

HANDBOOK

FOR

CLERKS OF SESSION

2012

*This handbook is dedicated to all Clerks of Session of
Trinity Presbytery,
both past and present.*

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FORWARD

FOUNDATIONS FOR OUR MINISTRY AS CLERKS

This *Handbook for Clerks of Session* is written for clerks by clerks, as a guide to the responsibilities of clerks of session. The following pages are, in part, the fruit of the 1997 Annual Polity Conference hosted by the Office of the General Assembly. Special appreciation goes to Elder Dick Coffelt, stated clerk of Grand Canyon Presbytery. His gifts are present throughout this handbook.

Our *Book of Order* now begins with a chapter titled *Foundations of Presbyterian Polity*. That chapter lays the groundwork for our mission as Presbyterian witnesses to the love of God and the light of Christ. The new Form of Government now refers to sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly as **councils**. Formerly, they were called “governing bodies” or “judicatories.” This Handbook uses the term **council**, to be consistent with the *Book of Order*.

This Handbook is built upon two foundations:

First Foundation: Clerking is MINISTRY

The Confession of 1967 offers a crucial perspective (emphasis mine):

*The church thus orders its life as an institution with a constitution, government, officers, finances, and administrative rules. **These are instruments of mission, not ends in themselves.***

As clerks, we have a vital role to play in keeping the church on track with regard to its mission. If we keep **ministry** foremost in our minds, we will work in a spirit that will be truly energizing and transforming to the life of the church. Within that perspective:

- Every time someone calls with a question, they are providing you the opportunity to minister.
- Keeping accurate minutes is the ministry of honoring our collective ministry, and of holding ourselves accountable for doing what we said we would do.

Second Foundation: As leaders we have a responsibility to further the Great Ends of the Church

The “Great Ends of the Church” are our marching orders, the basic vision of the Church of Jesus Christ.

*The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.
The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.
The maintenance of divine worship.
The preservation of the truth.
The promotion of social righteousness.
The exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.*

The “Great Ends” appear at the end of the first chapter of the *Book of Order*. They set the stage for all that we do as Presbyterians doing ministry and mission.

Assumptions Behind this Handbook

The ministry of Clerk of Session flows from the above foundations. As clerk of session you play a vital role within the Presbyterian Church (USA). This handbook is written with the following assumptions in mind:

- The clerk of session maintains the history of the faithfulness of a particular church, through careful minutes and records.
- The clerk of session is interested in and knowledgeable about Presbyterian polity.
- The clerk of session and the moderator of the session are partners in leadership.
- The clerk of session and the moderator of the session are liaisons between the session and the presbytery.
- The clerk of session always strives to be a servant of the session, in the fullest New Testament sense, and seeks to be equipped spiritually to fulfill the servant role.
- The clerk of session is elected to be the continuing ecclesiastical officer of the congregation.

An effective clerk of a governing body understands that order is derived from scripture, as expressed and interpreted in the Confessions of our church. Order expresses the principle that we must live our lives together in accord with our faith, and as a witness to the promises and demands of scripture. A clerk of a council respects the *Constitution* of the Presbyterian Church (USA) as our covenant with one another to be faithful witnesses. Perhaps most importantly, an effective clerk knows that our rules are never an end in themselves, but always an attempt to be faithful to our covenant.

Our Presbyterian polity commits to a shared ministry among elders, deacons, members, and ministers of Word and Sacrament. Our polity commits to corporate governance in which decisions are always communal, never individual. “All of us are generally wiser than one of us,” is one way to express this commitment. “The Holy Spirit works powerfully through groups, as well as through individuals,” is a classic Presbyterian approach to common work in the Church.

The moderator and the clerk of session are guardians of this polity . . . all in the hope of enhancing our witness to Jesus Christ, and furthering the Great Ends of the Church.

Thank you . . . for your service in this ministry of love!

*Jim Rowell, Stated Clerk
Trinity Presbytery*

YOU MAY COPY ANY PAGE OR SECTION
OF THIS HANDBOOK, FOR USE BY YOUR
SESSION OR ANY OTHER GROUP, OR FOR
EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES.

IN FACT, I **ENCOURAGE** YOU TO DO SO!

GRACE AND PEACE TO YOU AND YOUR FELLOW SERVANTS!

WHAT RESOURCES DO I NEED?

“Must Have” Tools for Clerks of Session

A current edition of the *Book of Order* [*Book of Order 2011-2013*]

Every other year, the General Assembly prints a new edition of the *Book of Order*. It is available for purchase and incorporates recent amendments to the *Book of Order*.

There are three ways you may obtain a *Book of Order 2011-2013*:

- You may purchase a copy at the presbytery office. The price is \$8.50.
- You may order a copy (\$8.50) at this link: <http://store.pcusa.org/OGA1101> The *Book of Order 2011-2013* is available both in book format and CD format.
- You may download a free copy (in pdf) at this link:

<http://oga.pcusa.org/section/departments/communication-development-and-technology/constitution>

Go to the bottom of the screen.

You will see “You can download *Book of Order* in English (pdf)

Click the word “English.” The application will download, and you can save it.

You will have the opportunity to make a donation, if you wish. Follow the instructions.

Companion to the Constitution: Polity for the Local Church

This is an excellent resource book. It is revised annually to incorporate changes to the *Book of Order*, but it is not necessary to order a new one every year. It is excellent, easy to read, and a helpful referenced to the *Book of Order* as it relates specifically to the ministry of the local church. This book is a practical application of the *Book of Order* to real-time experiences in the church. Available at <http://store.pcusa.org>.

ISBN 0-664-50146-X

The above items are available through Presbyterian Distribution Service – (800) 524-2612. You can place a web order through <http://store.pcusa.org>.

Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised, 11th Edition ~ DaCapo Press (Perseus Books Group)

This is going to sound like one of those TV commercials, but **buy only the DaCapo Press edition**. There are many Robert’s Rules books out there, but it is the DaCapo edition that is the “Bible” of parliamentarians worldwide.

Available at Barnes & Noble. Look in the “reference” section. You can also find it at Amazon.com.

If You Want to Go Deeper

Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers, Joan S. Gray and Joyce C. Tucker

This book is excellent. It is written by church officers for church officers. It is complete, accurate, and an excellent resource. It is particularly good when it deals with the “why’s behind how we do things as Presbyterians. This book is required reading for my seminary Polity Classes.

ISBN 0-664-50018-8

Available through PDS (see above).

WHAT SHOULD I DO FIRST?

A successful clerk of session is not made overnight. Knowledge of your resources and diligence in using them will help you become proficient in this rewarding task. The following is a checklist of priorities to pursue from the day you are elected.

1. Locate the Session Minutes Book and the Church Register. They are likely to be in your church office, but may be elsewhere. Locate all previous record books. Are they properly stored?

These records should NEVER be taken from the church (except when the minutes are being reviewed annually by the presbytery). They should be kept in a fireproof safe or file cabinet when not in use. You are the ONLY person who may authorize entries into these books, or provide official excerpts from them.

2. Obtain a current Book of Order. You will find ordering information in the “What Resources Will I Need?” section. Download information is on page 3.

3. If your congregation has By-Laws or a Manual of Administrative Operations, locate them. It is the function of By-Laws to make the general provisions of the *Book of Order* specific to the local situation. For example, while the *Book of Order* specifies three classes of elders and deacons, it does not specify the size of those classes. But remember:

*Where there is a tension between the By-Laws and the Book of Order,
the Book of Order **always** takes precedence.
Congregational By-Laws may not conflict with Book of Order requirements.*

4. Keep the presbytery stated clerk’s address – and the presbytery office address – close at hand. They are on the cover page of this Handbook. The stated clerk of presbytery is the one to whom you relate directly. Please do not hesitate to call or e-mail. All of the numbers have voice-mail.

A Note from Jim Rowell . . .

I check **e-mail** on Sunday after church and multiple times each day, Monday through Thursday.

My day off is Friday. I do not return Friday voicemails unless it is an emergency (usually pastoral). If you call on Friday, I will do my best to return the call on Saturday.

Please send land mail to Trinity Presbytery Office.

5. Locate a copy of the current Presbytery Directory. The Presbytery Directory is now digital. If you call the presbytery office (803-794-1225), a digital copy will be sent to you.

Supplies you will need:

Minutes book papers and binders are available through Cokesbury. Since the binders are very expensive, we recommend that when your minutes book is filled, you have the paper bound (or stored in acid-free folders). Then, re-use the binder. The presbytery office can give you information as to how to have your minutes pages bound.

The following items are available through Presbyterian Distribution Service (<http://store.pcusa.org>):

- Member transfer forms
- Baptismal certificates
- Marriage certificates
- Postcards notifying another church that one of your members has moved to their area

NAVIGATING THE NEW FORM OF GOVERNMENT

A Resource for Sessions and Congregations

Prepared by Jim Rowell, Interim Stated Clerk (with input from many others!)
The Presbytery of Trinity

A new Form of Government was approved by a majority of the Presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and took effect on July 10, 2011. The document is more streamlined than its predecessor, allowing for more flexibility to sessions, congregations, and presbyteries in deciding how they will be ordered and structured to accomplish the mission to which God calls them.

This resource is built around the things that sessions and congregations need to do **sooner** and the things they will need to do **later** (or at a more relaxed pace). That word "relaxed" is important. The best "first thing" to do is to relax. The Office of the General Assembly has said that the provisions of the previous Form of Government remain in force until a session or congregation changes them, or clarifies them in light of the new Form of Government's flexibility. Still, it would be unwise to put off some decisions. This resource seeks to be helpful.

The resource is structured in the following way:

- A statement of the decision that needs to be made.
- The relevant reference and quotation from the new Form of Government.
- Questions that will help guide the decision to be made. It is fully permissible to go with the requirements of the previous Form of Government, but **that decision must be stated and recorded in the minutes of the session or the congregation.**

Many of the decisions will need to be made by the congregation (not by the session), and this resource makes those clear. It will be very helpful for the session to reflect on those decisions, and the values expressed through them, and make recommendations to the congregation.

AN IMPORTANT FIRST THING TO DO

As a session engage in a study of the Foundational Principles.

What used to be the first four chapters of the previous Form of Government is now a separate section of the *Book of Order*. It is section "F"—*The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity*. Much of the previous content retained. Some of it is condensed. A new section, "The Calling of the Church," is organized around a phrase from the Nicene Creed: "The Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic."

This section could be the framework for a session retreat. It could be a series of study periods throughout the year (during a session meeting or at another time).

THINGS TO DO SOONER (WITHIN A YEAR)

1. Determine the quorum for session meetings.

G-3.0203 . . . 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.

Shall the quorum be that which is used in the previous Form of Government?

The quorum for a *regular meeting* of session was the moderator and one third of the elders.
The quorum for *meeting to receive new members* was the moderator and two elders.

Shall the quorum be a different number or percentage?

Will there be a different quorum for regular meetings and meetings to receive new members?

2. Determine how the membership rolls shall be organized.

This is a session responsibility, since it is the session who receives and dismisses members.

G-1.04 There are now only three categories of membership: *Baptized Member* (G-1.0401); *Active Member* (G-1.0402); and *Affiliate Member* (G-1.0403). There is a new category, called *Other Participants* (G-1.0404). There is no category of "Inactive Members."

The "best practices" suggestion from your stated clerk, other stated clerks, and the Office of the General Assembly:

Take an action to place those currently on the roll of Inactive Members on a new register of "Other Participants."

From now forward, if a person becomes inactive or requests inactive status, place their name on the roll of "Other Participants."

