**INTRODUCTION TO THE CONSTITUTION**

**PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)**

**TYPES OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT:**

There are three different types of church governments found among denominations:

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CONGREGATIONAL: In this form of church government, the decision making is with the entire congregation. While there may be a Board of some kind (i.e., Deacons, etc.), the decision making power rests with the congregation gathered in a Congregational Meeting. Each congregation determines its own rules, regulations, and policies. Examples are Baptist and United Church of Christ congregations.

EPISCOPAL: Contrasted to the above named form of church government is the Episcopal form of church government. Power resides with the Bishop. The decision making power resides with one person elected by the congregations to lead the particular group of congregations. Examples are United Methodist and Episcopal congregations.

REPRESENTATIVE: The third form of church government is called Representative. This form has a group of members of the congregation who are elected to determine the matters of a particular congregation. While there are certain powers reserved to the entire congregation, those powers are limited. Example of this form of church government is Presbyterian.

**CONSTITUTION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)**

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), consists of the *Book of Confessions* (Part I) and the *Book of Order* (Part II).

The *Book of Confessions* contains the Nicene Creed, the Apostles’ Creed, the Scots

Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster

Confession of Faith, the Shorter Catechism, the Larger Catechism, the Theological

Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, the Confession of Belhar, and A Brief

Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The *Book of Order* contains the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, the Form of

Government, the Directory for Worship, and Church Discipline.

**BOOK OF ORDER**

The four sections of the Book of Order are Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, the Form of Government, the Directory for Worship, and Church Discipline. Each section is represented by a single letter: Foundations (F); Form of Government (G); Directory for Worship (W); and Church Discipline (D).

Foundations (F): the first three chapters of the Book of Order focuses on the theological foundations that undergird our church government. It is a section that will rarely change as the foundations are rather stable. It deals with the missional nature of the church; the confessional nature of our denomination; and the historical principles church order and practice.

Form of Government (G): this section is the primary focus for leaders in the church. It consists of six chapters that provide guidance about establishing congregations; holding congregational meetings; membership requirements; ordered ministries; responsibilities of the four councils (i.e., Session, Presbytery, Synod, General Assembly); property issues; ecumenical commitment; and ways to change the Constitution.

Directory for Worship (W): the DfW focuses on the worship life of a congregation. It provides the essential elements in a Reformed worship service. It outlines the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. It contains the service for ordination. In addition, it provides guidance for other worship experiences. The DfW is not a service book with fixed orders of worship and selections of prayers (those are found in the Book of Common Prayer).

Church Discipline (D): the Church Discipline contains procedures when a church member or a council has violated scripture or the constitution of the PCUSA. While this section of the Book of Order is not used regularly, its presence assists in the restoration of relationships and situations when they have been out of order. Its intention is to be restorative and not punitive. It provides full and open processes to find the truth and then ways to move forward

**HOW TO READ THE BOOK OF ORDER:**

In recent years, the Book of Order has added page numbers in the document. While this addition can be helpful, it can also cause difficulties. The Book of Order is a dynamic, ever changing document. Every two years, there are possibilities for changes to the Book. Therefore, a page number in one edition will not necessarily correspond to the same page number in another edition.

Citations: Citations are finding various sections or paragraphs of the Book of Order. Because of its changing nature, this method is the best way to find references in the Book of Order regardless of the edition.

Each section is represented by a letter: Foundations (F); Form of Government (G); Directory for Worship (W); and Church Discipline (D).

An example of a citation is G-3.0103:

G: represents the part of the Book of Order (Form of Government)

3. represents the chapter in the particular part (chapter 3 in Form of Government)

01 represents the section of the particular chapter (section 1 of chapter 3, Form of

Government

03 represents the paragraph in the section of the particular chapter (paragraph 03 in

section 01 of chapter 3, Form of Government).

Exercise: Look up these citations and give the content or title of the citation:

G-3.0103 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

W-4.0404 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

F-3.01 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

D-1.0101 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Any section of the Book of Order that is **bold** means that the section was changed by the last General Assembly with a majority of presbyteries agreeing.

**FOUR CRITICAL WORDS IN THE BOOK OF ORDER:**

When reading and interpreting the Book of Order, it is important to watch for particular words. These are:

(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

In the following examples, how would you interpret the citations?

G-1.0401 (may) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

G-3.0103 (should) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

G-3.0106 (shall) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

W-1.0202 (is appropriate) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**HOW TO MAKE CHANGES TO THE BOOK OF ORDER:**

Changes to the Book of Order have a very defined way in which they can be made. Every two years, the General Assembly meets to transact business. Suggested changes to the Book of Order comes from a variety of origins. Usually they come from a Presbytery in the form of an Overture. They are called proposed Amendments to the Book of Order.

Suggested changes to the Book of Order have to be received by the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly at least 120 days prior to the convening of the Assembly. The Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) reviews the proposed change(s) and then gives guidance or advice to the appropriate committee of the General Assembly when they meet during the Assembly. The GA Committee debates the proposed changes and then makes a recommendation to the entire General Assembly. Recommendation could be to approve the proposal; to defeat the proposal; to approve the proposal with modifications. The Assembly meets and takes action.

Any Amendments that are approved by the GA are sent to the presbyteries for their vote. Each Presbytery has up to one year to vote for or against the proposed Amendment. No changes can be made to the Amendment which the GA has approved.

If a majority of the presbyteries approve the proposed Amendment, it goes into effect one year after the close of the last General Assembly. Changes made in the past two years in the Book of Order are printed in **bold** in the text of the Book of Order.

**APPENDICES and INDEXES**

In the back of the Book of Order, there are four appendixes and two indexes:

APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Articles of Agreement .,,,.................................................. A-1-A-16

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