the congregation upon a supermajority approval of the presbytery. Obviously, this is a significant departure from current practice in the church. Retaining this provision creates greater flexibility and discretion for the presbytery to address the mission and ministry needs of particular congregations. Making an exception in the case of interim ministers, on the other hand, preserves the integrity of interim ministry. In the end, the task force was persuaded to retain the maximum discretion for the

presbytery, but included language affirming the presbytery's right to place additional restrictions beyond the constitutional standards on the eligibility of interims to succeed.

- G-2.0305: The simplification and reduction of current G-11.0404 in this section is an effort to allow presbyteries flexibility and discretion as they seek to provide pastoral leadership in congregations. As presbyteries face the dilemma of providing adequate pastoral leadership, they are increasingly turning to ministers of other denominations. In this polity as in all previous ones, the presbytery must determine whether a minister of another denomination possesses the necessary skills and gifts for ministry to serve in this church. By referring to proposed G-2.0407 (ordination requirements), the section makes clear the expectation that transferring ministers will meet the same basic requirements that candidates of this church meet. By referring to proposed G-2.0410 (exceptions), it simultaneously gives the presbytery freedom to except a transferring minister from ordination requirements in proposed section G-2.04. Note, however, that this provision for exception does not include exceptions to ordination standards in proposed G-2.0103 (currently G-6.0106).
- G-2.0407d: The description of the standard ordination examinations is eliminated in this polity. It is not the task force's intent to eliminate the examinations themselves, but merely to leave to the General Assembly or its designated entity the decisions about what areas to examine and what content to include in each examination because these are not, finally, constitutional matters.
- G-2.0410: The exceptions provision here is explicitly limited to the ordination requirements of section G-2.04; it does not include the behavioral or character standards of G-2.0103. Again, the goal of the task force was to provide flexibility and discretion to the presbytery in determining who is suited and adequately prepared for ministry. The burden for determining readiness is, and has always been, on the presbytery.
- G-2.0502: The task force debated the issue of which presbytery is responsible for the act of ordination: the presbytery of care or the presbytery of call. Antecedent churches to the PC(USA) had different practices. In the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA), ordination was an act of the presbytery of care; in the Presbyterian Church in the United States, the presbytery of call. The current G-14.0483 follows the UPCUSA and the PC(USA) practice. The task force proposes to unite the acts of ordination and installation, and to place them in the hands of the calling presbytery, a possibility anticipated by current G-14.0484. Two concerns prompt this proposal. First, the current wording of G-14.0483 creates the possibility that a candidate might be required to stand ordination examinations in both presbyteries. Second, separating ordination and installation encourages thinking of ordination as a matter of status rather than of function. However, the use of the word "ordinarily" in proposed G-2.0502 signals the flexibility of the Constitution on this point, so that allowances for regional custom may still be made on a case-by-case basis.
- G-2.0601: The significant change in this provision is that it permits the formation of a pastor nominating committee (PNC) "after the presbytery approves the effective date of the dissolution of an existing pastoral relationship," rather than requiring that the PNC await the arrival of the effective date of dissolution as in the current G-14.0530. This permits a congregation to begin the pastoral search process somewhat earlier than at present. This can be a matter of some concern in congregations where a minister announces a departure or retirement date several months in advance of the date of the actual dissolution of the pastoral relationship.
- G-2.0605: This section is a reduction of the current G-14.0534 on the form and content of the terms of pastoral calls. It omits references to federal or state tax law and to military commitments, since decisions on these matters lie outside the authority of the presbytery. It further omits reference to specification of the terms of less-than-full-time calls, since this matter is dealt with in proposed G-2.0304. The language of the proposed provision does not specify either the categories or the numerical values required of calls, leaving these decisions to presbyteries. It does specify that the

presbytery is responsible to set minimum standards and to ensure that all calls meet those standards. Presbyteries may decide to approve pastoral calls that allocate financial resources in different ways within the same presbytery, provided that minimum standards are met. The provision continues the current requirement that all calls include participation in the Benefits Plan of the Board of Pensions.