[NOTE: Initially your clerk thought that such persons could be placed on the roll of Baptized Members. That is not appropriate because G-1.0401 makes it clear that persons on this roll have been baptized, but **have not made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ** (emphasis added). Active members who request inactive status have made a profession of faith, making it inappropriate to place their names on the roll of Baptized Members.]

Reaffirm the session's current process for reviewing church rolls, or determine a process to use in the future.

The new Form of Government continues to specify the session's role with respect to membership:

G-3.0201c. *nurture the covenant community of disciples of Christ.* This responsibility shall include receiving and dismissing members; reviewing the roll of active members at least annually and counseling with those who have neglected the responsibilities of membership. . . .

The session will need either to continue its current practice of roll review or establish a practice for reviewing the membership rolls. The session will need to determine how they will encourage persons to reflect on the integrity of their membership. It will be helpful to review G-1.0304, *The Ministry of Members*.

3. Recommend to the congregation a quorum for congregation meetings.

G-1.0502 . . . Congregations shall provide by their own rule the quorum necessary to conduct business.

Shall the quorum be that which is used in the previous Form of Government?

The quorum for a congregation meeting has been one tenth of the membership.

"Membership" is that figure reported in the most recent Annual Statistical Report, so the quorum would be one tenth of that figure.

Shall the quorum be a larger or smaller percentage than that used in the previous Form of Government?

A larger quorum may make it more difficult to conduct a congregation meeting, especially should a meeting be needed during a part of the year when many people are away.

A smaller quorum may be less representative of the congregation as a whole.

Shall the quorum be a stated number of active members?

It is fully permissible under the new Form of Government to establish a particular number of members as a quorum (e.g. "A quorum for congregational meetings shall be 45 active members.")

4. At your next congregation meeting ...

Make a motion that the congregation establish *Robert's Rules of Order, 11th Edition* as the parliamentary authority for congregation meetings.

The new Form of Government specifies *Robert's Rules of Order* as the parliamentary authority for meetings of **councils** (session, presbytery, synod, General Assembly), but specifies no such authority for congregations.

There are many versions of *Robert's Rules*. The best and most comprehensive is the recently released 11th edition. This is the edition recommended by the American Association of Parliamentarians, by the Office of the General Assembly, and by the Association of Stated Clerks (PCUSA).

5. Recommend to the congregation a definition of "adequate public notice" for congregation meetings.

G-1.0502 . . . Adequate public notice of all congregational meetings shall be given. Congregations shall provide by their own rule for minimum notification requirements and give notice at regular services of worship prior to the meeting.

Shall the standard of notice be that of the previous Form of Government?

The previous Form of Government defined two standards for notification of a congregation meeting:

1. *For congregation meetings related to the call of a pastor* (but not dissolution of a pastoral relationship), the notification requirement was **ten days** prior to the congregation meeting. Obviously this requirement would be longer than two Sundays. Notification would need to be given verbally during worship on the two Sundays.
2. *For all other congregation meetings* the notification requirement was **two Sundays** (which could include the Sunday on which the congregation meeting was held. Notification would need to be given verbally during worship on the Sunday prior to the meeting and the Sunday of the meeting.

Of course, these requirements were the minimum; any session could provide more notice.

Shall the standard of notice be different from that of the previous Form of Government?

The new minimum standard is not as simple as it seems.

" . . . give notice at regular services of worship prior to the meeting."

- What if a congregation has two worship services each Sunday? Would it be appropriate and beneficial to give notice at both worship services for a meeting to be held after the second service?
- Or would it be better to require notice on two successive Sundays?
- How many worship services is "adequate notice?"

" . . . their own rule of minimum notification requirements. . . "

- This is not simply a matter of the *time frame* of notification (one week, two weeks, ten days, etc.).
- It is also a matter of the *venues* for notification.

The value underlying the decision is important.

Members of a decision-making body have the inherent rights *to know* and *to speak*. Minimum standards for notice ensure that everyone has reasonable opportunity to be present and to know what is being proposed and to speak to it (and, of course, to vote).

In addition to worship services, what other venues of notice are reasonable and appropriate?

The flexibility of the new Form of Government allows sessions and congregations to develop "layers" of notice which may actually enhance the ability and desire of persons to participate:

- Facebook notice
- E-mail notice
- Church bulletins
- Church newsletters (printed and digital)
- Twitter and Tweet notices

Congregation meetings **must** be announced in worship services, and it is up to the congregation to determine how many and when (see above). In our highly mobile world, not everyone will be present in worship, even on two successive Sundays. The benefit of "new technology" notification is that persons who are not in worship regularly can be reached. The limitation of "new technology" notification is that particular technologies will not include all congregation members.

In making these decisions it will be helpful to remember that we are called to be the body of Christ, and that decisions that help members of the body enjoy their rights to know and to speak will be helpful and healthy decisions.

6. Determine the length of terms for elders and deacons.

G-2.0404 Ruling elders and deacons shall be elected to serve terms of no more than three years on the session or board of deacons, and may be eligible for reelection according to congregational rule. However, no ruling elder or deacon shall be eligible to serve more than six consecutive years, and a ruling elder or deacon who has served six consecutive years shall be ineligible for election to the same board for at least one year. Election shall be in classes as nearly equal in number as possible, with one only one class ending each year. They presbytery may, upon written request and by majority vote, grant a congregation a waiver of this limitation on terms.

The new Form of Government specifies only the maximum length of terms (three years). The flexibility of the new Form of Government would allow congregations to determine smaller lengths of terms (two years or one year). No longer would a presbytery have to approve smaller terms.

The waiver referred to in the last line is a waiver of the "six consecutive years" limitations. In the past, such waivers have been requested by very small congregations with few persons eligible to serve as elders or deacons.

How long shall the terms of office be for elders and deacons?

Shall the terms be the traditional length: three years?

What would be the benefits and limitations to the mission of the congregation of having shorter terms?

How many classes would there be?

The new Form of Government does not specify three classes of officers. The language is "classes as nearly equal in number as possible."

Would it be beneficial to have two classes? The traditional three classes? Four classes?

Again, the underlying issue would be the benefits and limitations to the congregation's mission.

7. Recommend to the congregation the size & make-up of the Congregational Nominating Committee.

G-2.0401 Ruling elders and deacons shall be nominated by a nominating committee elected by the congregation, drawn from and representative of its membership. Congregations may provide by their own rule for a congregational nominating committee, provided that the committee shall consist of at least three active members of the congregation, and shall include at least one ruling elder who is currently serving on the session. The pastor shall serve ex-officio and without vote.

[IMPORTANT NOTE: The committee is the **congregational** nominating committee. It is answerable to the congregation, not to the session. The nominating committee reports to the congregation, not to the session. The nominating committee may choose to inform the session of those whom it will nominate to the congregation, but the session as a whole and the individual elders have no inherent right to that information any earlier than any other congregation member. Sessions who require their nominating committees to report to them, or who take action to "approve" the slate of nominees are overstepping their authority inappropriately.]

[A **second** important note: A General Assembly authoritative interpretation affirms the session's right to name a currently serving Ruling Elder to the nominating committee. Given the provisions of the new Form of Government, the session may **nominate** an elder to serve, but the elder **must** be **elected** by the congregation. Until the 220th General Assembly clarifies the status of existing authoritative interpretations, this distinction should be maintained.]

Shall the Congregation Nominating Committee be formed according to the provisions of the previous Form of Government?

The previous standard for a nominating committee in a church without deacons was:

- A currently serving ruling elder, who serves as chair of the nominating committee
- Another ruling elder (either in active service or not currently serving)
- Enough at-large members, elected by the congregation, to make a majority (i.e. three)
- TOTAL of five members

The previous standard for a nominating committee in a church with deacons was:

- A currently serving ruling elder, who serves as chair of the nominating committee
- Another ruling elder (either in active service or not currently serving)
- A currently serving deacon, selected by the board of deacons
- Enough at-large members, elected by the congregation, to make a majority (i.e. four)
- TOTAL of seven members

Shall the Congregation Nominating Committee be the minimum established by the new Form of Government?

The entire committee (including the currently serving ruling elder) must be elected by the congregation.

Will three persons be "representative of [the congregation's] membership?"

How large a committee will be representative of the membership?

Should congregations with deacons specify that one of the members be a deacon? (That person would be elected by the congregation, not appointed by the board of deacons.)

[IMPORTANT NOTE: It is important to remember that "representative of the congregation" means representative of the make-up of the congregation. It does not mean that members of the nominating committee "represent" a portion of the congregation. Rather, the nominating committee "represents" the congregation as a whole, and is responsible to the congregation for discerning the leaders that God is calling into service.]

8. Develop the criteria and a process for the preparation and examination of candidates for office.

G-2.0402 When persons have been elected to the ordered ministry of ruling elder or deacon, the session shall provide a period of study and preparation, after which the session shall examine them as to their personal faith; knowledge of the doctrine, government, and discipline contained in the Constitution of the church; and the duties of the ministry. The session shall also confer with them as to their willingness to undertake the ministry appropriate to the order. If the examination is approved, the session shall appoint a day for the service of ordination and installation.

G-2.0104b Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. The council responsible for ordination and/or installation shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

The following is the general timeline and responsibilities:

The **congregation** elects a congregation nominating committee.

The **nominating committee** selects candidates for the offices of elder and deacon and requests the session to call a congregation meeting to hear their report and elect officers.

The **session** calls a congregation meeting for the purpose of election of officers

The **congregation** elects those who will serve.

The **session** engages those elected in a period of preparation.

The **session** examines the candidates for office and if the examination is approved establishes a date and time for ordination and/or installation.

[NOTE: Some have questioned, "Why does the preparation period occur after the election? Couldn't the preparation period occur before election?" It is important to preserve the right of the congregation to elect its leaders, including the right to nominate persons from the floor (persons who may not have participated in a preparation period). It would be inappropriate for a session to **require** such a preparation period prior to election, and as a condition of election. The above timeline preserves the respective rights of congregations and sessions, under the principle that "Congregations elect. Sessions examine, ordain and/or install." It is also the responsibility of a Congregation Nominating Committee to extend a **call** to serve, which presumes that the Nominating Committee (a) considers appropriate gifts and qualifications for service and (b) ensures that those accepting election to office fully understand the requirements of that office.]

[ADDITIONAL NOTE: There is no requirement that nominations from the floor be handled at the moment they are made or in the meeting in which they are made. It is most appropriate, when nominations are made from the floor, for someone to move that the nominations for that particular office be referred back to the Nominating Committee, for report and action at a future date. This preserves the responsibility of the Nominating Committee, and avoids manipulation of the nominating/electing process.]

What will be the *specific* timeline (target dates) for the above actions?

How will the session conduct the preparation, following election?

How long will the preparation period be? A day or part-day retreat? A series of classes?

Who will lead the preparation? What will be the session's involvement?

How will the preparation be reported to the session?

Will currently-serving officers be requested to participate in the preparation process? This is a particularly appropriate question for sessions and congregations in which such an intentional process has not been used.

How will the examination of candidates be conducted?

How will the session inquire as to the categories of examination?

- Personal faith
- Knowledge of the doctrine, government, and disciple of the PCUSA
- Duties of the ministry to which the person has been elected
- Their sense of calling to, and their gifts for, the ministry to which they were elected
- Their ability and commitment to fulfill the officer ordination vows

What questions will be asked in each category and how will they be asked and answered?

The denomination's standard is that examinations should be fair and equally applied for all persons.

