

Presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have approved a new Form of Government

Trinity Presbytery became the 87th presbytery to approve the amendment

Louisville—While the Office of the General Assembly awaits official tallies, it appears that a majority of the 173 presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have approved a new Form of Government. At its meeting on Tuesday, June 7, 2011, Trinity Presbytery became the 87th presbytery to approve an amendment that will replace the current 18-chapter Form of Government with a new version that is six chapters in length. The Form of Government is one section of the *Book of Order*, which is part of the PC(USA) *Constitution*. Along with the new Form of Government will be a new section of the *Book of Order* entitled “Principles of Presbyterian Polity,” which contains a large majority of the content of the first four chapters of the current Form of Government.

The proposed new Form of Government (FOG) was approved by the 219th General Assembly (2010) of the PC(USA). Two years earlier, a proposed revision had been presented to the 218th General Assembly (2008) by the FOG Task Force. That assembly reconstituted the task force and asked it to present a revised version to the 219th GA based on the feedback received at the 218th GA.

This is the first full revision of the Form of Government since the Presbyterian Church in the United States and the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America reunited to form the PC(USA). The current Form of Government had been amended over 300 times since reunion in 1983.

The new Form of Government will take effect July 10, 2011, one year after the adjournment of last summer’s assembly. It is anticipated that the transition from the current to the new FOG will take time.

In response to the vote, denominational leaders issued a letter to all congregations of the PC(USA). In it, they write, “While the new Form of Government will help the PC(USA) to be a faithful and responsive church in the 21st century, it also has a dimension of bringing us back to a truly constitutional document that contains broad governing and theological principles and emphasizes function over structure.” The letter continues, “Many Presbyterians will see nothing suddenly or dramatically different with a new Form of Government. Worship services will go on as usual, and congregations will continue to teach the faith, serve their communities, reach out to those in need, and work to further God’s realm on earth. However, what will be different is that congregations, presbyteries, and synods will have the opportunity to tailor mission and ministry to fit their own particular contexts and challenges.”

Resources and guides about the new FOG, including “Frequently Asked Questions,” are available at <http://oga.pcusa.org/formofgovernment>.

The full text of the churchwide letter:

To congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

While it is not official until the Office of the General Assembly receives notification from presbyteries that have voted, it appears that, as of June 7, 2011, the proposed new Form of Government (FOG) has been approved by a majority of our 173 presbyteries.

The new FOG will replace the current version within the Book of Order of the church’s Constitution on July 10, 2011, one year after the adjournment of the 219th General Assembly (2010). The print edition of the new Book of Order will be available by late July.

The new Form of Government at its core

A new section, Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, which contains the vast majority of the first four chapters of the current FOG, will also be added to the beginning of the Book of Order. Within it are these words: In the power of the Spirit, Jesus Christ draws worshiping communities and individual believers into the sovereign activity of the triune God at all times and places. As the Church seeks reform and fresh direction, it looks to Jesus Christ who goes ahead of us and calls us to follow him. (F-1.0401)

The foundational message of the saving love of God through Jesus Christ is timeless. The writer of Hebrews reminds us, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8). And yet, when the Spirit has moved the church to respond to “the sovereign activity of the triune God,” the church has, in turn, worked to reshape itself to do so effectively.

While the new Form of Government will help the PC(USA) to be a faithful and responsive church in the 21st century, it also has a dimension of bringing us back to a truly constitutional document that contains broad governing and theological principles and emphasizes function over structure.

What will change?

Many Presbyterians will see nothing suddenly or dramatically different with a new Form of Government. Worship services will go on as usual, and congregations will continue to teach the faith, serve their communities, reach out to those in need, and work to further God’s realm on earth. However, what will be different is that congregations, presbyteries, and synods will have the opportunity to tailor mission and ministry to fit their own particular contexts and challenges.

The new FOG will also usher in changes in terminology. For example, ministers of the Word and Sacrament will be known as teaching elders, partnering in ministry with ruling elders who serve on the congregation’s council (session).

It is a season of much change in the church, and change is often accompanied by anxiety. Making the transition from the current Form of Government to the new one will take time, patience, and grace. We will all be living gradually into these new dimensions of the church’s governance. We commend to you the resources and guides at <http://oga.pcusa.org/formofgovernment> for assistance, including the “Frequently Asked Questions” document that accompanies this letter. Further resources will be made available over the course of the summer to help with this transition.

The best resources through this transition, however, will be each other. A new Form of Government puts all of us on the same page, as it were. Through conversation, cooperation, and collaboration, we will discover the most effective ways to move forward into this new and exciting chapter of the life of the church.

In the end, as affirmed in the Confession of 1967, “The church ... orders its life as an institution with a constitution, government, officers, finances, and administrative rules. These are instruments of mission, not ends in themselves” (9.40). The mission remains the same: to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed, and to work for the reconciliation of the world. With God’s help, may this new Form of Government enable us to be ever more faithful to that mission.

In Christ,

Cindy Bolbach

Moderator of the 219th General Assembly (2010)

Gradye Parsons

Stated Clerk of the General Assembly

Linda Valentine

Executive Director, General Assembly Mission Council

Landon Whitsitt

Vice Moderator of the 219th General Assembly (2010)