- G-2.0705: The task force added a new final sentence to this section governing the relations between pastors and former parishes. The sentence requires that pastors who remain in the community of the former congregation shall not offer themselves in any pastoral capacity without appropriate invitation. The task force made this addition in response to concerns that the language of current G-14.0630 covers only officiating at services and did not discourage former pastors from presenting themselves as available for pastoral guidance or care in non-liturgical settings. The addition supports presbyteries in requiring that former pastors desist from remaining involved in leadership roles in their previous congregations unless specifically invited to fill those roles by the succeeding pastor.
- G-2.08: The task force proposes to refer to ruling elders prepared and commissioned for limited pastoral service in presbytery-designated settings by the term “commissioned pastors” rather than the current “commissioned lay pastor.” This change highlights two things. First, it removes the sole occurrence in the *Book of Order* to “lay” persons, a term that, together with its antonym, “clergy,” preserves an unfortunate distinction of kind between the ministries of the people of God. This distinction is foreign to the Reformed tradition, where ministry is the calling of all baptized persons. Second, it distinguishes this form of ordered ministry from the installed pastor, which is one who may broadly serve in ministry in a variety of contexts. Commissioned pastors serve in limited pastoral capacities as defined by the commissioning presbytery.
- G-2.09: This section on certified Christian educators eliminates the requirements for certification from the Constitution, anticipating that they will be spelled out in manuals and handbooks approved by the General Assembly.

### *Chapter Three: Councils of the Church*

This chapter proposes another significant change in the language of the church: the replacement of the current term “governing body” with “council.” From its earliest days, the task force heard pleas to replace “governing body” with some other term as a general descriptor for the gathering of presbyters to nurture and guide the witness of the church. These conversations were prompted by the recognition that the language we use to describe ourselves carries with it the power to shape our self-understanding, in both obvious and subtle ways. The task force believes the term governing body implies a regulatory polity in which rules, policies, and procedures are enforced from the top of a hierarchical structure; it does not evoke a missional polity that understands the congregation to be “the church engaged in mission in a particular context” (proposed G-1.0101), nurtured and guided by the work of those called to see to its spiritual welfare. The task force believes a truly missional polity requires that we abandon both the term and the implications it carries.

In its place, the task force offers the term “council.” This is not a new term. Rather, it is the proper term to describe gatherings of the church’s ordained leaders to pray, study, exercise spiritual discernment, and decide matters of theological import that bear on the health of the church. Christian history is replete with the names of such gatherings: Nicaea, Chalcedon, Ephesus, Trent, and, in our own time, Vatican II. In each case, the church has called on its ordained leaders to address matters of faith and life urgent to the particular time. In recovering this term as a general descriptor for sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly, the task force hopes to diminish the sense that serving in the forums of church leadership is equivalent to taking a seat on the board of directors in a nonprofit organization, and to enhance the sense that leadership in the ordered ministries of the church is a calling to the ministry of spiritual discernment and guidance.

In the structures of most presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly, there already exist bodies called councils that perform specified functions on behalf of the larger entity. The Form of Government does not require that such bodies cease to exist. It does, however, omit explicit reference to them, so that presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly are free to assign those functions to such entities as they see fit to design and name. In applying the term councils to sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly, the task force suggests that our current usage of the term is theologically impoverished, and that another term (executive committee, leadership team, etc.) could readily be found to take the place of council, freeing it for its proper ecclesiastical service.

Chapter 3 of the proposed Form of Government encompasses material from current G-9.0000–G-13.0000. The initial section, proposed G-3.01, covers general matters common to all councils; thereafter, each section treats one of the four councils in particular.

Theology and the heritage of the Reformed faith play a crucial role in the architecture of this chapter in two ways. First, the chapter begins with a new statement, proposed G-3.0101: Church Councils as an Expression of the Unity of the Church. The purpose of this paragraph is to frame the discussion of councils in the context of the church’s calling (see F-1.0302d). The church is unified by its mutual connectedness through the structure of its polity (F-3.0201, F-3.0203). Though the particular congregation is the basic form of the church, a congregation is not of itself a sufficient form of the church. Congregations do not witness in isolation. Just as the witness of members is strengthened by the gathering of believers into congregations, so the witness of congregations is strengthened by their gathering into councils. As councils are joined in a widening and more inclusive system of witness, the unity of the church becomes clearer. The task force has also sought to embody this principle in the descriptions of tasks for each council that affirm its relationship to other more and less inclusive councils (G-3.0202, G-3.0302–.0303, G-3.0402–.0403, and G-3.0502).