Should this provision for examination apply to elders who extend their service for a second term, or to elders who return to service after a period of not serving?

If a session has not previously had a practice of examinations, should the currently-serving Ruling Elders be examined along with newly-elected Ruling Elders?

What will be the process if a session should say, "No, the examination of this particular candidate is not sustained"?

9. **Establish a term for the Church Treasurer.**

G-3.0205 The session shall elect a treasurer for such term as the session shall decide and shall supervise his or her work or delegate that supervision to a board of deacons or trustees.

What shall be the term for a treasurer?

The previous Form of Government specified election by the session annually.

Shall the term of the treasurer be one year? Two years? Three years? Indeterminate?

Whatever decision the session makes should be accompanied by a clear rationale.

Who shall supervise the treasurer?

It is the session who decides who will supervise: the session, the deacons (if the congregation has deacons), the trustees (if the congregation has trustees).

If the congregation has no deacons and a unicameral session (in which the session functions as a board of trustees) then the supervision would be by the session.

Again, the decision should be accompanied by a clear rationale.

What will be the provisions for re-election of a treasurer?

There are no established term limits, so a treasurer could be re-elected to multiple terms.

The session would be wise to establish parameters regarding re-election of the treasurer.

Who will search for and nominate the treasurer?

Will the session (or a portion of the session) search for and nominate the treasurer?

Will the session delegate the search and nomination to the nominating committee? (If this option is chosen, the election would be by the session and not the congregation.)

10. **Establish a term for the clerk of session.**

G-3.0104 . . . The clerk of the session shall be a ruling elder elected by the session for such term as it may determine.

Shall the clerk of session be an elder currently serving on session?

The new Form of Government (as was true with the previous Form of Government) does not specify that the clerk of the session must be a ruling elder who is currently serving.

What shall be the term for the clerk of the session?

As with the church treasurer the decision as to length of term should be accompanied by a clear rationale.

11. **Develop and approve a sexual misconduct policy, if you do not have one.**

G-3.0106 All councils shall adopt and implement a sexual misconduct policy.

[NOTE: In the new Form of Government those bodies that were formerly called "governing bodies" (sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly) are now called "councils." Sessions are one of the four "councils" of the church. It is now **required** that sessions adopt and implement a sexual misconduct policy. Our presbytery's Committee on Ministry has the policy that Triennial Visits must include inquiry as to whether there is an established sexual misconduct policy.]

If you have a sexual misconduct policy, determine a time within the next six months for the session to review it and update it, if necessary.

If you do not have a sexual misconduct policy, contact the presbytery office for help in working to establish a sexual misconduct policy.

It is very unwise simply to adopt the presbytery's sexual misconduct policy as the church's policy.

Our presbytery does not encourage that, and the presbytery's insurance company discourages it.

There are ample resources for helping sessions to develop sexual misconduct policies.

Does your sexual misconduct policy include provisions for child safety? If not it would be wise to address issues of child safety in church programs.

12. Develop or amend your *Manual of Administrative Operations*.

G-3.0106 All councils shall develop a manual of administrative operations that will specify the form and guide the mission of that council.

All the previous decisions would be included in such a *Manual*.

The presbytery office can provide resources for developing a *Manual of Administrative Operations*.

THINGS TO DO LATER (BUT NOT TOO LATE)

Suggested time frame: within two years

1. Review your mission strategy.

G-3.0201 The session shall have responsibility for governing the congregation and guiding its witness to the sovereign activity of God in the world, so that the congregation is and becomes a community of faith, hope, love, and witness. As it leads and guides the witness of the congregation, the session shall keep before it the marks of the church (F-1.0302), the notes by which Presbyterian and Reformed congregations have identified themselves throughout history (F-1.0303), and the six Great Ends of the Church (F-1.0304).

In light of this charge, the session has the responsibility and power to:

- a. *Provide that the Word of God may be truly preached and heard. . . .*
- b. *Provide that the Sacraments may be rightly administered and received. . . .*
- c. *Nurture the covenant community of disciples of Christ. . . .*

2. Review the financial aspects of administration.

G-3.0205 . . . Sessions may provide by rule for standard financial practices of the congregation, but shall in no case fail to observe the following procedures:

- a. All offerings shall be counted and recorded by at least two duly appointed persons, or by one fidelity bonded person.
- b. Financial books and records adequate to reflect all financial transactions shall be kept and open to inspection by authorized church officers at reasonable times.
- c. Periodic, and in no case less than annual, reports of all financial activities shall be made to the session or entity vested with financial oversight.

G-3.0112 Each council shall obtain property and liability insurance coverage to protect its facilities, programs, staff, and elected and appointed officers.

G-3.0113 Each Council shall prepare and adopt a budget to support the church's mission within its area.

A full financial review of all financial books and records shall be conducted every year by a public accountant or committee of members versed in accounting procedures. Reviewers should not be related to the treasurer(s). Terminology in this section is meant to provide general guidance and is not intended to require or not require specific audit procedures or practices as understood within the professional accounting community.

3. Develop a strategy for participating in the life of the presbytery and the denomination.

G-3.0202 Sessions have a particular responsibility to participate in the life of the whole church through participation in other councils. (A list of particularly important items follows).

How will your session fulfill these responsibilities?

How will your session participate beyond "sending commissioners?"

4. Develop a regular process for review of the *Manual of Administrative Operations*.

5. Develop a regular process for review of the *Sexual Misconduct Policy*.

SUMMARY CHECKLIST OF THINGS TO DO SOONER (WITHIN A YEAR)

- **Determine the quorum for session meetings.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____
- **Determine how membership rolls shall be organized.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____
- **Recommend to the congregation a quorum for congregation meetings.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____
- **At the next congregation meeting, make a motion that the congregation establish *Robert's Rules of Order* as the parliamentary authority for congregation meetings.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____
- **Recommend to the congregation a definition of "adequate public notice" for congregation meetings.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____
- **Recommend to the congregation the size and make-up of the Congregation Nominating Committee.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____
- **Develop the criteria and process for the preparation and examination of candidates for office.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____
- **Establish a term for the Church Treasurer.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____
- **Establish a term for the clerk of session.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____
- **Develop and approve a sexual misconduct policy, if you do not have one.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____
- **Develop or amend your *Manual of Administrative Operations*.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____

Some suggestions for a session's reflection:

- ❖ Could all or most of the above be accomplished in a session retreat (which retreat might begin with a study of the *Foundations of Presbyterian Polity*)?
- ❖ Could such a retreat involve the sessions of multiple churches, working in partnership?
- ❖ Would it be better to deal with the above issues in successive session meetings?

SUMMARY CHECKLIST OF THINGS TO DO LATER (BUT NOT *TOO* LATE)

- **Review your mission strategy, in light of G-3.0201.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____

- **Review the financial aspects of administration, in light of G-3.0205, 3.0112, 3.0113.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____

- **Develop a strategy for participating in the life of the presbytery and the denomination.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____

- **Develop a regular process for review of the *Manual of Administrative Operations*.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____

- **Develop a regular process for review of the Sexual Misconduct Policy.**
Target Deadline: _____ Date accomplished: _____

HOW DO I PREPARE FOR A SESSION MEETING?

SUMMARY TIMELINE

The following timeline is simply a suggestion. It is a distillation of many conversations with clerks regarding session meetings and incorporates their suggestions and wisdom. If you follow a timeline like this your elders will be better prepared for particular meetings, and the session will function much more efficiently. The **best practice** is for the clerk of session and the pastor to accomplish these preparations in partnership.

Two weeks before the session meeting (but no less than 10 days) . . .

- Contact committee chairs about unfinished and referred business for which they are responsible. Remind chairs that recommendations for action from their committee should be submitted in writing.
- Meet with the Moderator to develop a Consent Agenda and Agenda for the meeting before the session meeting.
- Prepare a packet for the meeting (agenda, consent agenda,, minutes of previous meetings, recommendations from committees, reports and other items that can be gathered in advance).

One week before the session meeting (but no less than 3 days) . . .

- Send the meeting packet to session members.

During the session meeting . . .

- Seek approval of the minutes of the previous meeting.
- Record the minutes of the meeting (see suggested format for Session Minutes, later in this Handbook).
- Keep a running list of actions that will need follow-up in subsequent session meetings. [Examples: Approval of a baptism must be followed by a record of the date the baptism was accomplished. Record of the examination of prospective elders must be followed by a record of the date those elders were ordained and/or installed.]

Following the session meeting . . .

- Write the minutes of the meeting immediately after the meeting. [It will be more fresh in your mind.]
- Complete all correspondence directed by the session, including letters of transfer. **Remember: all correspondence between governing bodies of the Church is “clerk-to-clerk.”**
- Record in the rolls and registers all membership changes approved by the session.
- Record any pertinent information regarding baptisms, weddings, deaths.

BEFORE THE SESSION MEETING . . .

Plan the Meeting Agenda. It is the responsibility of the clerk of session and the Moderator—together—to prepare the agenda, so that all business is handled in an efficient manner. This is one of the many cases where “two heads are better than one.” A **best practice** is to list the “hoped-for outcomes” of the particular meeting, and develop the agenda to best accomplish those outcomes. In larger churches it may be best to have a meeting of the moderators of committees along with the Moderator and Clerk to establish the Consent Agenda and the Main Agenda.

Meeting Notices. Send—or arrange to be sent—notices of the session meeting. It is helpful to accompany the notice with reminders to committee chairs of reports due, business referred, or previous assignments. Many sessions have benefited from a meeting packet which serves as the reminder. Such a packet would include the agenda, reports of committees that have been submitted in time for the packet, recommendations for action, announcements about presbytery events, pastor’s report, clerk’s report, and other materials that would help members prepare for the meeting.

Written Reports. Most sessions find that written reports and **written motions** enable the efficient flow of session business. In such reports, the recommendations always come first and the historical or informational material comes last. Only the recommendations (as approved or amended and approved by the session) will appear in the session minutes . . . *unless* . . . the session orders the entire report (or a portion of it) to be spread upon the minutes. Many sessions find it helpful for committees to have reports ready in time to be mailed with the call of the meeting.

Regarding Special Meetings of the Session or Congregation. The call for a special meeting **must** include the **exact purpose** for which the meeting is called. No other business than that named can be transacted. The phrase, “and other such business as may come before session (or the congregation) is **not** appropriate in the call for a special meeting.

TAKE WITH YOU TO THE MEETING . . .

- **Current Book of Order**
- Session committee membership lists
- Current year session minutes (in case you need to refer to them)
- Your running list of all referred and/or unfinished actions

As clerk of session, you are responsible for all papers and documents that aid the session in reaching its decisions. It will be very helpful, both to you and to the session, to have the above items at each meeting.

DURING THE SESSION MEETING . . .

The Session cannot meet without its Moderator, who ordinarily is the pastor of the church. The council (session) shall provide by rule who shall preside in the absence of the Moderator [G-3.0104] **BEST PRACTICE:** If the Moderator is absent or ill, the Moderator may, **with concurrence of the session**, appoint another minister of the presbytery to moderate.

A quorum of the session must be present to have a meeting at which actions may be taken. A session shall provide by rule for the quorum [G-3.0203]. The quorum must include the moderator and either a specific number of ruling elders or a specific percentage of ruling elders in current service. The traditional quorum has been one-third of the members of session (or two ruling elders if the purpose of the meeting is to receive new members).

Session meetings in most congregations are informal. Many of the actions will be approved by consensus, and *Robert’s Rules of Order* is loosely applied. That is OK. However . . . as clerk of session **require** that **all** actions taken by the session be voted upon. In your role as clerk you may require or request that all motions be in writing. Ask the Moderator to stop the meeting briefly, if you must, until you are given the exact wording of a motion with which the session is dealing.

