

Form of Government Revision

Item(s): 07-01 from the Task Force, and all other items and concurrences (07-02 through 07-09).

GA Committee Assignment: 07 Form of Government Revision

Summary of the business and what it wants the Assembly to do:

In 07-01, the Form of Government Task Force is recommending that the General Assembly send to the presbyteries for their approval a complete revision (hereafter called nFOG) of the Form of Government (the G section of the *Book of Order*). The Task Force is also asking the GA to “commend” to the governing bodies of the church an “Advisory Handbook,” which is a list of all the policies and procedures that different governing bodies would need to adopt if the proposed nFOG were adopted.

Item 07-04, 07-07 and 07-08 (and concurrences) suggest in one way or another that the nFOG should not be sent to the presbyteries for their approval, and that the effort at a complete rewrite be ended. The overtures encourage continued efforts to modify the Book of Order as needed, in more limited ways that allow presbyteries to comprehend changes and their implications for church life.

Four overtures want details of the nFOG to be corrected. Item 07-06 and 07-09 want the nFOG to retain the requirement that governing bodies have Committees on Representation. Item 07-02 wants to allow committees to be composed of more ruling elders than teaching elders. Item 07-03 wants to add language concerning ministers laboring out of bounds and concerning congregations that request dismissal to other denominations.

Item 07-05 sees the nFOG as a first step towards an “enabling” constitution that will set overall standards for the PCUSA but that will allow flexibility and diversity at the local level.

Background:

The 2006 GA established a task force to revise the Form of Government. This task force reported to the 2008 GA. Due to strong reservations expressed by the GA committee as well as numerous overture advocates recommending either delay or rejection of the task force’s work, the GA recommitted the nFOG to the task force, adding a few members from the GA committee. The task force is resubmitting the document, with little change, to the 2010 GA.

Analysis of the business and how it would affect the Church:

Presbyterians have expressed several strong concerns about the nFOG, including the following:

- Policies or procedures removed from the Form of Government and placed in handbooks or standing rules are not subject to review by permanent judicial commissions.
- Because the meaning of the word “church” shifts in the nFOG, the role of the denomination is enlarged at the expense of congregations.
- Sessions’ ability to determine the distribution of benevolences would be reduced, as the nFOG would allow presbyteries to assess payments to support both per capita and mission budgets.
- Ordination standards would be easily changed without amendments to the *Book of Order*: the areas of examination for candidates would be removed from the constitution.

An Advisory on Business to the 219th General Assembly (2010)

From the Joint Renewal GA Team

- Interim pastors would be able to be called as the next pastor of the congregation they are serving, undermining the purpose of interims.
- Presbyteries could remove pastors from their congregations without holding congregational meetings.
- The church's commitment to inclusivity would be broadened in dangerous ways.

For a wealth of reasons, **the nFOG should not be adopted.** Throwing out our present *Form of Government* would bring many troubles, and evidence for making such drastic changes has not been demonstrated. Nothing in the present *Form of Government* is keeping any congregation from being missional—which it should be and can be with the simple will so to serve Jesus Christ.

A full analysis of the nFOG can be found in the Coalition resources listed below.

Pertinent Resources:

Full Task Force Report (Recommendation 20)

Four Presbyterian Coalition Resources at <http://www.presbycoalition.org/nfog.cfm>:

“How the nFOG Would Harm Congregations”

“The nFOG and Congregations – A Summary”

“Thinking Twice About the Proposed Form of Government”

“More Harm than Help”

Action by GA that will help the Church:

Substitute for the Task Force report the wording of Item 07-07 or similar wording that asks the contents of the report to be made available electronically, but leaves changes to the Book of Order in the hands of churches and presbyteries, using the overture process.