Second, the descriptions of the four councils share a common structure built on the three “Notes of the True Church” (see F-1.0303, G-3.0201, G-3.0301, G-3.0401, and G-3.0501). These three tasks—true preaching of the Word, right administration of the Sacraments, and upright ministry of ecclesiastical discipline—have defined the life and work of Reformed churches since the 17th century. The task force believes they continue to lie at the core of our polity. However, the task force understands the notes broadly, as the work of the community of believers rather than the to-do list of the pastor. More importantly, it understands them eschatologically—as acts that bear witness in the world to the Lordship of Christ and the new creation God has begun in him. Thus “preaching the Word” becomes the church’s work of proclamation and encompasses all sorts of work that states publicly the claims of Christ on the world. “Administering the Sacraments” involves not only what happens when a community of faith gathers around the Table and the Font, but also how our baptismal calling and the communion of the saints nurtures and sustains the ministry of the people of God. “Ecclesiastical discipline” includes, but goes far beyond, judicial process to include the shaping and nurturing of the community of those being transformed by God’s grace. The task force believes the church at every level has important functions that are understood under these broad and eschatological rubrics, and so it has reflected that understanding in the descriptions of church councils.

Some notes on particular sections:

- G-3.0104: This section replaces current G-9.0105, a large block of detailed material on the work of the committee on representation. The proposed new section simply mandates awareness on the part of councils of the church’s rich diversity in decision-making and employment practice. It does not mention a committee on representation. This is not to say that a council is prohibited to have such a committee, but only that such a committee is not a requirement of the polity. The task force’s principle of mandating function rather than structure is reflected in this decision. Councils may find a wide variety of appropriate ways to serve the functions of inclusiveness; mandating the existence of a particular structure may well be more hindrance than help in some contexts. Similarly, the

determination of the details concerning composition of a committee or the manner of the exercise of its responsibility seems better left to council discretion.

- G-3.0105: The fifth paragraph of this section, drawn directly from current G-9.0203a and b, provides that a stated clerk must be “eligible for membership in the council.” The task force understands this phrase to mean that the clerk must be of a standing that would make her or him eligible for membership in the body, not that he or she must actually *be* a member.
- G-3.0107: There are two items in this section that bear comment.
  - (1) This section includes new language that authorizes governing bodies to create advisory handbooks. Such handbooks would illumine practices required by the Constitution but left to governing bodies for implementation. This is not a new practice in the church; we have handbooks for committees on ministry and committees on preparation for ministry, as well as for a variety of other practices. Reference in the Constitution to their existence supports the expectation that governing bodies will continue to reflect on the implementation of the Constitution in ways appropriate to their own contexts for ministry without resorting to constitutional amendment for matters of process and procedure.
  - (2) The section eliminates mention of *per capita* funding. Instead, it employs the term “requested funds” to describe the practice of more inclusive governing bodies to seek the financial support of less inclusive bodies in funding the mission of the church. It is not the intent of the task force that there be no more *per capita* assessments, but simply to avoid fixing in the Constitution a particular name that may or may not continue to be in use in the church.
- G-3.0109: This section on the composition of committees and commissions omits the definitions of the sizes of commissions in current G-9.0504b(1–3). As in other such decisions, the task force’s aim is to leave such matters to the discretion of the governing body that forms the commission.
- G-3.0204: This section on the rolls kept by the clerk of session omits reference to a roll of inactive members. The task force deleted this reference as a result of the decision to delete the category of inactive member in proposed G-1.04, and for the same reasons. Sessions are already empowered to determine the membership of the church and to add or remove names from the membership. The removal of a name from the roll of the church already requires consultation with the member, so that removing someone from membership is accomplished only through pastoral care on the part of the session.
- G-3.0308: There is no reference in the section to either a committee on ministry or a committee on preparation for ministry. Instead, the section mandates the creation of mechanisms and processes for pastoral care of ministers and congregations, and for oversight of the development of those preparing for ministry. This omission is not intended to communicate that committees on ministry (COM) or committees on preparation for ministry (CPM) shall not exist. Rather, it recognizes that presbyteries may find a variety of ways of accomplishing these tasks that lie outside the accustomed frameworks of COM and CPM. The task force believes the Constitution should make room for that variety, and so mandates function rather than structure.
- G-3.0401: The description of the synod’s core functions, unlike that of session, presbytery, or General Assembly, is accompanied with the auxiliary verb “may,” rather than “shall.” This is to provide room for presbyteries within a synod to reduce the functions of the synod, as permitted by proposed G-3.0404.
- G-3.0404: This is a new section, providing for synods, in consultation with their constituent presbyteries, to reduce their regular functions. The section provides that synod will continue to

provide at least administrative review of presbyteries and judicial process, but that other functions may be assumed by presbyteries upon mutual agreement. In several synods across the denomination, this is already the case *de facto*. This provision gives this reality constitutional foundation.