Do not include the names of the mover and seconder of a motion. Naming movers and seconders is a tradition that is dictated by custom, not by rule. Again: it is not necessary to record the names of movers and seconders. The preferred format is simple:

“The session VOTED to . . .”

The purpose of a second is **only** to get the item to the floor. A seconder is not even bound to vote in favor of the motion. In Presbyterian polity, once an action is taken it is an action of the body, making it completely irrelevant who made the motion.

You may occasionally be asked to help a session member to word a motion. Helpful questions to ask in framing a motion for session action are:

What—exactly—is going to be done?

Who is going to do it?

When will it be completed and/or reported?

How much will it cost?

Where will the money come from?

Is the action compatible with the Book of Order? (If not, the action is inappropriate.)

Do not include a summary of discussion in your minutes. Record only the motions made and their disposition (along with any subsidiary motions adopted, e.g. amendments). If you include other information include only that which will help a reader understand the motion (e.g. background information, rationale).

Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised [11th edition] governs all procedures of session in cases not specifically provided for in the *Book of Order*.

AFTER THE MEETING . . .

Write up the minutes **immediately**. Prepare a draft and provide it to the session **within a week** for their review and approval at the next meeting. When I prepare my minutes for the Presbytery Council or Committee on Ministry, I give them a title like this: January COM minutes-UNAPPROVED. I send them electronically to the members (and by land mail to those without e-mail) and invite corrections/clarifications. After incorporating the changes and after approval by the body, I change UNAPPROVED to FINAL.

When the minutes have been approved, transcribe them or have them transcribed into the minutes book. Everything must be typed or laser printed onto the pages. **Never include attachments and never place inserts into the minutes book.**

Make all necessary entries into the rolls and registers. No entry or deletions should be made unless a session action which appears in the minutes directs that entry or deletion.

Complete or direct to be completed all necessary correspondence related to actions of the session. Among and between governing bodies of the PC(USA), **all** official correspondence is **clerk-to-clerk**. The clerk's signature and no one else's authenticates any document coming from the session. **THE MODERATOR OF SESSION HAS NO AUTHORITY TO ATTEST TO SESSION ACTIONS.**

*NOTE: Some clerks are fortunate to have church secretaries who will print minutes or update rolls and registers. Some congregations even have a "rolls clerk" for the latter task. Still **the clerk of session supervises the church secretary or the roll clerk in all matters related to the minutes and the rolls.** The accuracy of those records is always the responsibility of the clerk of session.*

CONTINUING EDUCATION OF THE SESSION

National studies show that very few Presbyterian elders understand their office or the history, theology, and polity of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The *Book of Order* requires the session to plan for the continuing education of elders.

As clerk of session, you have an important role to play in the session's continuing growth and education.

- *You have the opportunity to become a student of the church's governance.*
- *You can model what it means to seek assistance with problems and concerns.*
- *You can share the fruit of your study and of the assistance you have received.*
- *You are an important advocate for attendance at the annual Leadership Development Event.*
- *You can consistently raise the question, "What are our plans for session education?"*

Each meeting of the session is another opportunity to learn something about the *Book of Order*. Here are some possibilities, each of which could be accomplished in fifteen minutes or less:

- Spend 15 minutes with one of the Preliminary Principles in F-3.0101 through F-3.0108.
- Discuss the implications of the first sentence in F-1.0202.
- Discuss F-1.0302a, especially the second sentence.
- Discuss the "Great Ends of the Church" [F-1.0304], sharing how each is manifested in your congregation.
- Over several meetings, use the following as a responsive reading: W-7.2001; W7.3001; W-7.4002; W-7.4003; W-7.5000 (all)
- Read the Preamble to the Rules of Discipline (D-1.0101, 1.0102, 1.0103) and discuss implications.

HOW DO WE MANAGE THE *BAPTIZED MEMBERS* ROLL?

Who is placed on the Baptized Members roll?

The roll of Baptized members is for all persons who have been baptized, but who have not made a profession of faith.

If an infant is baptized in our church, is he/she placed on the roll of Baptized Members?

Yes.

For an infant or young child, you would list his/her name on the roll, along with the date and location of the baptism (sanctuary, lake, river, etc.).

What *adults* would be on the roll of Baptized Members?

If a baptized child grows to adulthood, but has not made public profession of faith, he or she would remain on the roll of baptized members.

If a family moves to your church and one of the spouses becomes a member but the other does not, you would put that other person on the roll of baptized members.

What happens when a child on the roll becomes confirmed, or an adult on the roll becomes a member?

You would do four things:

1. Make a note by their name on the roll Baptized Members the date of the session's action receiving them as a member. For a child that would most likely be when the session received her or him after confirmation. For an adult that would be when the session received them as a member of the church.
2. Draw a thin line through their name on the roll of Baptized Members.
3. List her/his name on the chronological roll of Active Members by the next available number, and note the date of session action receiving her/him as a member.
4. List her/his name on the alphabetical list of members, with their chronological roll number.

What do I do when they and/or their family moves?

In the case of an infant or young child on the roll of Baptized Members: If the family moves and requests a membership transfer, you would note the name and baptism date on the transfer form (or letter), note the family's move next to the child's name on the roll, and draw a thin line through the child's name.

In the case of an adult on the roll of Baptized Members: You would simply draw a thin line through their name.

A BRIEF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The above reflects the Presbyterian approach to baptism and profession of faith. We baptize both infants and adults. Baptism is the visible sign of God's presence and action in the lives of people. That visible sign may be enacted for adults who were never baptized, who make a profession of faith (which is accompanied by baptism and reception as a member of the congregation).

NOTE: It would be inappropriate for a session to approve baptism for an adult without profession of faith and membership in the church. Baptism is itself a profession of faith, and in the case of adults who are baptized, is accompanied by the constitutional faith questions.

The visible sign of baptism also may be enacted **on behalf** of someone who is not able to make a public profession of faith, but is no less a part of Christ's body and no less a recipient of God's presence and action. This is the case with infants, very young children, and severely mentally challenged persons. In both cases (baptism of adults and baptism of children) we look toward the public profession of faith. An adult makes public profession of faith at the time of baptism. In the case of an infant or very small child, the parents and the congregation anticipate the time when the child will **confirm** his or her faith (this is what confirmation ministries are about in the Presbyterian Church).

“Abstaining from a Vote”
Stated Clerk Educational Moment
[Revised October, 2012]

“What are the effects of abstaining from a vote?”

Often, members of a voting body will register that they are abstaining from voting. There are many assumptions about the effect of abstaining, which usually fall under three categories:

- It has no effect.
- It counts as a “yes” vote.
- It counts as a “no” vote.

Actually, the effect of abstaining relates to the **stated principle by which the body decides**.

Are actions approved by “a majority of those present and voting?” Or are the actions decided by “a majority of those present?” Look at the two statements carefully, for they are different statements.

First . . . a “majority” is one more than 50%.

If decisions are made by a “majority of those present AND VOTING” then a vote to abstain has *no effect*, positive or negative.

Example:

- A session has 15 members and the practice is “those present and voting.”
- During a particular meeting, 12 members are present.
- If all members vote a majority is 7 (one more than 50% of those present).
- So . . . If the vote on a proposal is 6/6, the motion fails, for it is not a majority.
- If the vote were 7/5 the motion would pass, having achieved the majority.

- But what if two persons abstain, with the result that the vote is 5 yes, 5 no, and 2 abstentions?
- The motion would fail, because it does not achieve the majority of those present AND VOTING. (That majority would be 6 – one more than 50% of the ten who were present and voting.)
- If one person abstained (6 yes, 5 no, 1 abstention) the motion would pass, having such a majority.

If decisions are made by a “majority of those present,” then a vote to abstain would have the effect of a no vote.

Example:

- A session has 12 members and the practice is “those present.”
- During a particular meeting, all twelve members are present.
- The majority would be 7 (one more than 50% of those present).
- If the vote were 7 yes, 4 no, and 1 abstention, the motion would pass, having achieved the majority.
- If the vote were 6 yes, 5 no, and 1 abstention, the motion would fail, having failed to achieve the majority (Even though more persons voted “yes” than “no” the positive votes do not achieve the required majority.)

THE “PRESBYTERIAN APPROACH” . . .

The common *assumption* in the Presbyterian Church is that decisions are made by those present **and voting**. That said, it is important that bodies in the church (particularly sessions) make it clear which of the above positions they take, **and follow that practice consistently**.

- Proxy voting is **not** allowed . . . ever . . . in the Presbyterian Church. If a person is absent, they are absent. One **cannot** vote if one is not present . . . not ever . . . not under *any* circumstances.
- Regarding e-mail votes: The newest edition of *Robert’s Rules* maintains that such a vote is appropriate **only** after face-to-face discussion of an issue.
- Regarding teleconference voting / Skype / etc. – I have not heard anything definitive on this. One key issue would be assuring that ALL members of the body have the opportunity to participate.

Abstaining is appropriate when a person has a personal or financial interest in the decision being made. In such a case, abstaining is done to avoid a conflict of interest. *Robert’s Rules* maintains a right of a person to abstain, but notes that under the second provision above (a majority of those present) abstaining loses its neutrality. *Robert’s* also maintains that a person has a *responsibility* to vote in a manner consistent with their opinion on the issue. Our Presbyterian polity and theology would be on the side of *responsibility* to vote in a manner consistent with their opinion on the issue, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

“Electronic Meetings”
STATED CLERK EDUCATIONAL MOMENT
Prepared by the stated clerk – October, 2012

Over the past few years questions have been regularly raised about the wisdom, propriety, and mechanics of “electronic meetings.” The prevalence of e-mail, Skype, video-conferencing, telephone conferencing, Facebook, Twitter and other media have made the issue of electronic meetings an important one. This resource offers some parameters for planning for and conducting electronic meetings. It is in three parts:

1. The complete section of *Robert’s Rules of Order*, for electronic meetings.
2. An “Advisory Opinion” from the Office of the General Assembly.
3. Some reflections from your stated clerk on the issue of such meetings.

Excerpt from *Robert’s Rules of Order*, 11th Edition, pp. 97-99

ELECTRONIC MEETINGS:

EXTENSION OF PARLIAMENTARY LAW TO ELECTRONIC MEETINGS. Except as authorized in the by-laws¹ the business of an organization can be validly transacted only at a regular or properly called meeting—that is . . . at a single official gathering in one room or area—of the assembly of its members at which a quorum is present.

Among some organizations, there is an increasing preference, especially in the case of a relatively small board or other assembly, to transact business at electronic meetings—that is, at meetings at which, rather than all participating members being physically present in one room or area as in traditional (or “face-to-face”) meetings, some or all of them communicate with the others through electronic means such as the Internet or by telephone. A group that holds such alternative meetings does not lose its character as a deliberative assembly . . . so long as the meetings provide **at a minimum**, conditions of opportunity for simultaneous aural communication among all participating members equivalent to those of meetings held in one room or area. Under such conditions, an electronic meeting that is properly authorized in the bylaws is treated as though it were a meeting at which all the members who are participating are actually present.

If electronic meetings are to be authorized, it is advisable to adopt additional rules pertaining to their conduct.

TYPES OF ELECTRONIC MEETINGS. Various provisions for electronic meetings are possible, so that more than the minimum standard of an audio-conference may be required. Thus, if the bylaws provide for meeting by video conference (but not merely by “teleconference” or by “audio-conference”), the meeting **must** be conducted by technology that allows all participating members to see each other, as well as to hear each other, at the same time. Provision may also be made for the use of additional collaborative technology to aid in the conduct of a meeting.

It is important to understand that, regardless of the technology used, **the opportunity for simultaneous aural communication is essential to the deliberative character of the meeting.** Therefore, a group that attempts to conduct a deliberative process in writing (such as by postal mail, e-mail, “chat rooms,” or fax)—which is not recommended—does not constitute a deliberative assembly. Any such effort may achieve a consultative character, but it is foreign to the deliberative process as understood under parliamentary law.

ELECTRONIC MEETINGS IN COMMITTEES. As in the case of a board or any assembly, committees that are expressly established by the bylaws can hold a valid electronic meeting **only if authorized by the bylaws to do so.** A committee that is not expressly established by the bylaws, however, may instead be authorized by a standing rule of the parent body or organization, or by the motion establishing the particular committee, to hold electronic meetings.

¹ Or in the case of Trinity Presbytery churches, the *Manual of Organization* or the *Manual of Administrative Operations*. Where the word “bylaws” appears in this excerpt, substitute either of the versions of *Manual* in this footnote.

ADDITIONAL RULES FOR THE CONDUCT OF ELECTRONIC MEETINGS. If an organization authorizes its assembly, boards, or committees to hold electronic meetings, such a provision should indicate whether members who are not present in person have the right to participate by electronic means, or whether the body may choose to allow or disallow such participation; and, conversely, whether there is required to be a central location for member who wish to attend meetings in person. The notice of an electronic meeting must include an adequate description of how to participate in it (for example, the telephone number to call for a teleconference must be provided). Various additional rules (in the bylaws, special rules of order, standing rules, or instructions to a committee, as appropriate) may also be necessary or advisable regarding the conduct of electronic meetings, such as rules relating to:

- the type of equipment or computer software required for participation in meetings, whether the organization must provide such equipment or software, and contingencies for technical difficulties or malfunctions;
- methods for determining the presence of a quorum;
- the conditions under which a person may raise a point of order doubting the presence of a quorum, and the conditions under which the presence of a quorum is presumed if no such point of order is raised;
- methods for seeking recognition and obtaining the floor;
- means by which motions may be submitted in writing during a meeting; and
- methods for taking and verifying notes.

In addition, depending on the character of the organization, it may be advisable to adopt provisions for ensuring that non-members cannot participate in meetings (unless properly invited to do so), especially during any meeting or portion of a meeting held in executive session.

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FROM THE OFFICE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

**Constitutional Musing - Note 18 –
 Guidelines for Electronic Assemblies
 When Participants Are Unable to Meet Face-to-Face**
 Issued August 2009

The polity and theology of the Presbyterian Church recognizes the importance of elders and ministers assembling together to make decisions about the work and ministry of the church. There is no substitute for the richness of conversation and debate that is possible when we gather in one place to listen and watch and open ourselves to the work of the Spirit. We best subject ourselves to each other and to God's discerning power when we are together.

There are circumstances though, when being physically present with one another is impossible or impractical. The following are guidelines for the extraordinary times when we must use other means of accomplishing the business of a governing body when we cannot meet face to face.

1. The 216th General Assembly provided an Authoritative Interpretation concerning votes by email or mail (2004 item 04-14). In that opinion the church was reminded that:
 - a. G-9.0302b says that "Meetings of governing bodies, commission, and committees shall be conducted in accordance with the most recent edition of Robert's Rules of Order..."
 - b. RRONR (page 482) states that "The opportunity for simultaneous communication is central to the deliberative character of the meeting, and is what distinguishes it from [other] attempts to do business..."
 - c. The summary conclusion of the 216th General Assembly was that "voting by e-mail is permissible only if there has been provision for deliberation, and the governing documents of the governing body provide for vote by mail or email."
2. Furthermore, at the Reunion meeting of the General Assemblies, the UPC General Assembly (1983) reaffirmed the following as reflecting the Historic Principles of the Presbyterian Church:
 - Every governing body is composed of persons who are elected to represent the church. Representatives are not simply to reflect the will of the people but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ for the Church. For this reason, the polity of the Church requires

- That representatives may not be instructed nor vote by proxy.
 - They must have the freedom to participate in debate.
 - Debate within the context of prayer is properly open to the movement of the Holy Spirit.
 - Representatives must be open to the possibility of having their minds changed and
 - The rules for the conduct of debate are designed so this may happen.
[G-1.0400, UPC, 1983, pp 141ff, Report of the Special Committee on Historic Principles, Conscience, and Church Government]
3. Any non-traditional form of meeting must provide an opportunity for simultaneous communication and deliberation.
 4. Any non-traditional form of meeting must be described in the governing body's bylaws or standing rules.
 5. Care must be taken that all qualified to participate in the meeting are included.
 6. Care must be taken to provide opportunities for others to participate in the same manner that they might observe a regular meeting of the governing body.
 7. Minutes of the meeting must be recorded and added to the minutes record of the governing body.

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REFLECTIONS FROM YOUR STATED CLERK

Both *Robert's Rules* and the Constitutional Musing lift up the importance of what it means to be a "deliberative assembly." Both assume the same conditions or parameters:

- The **face-to-face** nature of deliberation.
- The crucial importance of **being able to hear one another simultaneously**.
- The importance of interacting with one another directly in deliberating as a body.

These are, for lack of a better phrase, the *bottom-line* requirements for deliberating. Any form of meeting which eliminates one of these requirements is inappropriate, from both a parliamentary and an ecclesiastical standpoint.

Many clerks and session members have asked about "electronic voting" (read: "e-mail voting"). "*May we conduct a vote by e-mail?*"

- The Constitutional Musing answer is "Yes, **as long as provision has been made for everyone to participate in debate on the issue prior to taking the e-mail vote.**"
- Your stated clerk's opinion is: "Don't vote via e-mail" **unless** it is a routine issue that relates to the ability to conduct business (e.g. establishing the date of a special meeting). Still, face-to-face discussion should occur prior to such a vote . . . always.
- What is clear in both of the above documents is that it is not appropriate to conduct deliberation via e-mail. Why? Because there is no opportunity for "simultaneous aural communication."

The Executive Committee of the Association of Stated Clerks (of which your stated clerk is a member) meets several times a year by telephone conference. These are the parameters for such a meeting:

- The agenda is established ahead of time and is communicated to all members.
- The date and time of the conference call is established by **all** the potential participants (our President uses Doodle.com). Care is ensured that all of the members are able to participate.
- Reminders of the date and time of the call are sent to all members in advance of the meeting.
- Materials for deliberating on important issues are provided no less than five days prior to the call.
- All members present identify themselves at the beginning of the call. Within this context the quorum is established.
- If a person joins the call after the meeting is begun, they are identified by name, and the other participants again identify themselves.
- The moderator of the call (usually the President) ensures that everybody has a chance to offer opinion on issues.
- Persons identify themselves each time they speak.
- If a vote is taken, it is taken by a telephone version of "roll call" (the president calls on each person by name, and each registers his or her vote).

- If a person must leave the meeting prior to its adjournment, they announce that to the group. (In other words, the standard is that no one “hangs up.”)
- The very basic structure of the minutes are reviewed at the end of the meeting, and the clerk of the meeting provides the written minutes by e-mail within a week of the conference call.
- The meetings—of course—are opened and closed with prayer.

This seems to work well for the Executive Committee and would be a worthy model for such meetings.

HOWEVER . . . your stated clerk suggests that our sessions never employ such a meeting. The Executive Committee of the Association of Stated Clerks is national and involves people almost literally from the four corners of the country. Such a meeting makes sense, practically and economically. There is no reason for a session to meet in that way.

Finally . . . it is clear from both *Robert’s* and the Office of the General Assembly that **e-mail meetings are not appropriate and are never allowed**. While a *vote* may be conducted by e-mail (see above) a *meeting* may not be conducted by e-mail (or text, or twitter, or Facebook, or other such media)

FURTHER GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF E-MAIL

- Use e-mail **ONLY** for routine business, such as:
 - Establishing the date/time of a meeting
 - Providing preparatory materials to all participants prior to a meeting
 - Sending an agenda for a meeting
 - Inviting participants to provide preparatory materials or reports (with a deadline for submitting)
 - Working on a document to which several people are contributing (see below)
- Make sure that every member of the group has a complete and accurate list of the e-mail addresses of all members of the group.
- If one or more group members do not have e-mail, either (1) do NOT use e-mail communication (recommended as a best practice), or (2) make sure that those non-electronically-connected members have a copy of what is sent by e-mail.
- In all cases **require** that if group members reply to an e-mail related to the work of the group, they **always** “reply all.”
- If the purpose of e-mail is to work on a document:
 - Designate ONE PERSON to be the manager of submissions.
 - Require that all submissions or comments be “reply all”
 - The manager of submissions would be responsible for maintaining the central copy of the document.
- **Never . . . ever . . .** use e-mail to discuss an issue. E-mail is an ineffective, inappropriate, and even destructive way of conducting dialogue. Dialogue must **always** be face-to-face.
- **Never . . . ever . . .** employ “blind carbon copy” in group related e-mails.
- **Never . . . ever . . .** broadcast any group related e-mail beyond the group UNLESS the group has granted permission to do so at a face-to-face meeting, and **ONLY** with respect to a particular document.

“Election and Installation of Officers – A Question of Timing”
Stated Clerk Educational Moment

[Original composition, 2008 / Latest revision, 10/20/2012]

“When does a person who is elected an elder or deacon actually take office?”

This question is an important question, given the varied practices of congregations in the timing of electing and ordaining/installing officers.

The **service of ordination and installation** effectively begins a person’s term of service. So too, the ordination and installation of a particular officer signals the end of service for the person whom they are replacing.

Example:

- An elder is elected in December of 2009 to begin service in mid-January 2010.
- The service of ordination/installation is held the second Sunday of January 2010.
- At the conclusion of the ordination/installation service, that elder becomes an active elder.
- The person whom they are replacing ends their term of service at the conclusion of that service of ordination/installation.

It is important to note the different responsibilities along the way:

- The *congregation* elects a Nominating Committee (which is a committee of the *congregation*, not a committee of the session).
- The *Nominating Committee* nominates candidates to the congregation. [NOTE: The session’s **sole** responsibility is to call a congregation meeting for that purpose, at the request of the Nominating Committee. Please understand that the session has no more inherent right to know the names of the nominees than any other members of the congregation. There is no requirement that the Nominating Committee run names by the session, and it is certainly inappropriate for a session to “approve” or “disapprove” a slate of nominees prior to their being presented to the congregation. Again, the Nominating Committee is a committee of the *congregation*.]
- The *congregation* elects the officers who will lead them.
- The *session* examines the elected officers and approves or disapproves proceeding with their ordination and/or installation. [If the session disapproves the ordination and/or installation of an officer or officers, that decision is communicated to the Nominating Committee, which will initiate a subsequent search for nominees.]
- The *session* ordains and installs the officers.
- The *officers* begin their service upon their ordination and/or installation.

If the “lag time” between election and ordination/installation is long, it is very appropriate for a session to invite the elected persons to attend session or deacon meetings (and, if the respective bodies deem it wise and appropriate, to grant them privilege of voice).