- G-3.05: This section makes no reference to the General Assembly Council, currently G-13.0200. Once again, it is not the intent of this provision to do away with the General Assembly Council, but rather to make its existence and operation matters of General Assembly policy and procedure. This Constitution envisions the possibility that the General Assembly may at some point wish to reorganize itself; the provisions here would permit that reorganization without the need for constitutional amendment.

The section on the Advisory Committee on the Constitution, currently G-13.0112a–d, has been moved to proposed G-6.02.

#### *Chapter Four: The Church and Civil Authority*

This proposed chapter is composed of existing language in the current Form of Government. Proposed G-4.01, Congregational Incorporation and Trustees, is the content of current G-7.0401 and 7.0402, but is slightly reorganized. Proposed G-4.02, Church Property, is the text of current G-8.0000, including G-8.0200, as mandated by the charter of the task force by the 217th General Assembly. Proposed G-4.03, Confidence and Privilege, is a summary statement of the provisions on the same subjects in current G-6.0204a and b, G-6.0304b, and G-6.0402b.

#### *Chapter Five: Ecumenicity and Union*

The contents of proposed G-5.00 are drawn from current G-15.0000, G-16.0000, and G-17.0000. The guiding principle behind this conflation is the missional commitment to the unity of the church, which guides the church's commitment to ecumenicity, interfaith cooperation, and partnership with secular organizations (G-5.01).

Provisions in current G-16.0200, G-16.0400, and G-17.0200 extensively define the required contents of plans of union (or federation) of churches and governing bodies. The task force believes that such detail is not necessary in the Constitution and may, in fact, hinder the efforts of ecumenicity and union. The proposed sections G-5.03, 5.04, and 5.05 require only that there be plans of union or joint congregational witness, that those plans and the resulting congregations or entities be subject to the Constitution, and (in the case of union presbyteries and congregations in joint witness) that the plans and process for union or joint congregational witness be approved by the next more inclusive council. This allows for greater freedom on the part of all parties to respond to the needs of the situation that prompts the joint witness.

Proposed section G-5.05 deals with “joint congregational witness.” Joint congregational witness replaces the two terms in use in the present polity, “union” and “federated” congregations. Union congregations are the result of the merger of two congregations into a single entity; federated congregations are the result of two congregations joining together for worship, service, and administration, but remaining legally separate entities. The task force believes that the use of these two options, and possibly other permutations of them, should be determined on a case-by-case basis by the governing bodies involved. It has thus opted for more generic language that permits flexibility and discretion on the part of the party entities in the relationship and does not codify the options.

## *Chapter Six: Interpreting and Amending the Constitution*

This chapter retains the processes for amending the Constitution (both *The Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*) already in place in current G-18.0000. It has redrafted the descriptions of those processes to make them clearer, but has not altered their substance.

There are, however, two significant changes in the chapter. First, the task force is proposing to broaden the subject matter to include not only amending, but also interpreting the Constitution. This seems a reasonable move, since (a) both acts are finally acts of clarifying the contents of the Constitution, and (b) interpretation very frequently leads to amendment. Second, the task force is recommending that The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity (F-1.00 through F-3.00) be allowed to remain intact for a period of six years before being subject to the normal process of constitutional amendment. This would permit the church to live with the document for a period of time to determine whether the new section serves the church's needs.

Some notes on a particular section:

- G-6.02: The task force proposes to move the provisions governing the Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) to this chapter, rather than leave them as a part of the description of the General Assembly in proposed G-3.05. As indicated above, this reflects the task force's sense that the acts of interpreting and amending the Constitution are closely related, and should therefore be dealt with in the same place. The task force is further proposing that language in current G-13.0112a–d concerning the qualifications for membership of the ACC, its frequency of meeting, and the number of members required to remain on the floor of the General Assembly during plenary sessions be deleted. Such material is process and procedural in nature and seems to the task force to belong in manuals of the General Assembly, rather than in the Constitution.