It is not appropriate for an elected officer to vote prior to his or her ordination and/or installation. This is purely a matter of “orderly practice.” Some congregations have a practice of an “expanded session” in the transition period between officer classes. This may be fine most of the time, but it is risky, and makes the church vulnerable. If an action of the “expanded session” were complained against, it is likely that a Permanent Judicial Commission would take note of the irregularity of the composition of such a session, and even void the decision made under such circumstances, requiring that action be reconsidered and taken only by those authorized to vote.

HOW DO I PREPARE THE MINUTES OF MEETINGS?

This section of the Handbook for Clerks of Session is intended as a helpful guide. What is offered here is offered (a) as suggestion only and (b) incorporates both helpful suggestions and some “best practices” for recording minutes of meetings. In general, this guide will apply to regular meetings of session, special meetings of session, and congregation meetings.

*The minutes of a council are a record of the **decisions** and **actions** taken by the council. The minutes serve the practical function of accurately recording what the particular group has done.*

- ❖ *Minutes ensure that there is an accurate record of proceedings and who participated.*
- ❖ *Accurate minutes are a significant help in developing the resources to communicate to a congregation what their leaders are doing to further the ministry of the church.*
- ❖ *Minutes are a significant historical record of the life of a particular congregation, and its witness to the call of Christ to be faithful witnesses to God’s love.*
- ❖ *Should there ever be a question about what the council has done, or should there ever be a complaint against what the council has done, the minutes provide accurate documentation, so that it may be determined fairly whether the particular action was or was not an irregularity, or whether the session has overlooked something important. [This is rare, but it does happen.]*

The following guide is organized similarly to the Handbook, with “How Do I?” sections.

In the following sections, suggestions and commentary are indented and printed in italics.

HOW DO I BEGIN THE MINUTES?

Minutes should be titled, and should include: (1) the type of meeting, the name of the church, the date/time of the meeting, and the location of the meeting (e.g. session meeting room, fellowship hall, classroom, library, etc.) The minutes should include a clear indication of who was present and absent, the presence of the moderator, and the names of any guests. If there are guests who are given permission to speak, that should be noted as well.

Here is a suggested format for the opening part of the minutes.

MINUTES
Regular [or Special] Meeting of the Session [or congregation]
 _____ Presbyterian Church, _____, SC
 [date, time, location]

| CLASS OF 2012 | | CLASS OF 2013 | | CLASS OF 2014 | |
|---------------|------|---------------|------|---------------|--------|
| P | Name | P | Name | P | Name |
| Ex | Name | P | Name | P | Name |
| P | Name | P | Name | P | Name |
| P | Name | Ex | Name | | VACANT |

Moderator: The Rev. [name]

Guests:

The session of the _____ Presbyterian Church of _____, SC held a regular/special meeting in the [location] at [time] on [date]. A quorum being present, the Moderator called the meeting to order and opened the meeting with prayer.

*Meetings of session and the congregation **must** be opened and closed with prayer.*

If it is your session’s practice for an elder to offer the devotion and prayer, the above sentence would read, “A quorum being present, the Moderator called the meeting to order. [name] offered the devotion and the opening prayer.”

*You **must** indicate that a quorum was present. (You don’t need to specify what the quorum is.)*

If the meeting is a special meeting, then you would list the call of the meeting in this way:

CALL FOR THE MEETING (this is ONLY for special meetings)

The meeting was called for the following purpose:

- o State the purpose of the meeting here.
- o ONLY the business stated in the purpose may be conducted at a special meeting.

The session granted the privilege of voice to the following guests: [name(s)]

[NOTE: It is important to note that you grant guests the privilege of **voice**. The common language is “privilege of the floor.” This may seem nit-picky, but “privilege of the floor” means only that a person may be present in the room. “Privilege of **voice**” means that a person may speak. Best practice is to use the term “voice.”]

HOW SHOULD I FORMAT THE MINUTES?

First: The main concern for minutes is **accuracy**. The minutes must be an accurate record of the meeting.

Second: (And this comes as a surprise to many people) The minutes do not have to be **chronological**. There is no requirement that the particular minutes of a particular meeting reflect the *chronology* of the meeting. Again, the question is, “Is it an accurate record.” *Robert’s Rules of Order* suggest that all minutes follow the same order. Let’s take a look at this:

What are the benefits of recording minutes chronologically?

- They are slightly easier for the clerk to record. It is a bit easier to record the meeting and actions as they happen, rather than fitting those actions and events into a pre-determined order. And . . . most meetings generally follow the habit of a particular order of business.

What are the benefits of recording minutes by a “standard” order?

- A standard order makes the minutes easier to review by persons who read them (either for the annual review, or for a person researching the historical record).
- It is easier for a subsequent clerk to learn the “pattern” of recording minutes.
- Should there be a question months later about a particular decision in a particular area of the council’s work, that decision will be easier to find, than engaging a search of chronologically-recorded minutes.

Some clerks will record a brief “table of contents” for the minutes of each meeting. This is rare, but it is another way of tracking actions. It would also be helpful for reviewing minutes that are recorded chronologically. Some presbytery clerks include the **basic** docket for each meeting at the beginning of the meeting.

Simply know that you have a choice in how to organize your minutes.

However you record the minutes, be sure to use clear **headings** for each section of the minutes. These are some examples of how clerks have organized their minutes:

LEFT MARGIN HEADING Section of the minutes to the right.
Subsections recorded as appropriate.

SINGLE LINE HEADING
Section of the minutes recorded below the heading.
Subsections recorded as appropriate.

NUMBERED SECTIONS This is a common format for non-chronological minutes.
If this is used, a list of the numbers should be provided at the beginning of each section of minutes. For example:

- 1.0 Opening
- 2.0 Routine Business
- 3.0 Committee reports
 - 3.1 Worship Committee
 - 3.2 Christian Education Committee

HOW DO I RECORD ROUTINE BUSINESS?

Routine business is that which usually occurs at every meeting, and which does not involve much discussion, if any. Routine business may be scheduled at any time in the meeting. Some sessions take care of it right away; others handle routine business at the end of the meeting. When it is handled does not matter.

Routine business includes:

- Approval of the **agenda** of the meeting. *This is **required** for every meeting.*
- Approval of the **minutes** of previous meetings (including the most recent congregation meeting. Simply list the date of the meeting and the type of meeting).
- Reports of **services of baptism**:
 - Name of person baptized (and parents—including maiden name of mother—if the person baptized is an infant or small child)
 - Date, time, and location of the baptism
 - Name of officiant (usually the pastor, but it might be someone else)
 - Name of the Ruling Elder who assisted
- Reports of **services of the Lord's Supper**:
 - Date, time, and location
 - **ALL** services of the Lord's Supper must be approved by the session, and **must** be recorded. (This would include services at other times than Sunday morning, services at locations like a nursing home or senior center, home communion services, services at retreats or other gatherings, etc.)
 - **A session may (annually) give approval for regular services of the Lord's Supper at other times than Sunday morning.** The approval should include indication of who will preside for such services, and all such services **must** be reported to the session. Here are some examples:
 - Approval for communion at confirmation retreats during the next year
 - Approval for monthly communion at a senior living center
 - Other regular celebrations of the Lord's Supper
- Reports of **weddings**:
 - Name of the couple (including the bride's maiden name)
 - Date, time, location, and the name of the officiating minister
- Reports of **funerals**:
 - Name of deceased
 - Date and location of the funeral service and name of the officiating minister
 - Location of interment or inurnment (and date, if different from the date of the funeral)
- Report of the **ordination and installation** of officers:
 - Date and time of the worship service during which the installation occurred
 - Name of the persons ordained/installed and the office to which each was installed
 - Name of the Ruling Elder who assisted
 - *The minutes of a previous meeting will have recorded **that** persons were approved for ordination/installation. Later minutes **must** record that the ordination/installation occurred.*
- Report of the **public welcome** of new members:
 - Name of persons welcomed (including maiden names, if appropriate)
 - Date and time worship service during which they were welcomed
 - Name of the Ruling Elder who assisted.
 - *Persons become members of a congregation **when they are received by the session**, and **NOT** when they are welcomed publicly. However, they must be publicly welcomed during worship, and that public welcome must be reported.*
- Report of **routine membership actions**:
 - Transfers of membership at a person's request
 - Actions subsequent to the review of church rolls
- Report of **significant correspondence** received and referral of the correspondence. Examples:
 - A letter from the General Assembly, thanking the congregation for General Mission Giving—referred to the Stewardship Committee for sharing with the congregation
 - A request that our congregation participate in an upcoming county-wide evangelism event—referred to the ____ Committee
 - Correspondence that requires action by the session would not be placed in Routine Business, but would be scheduled as an agenda item

- Report of the **Moderator** (other than items listed above)
- Report of the **clerk of session** (other than items listed above)
-

Routine business, also known as a Consent Agenda, may be handled by a single motion, if the following requirements have been satisfied:

- The list of routine business was provided ahead of time.
- Opportunity was given for specific items to be lifted out for further discussion.
-

If no items are lifted out for discussion, the routine business may be handled in one motion. That motion would be recorded like this:

Routine Business (Consent Agenda)

The following Routine Business was presented for action by single vote:

{List the routine business here}

Opportunity having been given for items to be lifted out for discussion, and there being none lifted out, the following the session VOTED to approve the Routine Business, as presented.

If items are lifted out for discussion, they may be handled (1) after the vote on the remaining routine business is taken, or (2) at the report of the committee that would be responsible for the motion. You would record it this way:

Routine Business (Consent Agenda)

The following Routine Business was presented for action by single vote:

{List the routine business here}

Request was made to lift the following items for discussion:

[List lifted items here]

The session VOTED to approve the Routine Business items that were not lifted out.

Then you would either (1) note disposition of items as discussed, or (2) note when the items would be dealt with later in the meeting and record disposition at the time of discussion.

HOW DO I RECORD MOTIONS?

The simplest way to record motions is this:

Upon motion and second, the session VOTED to

--OR--

Upon recommendation by the ____ Committee, the session VOTED to . . .

The record of the motion **must** include:

- A **clear** statement of the action taken.
- **Who will follow through** to implement the motion (whether an individual or individuals, or a committee or board).
- The **anticipated deadline** for implementation of the motion --OR-- the anticipated time of a **report** regarding progress.
- If finances are involved, an indication of (1) the amount and (2) the budget line to be charged, **and** an indication of who will inform the treasurer of that information.
- If the motion is taken by other than voice vote (e.g. counted vote or secret ballot), both the manner of voting and the results must be recorded in the minutes.
- The names of any Ruling Elders who wish to record their dissent from the action (if one or two persons vote no, it is good practice to ask if they wish their no votes recorded)
- If it is appropriate to the record, it is good (even advisable) to record below the motion the **rationale** for the action. That rationale may have been presented with the motion, or the session may deem it important to express the rationale.

It is not necessary to indicate who made the motion and who seconded the motion.

- It is inappropriate to record the name of the person who seconded a motion, because a second ONLY means that the person agrees that the item should be discussed and acted on. Contrary to common assumption, a person who seconds is NOT obliged to vote "yes."

- Within Presbyterian theology and ecclesiology, naming the mover is unnecessary because once a motion is approved or disapproved, the action belongs to the body. You may name the person who moved the motion if you desire, but it is not necessary.

HOW DO I REPORT THE ANNUAL REVIEW OF SESSION RECORDS?

Here is a suggested format:

REPORT OF ANNUAL REVIEW OF SESSION RECORDS.

The session received from the clerk the report of the annual review of the session records. The records were reviewed on [date] at [location].

The session celebrated that the records were reviewed with no exceptions.

OR

The session noted the following exceptions to the minutes:

*List each exception, and the session's response to the exception (including steps to be taken to correct it)
If the session disagrees with an exception, that disagreement may be noted next to or under the exception.*

WHAT ROUTINE REPORTS ARE REQUIRED?

The minutes are required to include certain routine reports:

- A monthly report of the Treasurer
- Election by session of a commissioner to presbytery meetings, and a report by that commissioner to the session meeting following a meeting of the presbytery. *Some sessions elect their commissioner meeting-by-meeting; others elect a commissioner for an annual term. Either is fine, but it must be done. The report of the presbytery meeting should not be included in Routine Business.*
- Annual Approval of the Budget
- Annual review of church membership

Here are suggested formats for recording these required reports:

REPORT OF THE TREASURER

The session VOTED to receive and file for audit the report of the Treasurer for the period ending [date], summarized as follows:

| | |
|------------------------|----------|
| Receipts for [month] | \$ _____ |
| Expenses for [month] | \$ _____ |
| | |
| Receipts, year to date | \$ _____ |
| Expenses, year to date | \$ _____ |
| Balance, year to date | \$ _____ |

ELECTION OF PRESBYTERY COMMISSIONER

The session VOTED to elect Ruling Elder _____ as commissioner to the stated (or special) meeting of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley, to be held on [date] at [location]. *See below for another way of handling this.*

OR

The session VOTED to elect Ruling Elder _____ as commissioner to all stated and special meetings of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley during [note the year or the time frame].

REPORT OF PRESBYTERY COMMISSIONER

Ruling Elder [name] presented a report of the recent meeting of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley held on [date] at [location].

A summary of the report may be made, for inclusion in the minutes.

If the commissioner has recommendations, they would be acted on and noted this way:

Upon recommendation from the commissioner, the session VOTED to:

List the action taken

If your session rotates commissioners, then you might note the following action:

The next meeting of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley is [date] at [location]. The session VOTED to elect Ruling Elder [name] as commissioner to that meeting.

ANNUAL APPROVAL OF THE BUDGET

The minutes would note the beginning of the budget process, whenever that occurs in your congregation. Also noted should be the persons or committee responsible, along with a deadline for reporting.

When the report of the budget proposal is made, the minutes should record session action on the budget, and the approved budget should be included in the minutes, either at that place in the minutes or as an appendix.

The session should note its **recommendation** of the pastor's terms of call for the following year. If there are changes in the terms of call, the congregation must approve those at a duly-called congregation meeting. If there are no changes in the terms of call, that is simply noted in the budget. It is **vital** important that the terms of call be included in the session minutes, for the sake of the pastor.

- The Internal Revenue Service requires that the terms of compensation be listed in the minutes
- Housing allowance **MUST** be noted, and it cannot be noted retroactively. **It is important to note the housing allowance in minutes PRIOR TO THE END OF THE YEAR BEFORE THAT HOUSING ALLOWANCE TAKES EFFECT.**
- It is important (for tax purposes) to specify reimbursable parts of the pastor's benefits

ANNUAL REVIEW OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

It is the session's responsibility annually both to (1) review the rolls of membership, and (2) invite persons to consider the integrity of their membership. There are various models for this, but the action of reviewing the rolls must be included in the minutes.

- You would note the session's action directing the review
- You would note who is conducting the review
- You would note the deadline for completion
- You would record any recommendations of the review group, and the disposition of those recommendations

HOW DO I RECORD THE ANNUAL REPORT?

It is not necessary to include the entire annual report in the session minutes book.

In the minutes of the annual meeting, simply record something like this:

The congregation VOTED to receive the Annual Report for [year], with thanks to all those who submitted reports for inclusion. The Annual Report is filed [describe location]. The [year] Annual Report includes the following program reports:

[List here]

The [year] Annual Report includes the following financial reports:

[List here]

HOW DO I RECORD THE ANNUAL STATISTICAL REPORT?

First . . . The session does not vote to "approve" the annual statistical report; it votes to "receive" the annual statistical report.

As to recording the report:

You have two options:

1. You may say in the minutes: The session VOTED to receive the annual statistical report for [previous year], which is inserted as Appendix 1 following these minutes.
2. You may say in the minutes: The session VOTED to receive the annual statistical report for [previous year], summarized as follows: [*then type in a very basis summary of the report*]

HOW DO I RECORD THE REPORT OF A TRIENNIAL VISIT?

Report the Triennial Visit in this way:

The session VOTED to approve the report of the Triennial Visit held on [date], with the following representatives of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley:

The Rev. (or Elder) [name], [name of committee or board]

The Rev. (or Elder) [name], [name of committee or board]

The report is as follows:

[Ask for the report in digital form and copy/paste it here]

HOW DO I RECORD OTHER SESSION BUSINESS?

REPORT OF SESSION COMMITTEES

(Name of Committee)

Ruling Elder [name] presented the report of the [name] Committee.

You would list a brief summary here.

If there are recommendations you would note them this way:

Upon recommendation by the [name] Committee, the Session voted to:

List the action taken

DISCUSSION OF AN ISSUE BEFORE THE SESSION

The session engaged in discussion of [*state the subject or the issue*].

ONLY record pertinent facts, background, points of discussion.

IF THE SESSION EXPLORED OPTIONS, list them.

IF THE SESSION MADE DECISIONS, record them.

It is important to list follow-through information:

*Describe **who** will do **what**, and by what **deadline**.*

If there is a cost, describe what it is, how much, and where it will come from in the budget.

Describe other follow-through actions and their responsibility.

CLOSING

The meeting of the session ended with prayer offered by _____.

HOW DO I CLERK A CONGREGATION MEETING?

The clerk of session is the secretary of both regular and special congregation meetings. [G-1.0505] If the clerk of session is unable to serve, the congregation must—as a first item of business—elect a secretary for the meeting. That action is recorded in the minutes. Minutes are taken exactly as for a session meeting.

A congregation meeting may be called only by the session, the presbytery, or by the session when requested in writing by one-fourth of the active members of the congregation.

It is important to ensure that **adequate public notice** be given for a meeting of the congregation. [G-1.0502] That notice **must** specify the nature of the business for which the meeting is called. The *Book of Order* specifies that the congregation shall provide by its own rule for the minimum notification requirements. The *Book of Order* requires that notice shall be given at regular services of worship prior to the meeting (but does not specify details as to how many worship services). **Best practice:** The moderator and the clerk work together to develop the agenda for a congregation meeting, in the same way they work together to prepare the agenda for a session meeting.

The *Book of Order* specifies the business that may be conducted at congregation meetings: G-1.0503. The annual meeting of a congregation may include in the call for the meeting a phrase like “. . . and other business which may rightly come before the congregation.” Such other business must be within the parameters of G-1.0503.

A special or called meeting of the congregation may **ONLY** consider the business listed in the call for that particular meeting. **The phrase “. . . and other business which may rightly come before the congregation” is NOT PERMISSIBLE for a special or called meeting.**

The church budget is adopted by the session, NOT by the congregation. The session has a duty and responsibility to inform the congregation of the budget they have approved. (**Best practice:** At an informal gathering of the congregation after worship or at a church supper, session should present the proposed budget, invite comment, and solicit suggestions.)

Changes to the pastor’s compensation package (terms of call) must be approved by the congregation and reported to the presbytery. With respect to the pastor’s compensation, the session has only the authority to recommend. This is the one part of the church budget for which the congregation has authority.

Proxy voting and absentee voting is not allowed for any meeting, congregation or corporate. Only active members who are present may vote.

The congregation is responsible for establishing the **quorum** for congregation meetings. [G-1.0501] **Best practice:** At the next congregation meeting, have the session recommend a quorum, to be followed at that meeting and subsequent meetings.

Minutes of the congregation meeting may be approved by the session at the next session meeting following the congregation meeting. Those approved minutes would be reported at the next regular or special congregation meeting.

TIMELINE FOR CLERKS IN RELATION TO PRESBYTERY

February **Second Saturday** – Stated Meeting of Trinity Presbytery (Includes Service of Communion)

June **Second Saturday** – Stated Meeting of Trinity Presbytery

Begin to prepare your minutes book for the annual review. You will receive notice of the reading dates and the location to which you should bring your records. Fill in the form with the required information and page numbers. **Watch for the mailing announcing the dates of minutes review; it should come in September or early October.**

October **Second Tuesday** – Stated Meeting of Trinity Presbytery
Presbytery officers / committee members elected; take office in January.

Usual month for session minutes review. It is expected that clerks of session will attend the minutes review. You will read the minutes of another session.

Following the minutes review, prepare a report to the session regarding the review of your session's records. Note specifically any exceptions that were made. It is the session's responsibility (not yours) to take steps to correct the exceptions. Record those steps, as determined by the session.

November In late November or early December you will receive your materials for the Annual Statistical Reports. The packet will include passwords, login information and helpful hints for preparing the report.

December Continue to work on the Statistical Report. If you have delegated portions of the report, check with those to whom you have delegated, as to their progress.

January In early January, you will receive a form for the *Necrology Report* that will be made during the February presbytery meeting. The form will ask for the name and dates of birth and death of any elder who passed during the previous calendar year. Return the form to the presbytery office when you have completed it.

Complete the Annual Statistical report and submit it. **This can be done online and does not require congregational approval.** The best deadline is your church's January session meeting. **Final deadline for statistical reporting is always February 1st!**

Stated Clerk will conduct Clerk Training sessions around the Presbytery.

ACTIONS WHICH MUST BE APPROVED BY MORE THAN JUST THE SESSION

| ACTION | GROUPS INVOLVED IN DECISION |
|--|---|
| Application to the presbytery for a person to begin the process of becoming a Teaching Elder. | Session
Committee on Preparation for Ministry
Presbytery |
| All loans which use the church property as collateral, and all sales of property | Session
Church Trustees
Congregation
Presbytery board of Trustees
Presbytery |
| All leases of property used for worship for <i>any</i> length of time; and all leases of other property for more than 5 years. | Session
Church Trustees
Presbytery Trustees
Presbytery |
| Capital fund campaigns which total more than 25% of the previous year's budget. | Session
Church Trustees
Congregation
Congregational Development Committee of Presbytery
Presbytery Trustees
Presbytery |
| All changes of church location or church name | Session
Congregation and Corporation
Presbytery Trustees
Presbytery |
| All changes in the terms of call of the pastor. | Session ONLY recommends changes
Congregation approves changes
Changes are reported to the presbytery |
| All proposals for merger, yoking, or dissolution of congregations | Session
Congregation
Congregational Development Committee
Committee on Ministry (through COM liaison)
Presbytery Trustees
Presbytery |
| All dissolutions of pastoral relationships and all calls for new pastors. | Congregation
Committee on Ministry
Committee on Preparation (in the case of a person being ordained to the call)
Presbytery |
| Appointment of Moderator of Session, stated supply, temporary supply, or interim pastor | Session
Committee on Ministry
Presbytery |
| Call for a special session meeting | Two members of session, in writing – OR – the presbytery – OR – the moderator of session |
| Call for a special congregation meeting | Session – OR – presbytery – OR – session, when requested in writing by $\frac{1}{4}$ of the active members of the congregation |
| Session meeting when pastor is ill or out of town | Pastor grants permission, and invites a minister member of the presbytery to serve as moderator for the meeting |

HOW DO I MAINTAIN THE MEMBERSHIP ROLLS AND REGISTERS?

First . . . Take a look at Page 6 of this Handbook, Item 2. Your session will have to decide how to handle the previous category of “Inactive Members.” THIS IS IMPORTANT. Please know that the new Form of Government makes no provision for the previous category of “Inactive Member.” You are not *prohibited* from having such a category; it is simply not a part of the new Form of Government.

*It will be important for your session to have a serious discussion of the observation of the Form of Government Task Force that the term “inactive member” is meaningless. Their rationale is that “one is either an active member or not.” They recommended not continuing the practice of naming a “member” as “inactive.” The question they did not answer is **how a session deals with that now-eliminated former practice.***

What follows is a set of suggestions for how to maintain the rolls and registers. Each membership scenario is listed in bold print, followed by the “tip” for making entries in the rolls and registers.

The standard Church Register book has the following sections:

- Roll of Pastors
- Roll of Elders
- Roll of Deacons
- Chronological Roll of Members (recorded by date of their being received as members)
- Alphabetical Roll of Members
- Roll of Baptized Members

Other registers may include:

- Register of Deaths
- Register of Marriages

An important general principle: **Every entry or change in a membership roll or register MUST be connected to a particular action of the session.** Every one. Without exception.

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The Rev. So-and-So becomes pastor of the congregation.

1. Record the full name of the pastor on the Roll of Pastors.
2. Record whether the person is pastor, associate pastor, co-pastor, interim pastor, stated supply, temporary supply or commissioned lay pastor
3. If the pastor is installed (pastor, associate pastor, co-pastor) list the date of installation
4. If the pastor is temporary (interim, stated supply, temporary supply, commissioned lay pastor), note that date that their service begins.

The relationship with the Rev. So-and-So is dissolved.

1. If the pastor is installed, record next to their name (1) the date of congregation action dissolving the relationship and (2) the date that the pastor’s service ends. [*Those dates are not always the same.*]
2. If the pastor is temporary, record next to their name (1) the date of session action ending the service and (2) the date that the pastor’s service ends.

A member of the church is ordained as an elder or a deacon (never having previously served as an elder or a deacon).

1. Record the person’s name on the Roll of Elders or the Roll of Deacons.
2. Note the date of the Service of Ordination and Installation.
3. When the person’s term of service ends, note that date next to their name on the appropriate roll.
4. If the person is re-elected to a second term in the same office, they would be installed to that second term, and you would note the date of that installation.

A member of the church who previously served as an elder or deacon is some years later elected to serve again in that office.

1. Next to the person's previously-entered name for that office, note the date that their installation.

Mr. & Mrs. John Adams are received as members by letters of transfer.

1. Record John [middle name] Adams on the chronological roll, opposite the first free membership number. Indicate the way he joined the church (letter of transfer), the church from which they transferred, and the date of the session action.
2. Record Abigail (maiden name) Adams on the chronological roll in the same manner as with Mr. Adams.
3. Record both members in the alphabetical roll, noting their chronological membership numbers.

Mr. & Mrs. Adams have a three year old son, John Quincy, who was baptized in the former church.

1. List John Quincy Adams on the roll of Baptized Members, with the date and place of his baptism, and the names of his parents (including mother's maiden name).

Mr. & Mrs. Adams' infant daughter, Elizabeth, is baptized after they join the church.

1. List Elizabeth (middle name) Adams on the roll of Baptized Members, with the date and place of her baptism and the names of her parents (including mother's maiden name).

If the child is the child of a single mother or father who does not wish to list the other parent's name, list only the mother's or father's name (including mother's maiden name).

If the child is the adopted or legal ward of the parents, their names are listed as the parents.

Benjamin Harrison has never been a member of any church, nor has he been baptized.

1. Session votes to receive Mr. Harrison by profession of faith with baptism.
2. List Benjamin (middle name) Harrison on the chronological roll, opposite the first free membership number.
3. Note that he was received by profession of faith and the date of session's action.
4. Note the date and location of his baptism.
5. List his full name on the alphabetical roll, noting his chronological membership number.

Martha Washington was a member of another church, but (a) it has been many, many years since she was active, or (b) she can't remember where she was a member, or (c) that previous denomination does not provide letters of transfer.

1. Session votes to receive Mrs. Washington by reaffirmation of faith in Jesus Christ.
2. List Martha (maiden name) Washington on the chronological roll, opposite the first free membership number.
3. Note that she was received by profession of faith and the date of session's action.
4. List her full name on the alphabetical roll, noting her chronological membership number.

Andrew Jackson requests that session transfer his membership to First Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee.

1. Session votes to transfer Mr. Jackson.
2. Fill out the transfer certificate, noting on the back any ordinations Mr. Jackson holds (Ruling Elder, deacon) and the date(s) of ordination and date(s) of service.
3. Draw a thin line through Mr. Jackson's name on the chronological roll, noting the date of transfer and the church to which he was transferred. Do this **after** you have received notice that he has been received by the other church.

Mr. Jackson's ten year old son, Archibald, is on the roll of Baptized Members.

1. Note Archibald's name on the back of Mr. Jackson's transfer form, along with the date and location of his baptism.
2. Draw a thin line through Archibald's name on the roll of Baptized Members, and note that his baptism was transferred to the First Presbyterian Church of Nashville, Tennessee.

Dolly Madison dies.

1. Draw a thin line through her name on the chronological roll, and note the date of her death.

2. If you have a death register, list her name in that register along with the date of death, the date of her funeral, the location of her funeral service, and the location of her interment or inurnment.

John Tyler requests that he be removed from the membership roll.

1. Session acts on the request for removal.
2. Draw a thin line through Mr. Tyler's name on the chronological roll, and indicate the date of the session action to remove him from the roll, and that it was by Mr. Tyler's request.

The following tips anticipate what the clerk would do, depending on the decision to maintain a roll of Inactive Members or to follow the new Form of Government's category of "Other Participants."

John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt (his name is my name, too) lives in town but has not been involved in the church for several years.

If your session continues to maintain an Inactive Roll . . .

1. The session makes attempts to encourage Mr. Schmidt's participation in the church, including inviting him to communicate how he understands his membership.
2. If there is no response to those attempts, session notifies Mr. Schmidt that at, after a certain reasonable time for response, they will move him to the Inactive Roll.
3. The session votes to place Mr. Schmidt on the Inactive Roll.
4. Note that action next to his name on the chronological roll, and the date of the action.
5. If after two years Mr. Schmidt fails to return to active membership, the session may vote to remove his name from the roll.
6. Draw a thin line through his name on the chronological roll, and note the date of session action removing him.

If your session uses the "Other Participants" provision of the New Form of Government . . .

1. The session makes attempts to encourage Mr. Schmidt's participation in the church, including inviting him to communicate how he understands his membership.
2. If there is no response to these attempts, session notifies Mr. Schmidt that, after a certain reasonable time for response they will remove his name from the roll of Active Members, at which time he will become an Other Participant.
3. Session acts to remove Mr. Schmidt from the roll of Active Members.
4. Draw a thin line through his name, and note the date of the action and that he is an "Other Participant."

If Mr. Schmidt is on the Inactive Roll and resumes activity in the life of the church, and requests that he be restored to the Active Member roll . . .

1. Session acts to restore him to the active membership roll.
2. Note that action next to his name on the chronological roll.

If Mr. Schmidt is on the Inactive Roll and subsequently desires that his membership be transferred to another church . . .

1. Session acts to restore him to active membership.
2. Session acts to transfer his membership to the other church.
3. Note both actions next to his name on the chronological roll.

If Mr. Schmidt is an "Other Participant" and resumes activity in the church, and desires to restore his membership . . .

1. Session acts to receive him as a member by reaffirmation of faith.
2. List his name on the chronological roll next opposite the first free membership number (yes, you are creating a new entry) and note the date of session action.
3. Note the new membership number next to his name on the alphabetical roll.

If Mr. Schmidt has been removed from the active roll, and requests transfer to another church . . .

1. The clerk simply informs the other church that Mr. Schmidt was removed from the roll of Active Members (either by personal request or by action of session), and that there is no membership to transfer.
2. Suggest that Mr. Schmidt be received in the new congregation by reaffirmation of faith in Jesus Christ.

A WORD ABOUT BY-LAWS

An important first word . . .

Contrary to common assumptions, New York State does not **require** Presbyterian congregations to have by-laws. Congregations may have by-laws if they wish, but they are not required to do so.

The *Book of Order* does not require congregations to have by-laws. In fact, the words “by-laws” do not appear in the *Book of Order*.

What does the *Book of Order* require?

The *Book of Order* now requires sessions to prepare and maintain a *Manual of Administrative Operations*. If you will review the section of this Handbook, “Navigating the New Form of Government” (especially the summary checklists) you will find the basic contents of such a *Manual*.

What is the purpose of “by-laws” or a *Manual of Administrative Operations*?

The purpose of by-laws (or the *Manual*) is simple:

By-laws (or a Manual) serve to make specific what the *Book of Order* leaves general.

For example:

- The *Book of Order* specifies classes of officers, but does not specify the size of those classes. So by-laws (or a *Manual*) would specify how many people are in a particular class of officers.
- The *Book of Order* specifies that a congregation must hold an annual meeting, but does not specify when such a meeting is to be held. By-laws (or a manual) would specify when the annual congregation meeting is held.

You will find other such examples in the “Navigating the New Form of Government” section of this Handbook.

A very important word to use in by-laws or a *Manual* . . .

Whenever your by-laws or the *Manual* specify a date or a particular procedure, use the word “**ordinarily**.”

For example:

The annual congregation meeting will ordinarily be held on the fourth Sunday of January, following Morning Worship.

In the above example, the word “ordinarily” affords the session the privilege and responsibility of making necessary changes due to unforeseen circumstances, without having to have a special meeting to approve a change or to approve “suspending the by-laws.” If a huge snow-storm should make it impossible to meet on the fourth Sunday of January, the session and congregation will be grateful that the word “ordinarily” appears in the by-laws or *Manual*.

What is the relationship of the by-laws (or the *Manual*) to the *Book of Order*?

- The basic relationship is spelled out above: the by-laws (*Manual*) makes specific the general provisions of the *Book of Order*.
- The by-laws (*Manual*) may not conflict with the provisions of the *Book of Order*. In any conflict between by-laws (*Manual*) and the *Book of Order*, the *Book of Order* prevails.
- It is inappropriate to include in by-laws (*Manual*) provisions that are already in the *Book of Order*. Such inclusion is (1) unnecessary, (2) redundant, and (3) makes the by-laws (*Manual*) too long. Such provisions are already stated in the *Book of Order*; it is unnecessary (and inappropriate) to include them in by-laws.

What about amending the by-laws (or *Manual*)?

By-laws (or a *Manual of Administrative Operations*) should include a final paragraph concerning how they may be amended, by whom, and by what vote (majority, two-thirds). The basic *Robert’s Rules* principle is that with prior notice the amendment may be approved by a simple majority; with no prior notice the amendment may be approved by a two-thirds vote.

Regarding who may approve amendments:

The general rule is that provisions which are under the authority of the session may amended by the session; provisions which are under the authority of the congregation (and those mostly relate to officers) may be amended by the congregation. Such amendments would be handled at duly-called meetings of the session or congregation, with such amendment clearly noted in the call for the meeting.

Examples of items under session's authority:

- The quorum of a session meeting
- The number of meetings in a year
- The provisions for electing a treasurer and the term of the treasurer
- The provision for electing a clerk of session and the term of the clerk
- The ordinary date of the annual congregation meeting
- The ordinary date of other congregation meetings (e.g. to elect officers, to review the session-approved budget)

Examples of items under a congregation's authority:

- How large are the classes of officers
- How many classes of officers there are (the *Book of Order* no longer requires three classes of officers)