

More Harm than Help: The New Form of Government

- **Scripture Is Demoted**

There is no statement in the Foundations section that points to the Reformed conviction regarding the authority of Scripture for the Church or for individuals. This is a primary doctrine, a decisive point over which the 16th century Reformation emerged. Worse, a “Jesus” divorced from Scripture could become our authority, a “Jesus” who is a unique, personally invented “Savior,” rather than the only Savior for all of mankind. (See F-1.0303 and F-1.0302.) The “Foundations” section leaves us without the one true foundation: God’s Word.

The only paragraph in the nFOG that calls us to “obedience to Scripture” is the language of the current G-6.0106b, which the General Assembly directed the task force to retain without change. That section is not in the “Foundations” (F section). It is in the G section, Chapter 2 (2.0104b).

- **Radical Inclusiveness Without Boundaries Is Imposed**

Any limit on diversity is removed, putting G-6.0106b in conflict with a new “diversity” standard, found in F-1.0403. “All persons or groups” are guaranteed full participation and representation in worship, *governance*, and emerging life. The diversity guarantee is repeated, with reference back to the Foundations section, at every level of government, including congregations. No description or restriction is associated with the term *groups*, so that a “group” guaranteed full participation and leadership status could logically include those advocating racism or other religions.

F-3.03 brings the conflict between the “foundational” diversity language and the “fidelity and chastity” ordination standard into sharp focus. This section says: “No provision of the *Book of Order* can of itself invalidate any other. Where there are tensions and ambiguities between provisions, it is the task of councils and judicial commissioners to resolve them in such a way as to give effect to all provisions.” G-6.0106b (G-2.0103b in the nFOG) would have to be adjudicated in the courts in the new context of repeated guarantees of “full participation and representation” for “all persons or groups,” and especially its placement as a foundational principle in the “Foundations” section.

- **Pastors and Congregations Lose Due Process Protections**

Changes in provisions in the proposed new Form of Government allow presbyteries to:

- reduce the number of commissioners to presbytery and other higher governing bodies from the larger congregations, the vast majority of which are orthodox and evangelical.
- dissolve pastoral relationships without even holding a congregational meeting.
- appoint commissions with broader powers to swiftly dissolve pastoral relationships.

- screen and have the opportunity to reject candidates outright before a congregational Pastor Nominating Committees ever reports to the congregation.
- declare that ministers have renounced the jurisdiction of the church.

- **Voluntary Per Capita Disappears**

Subtle but significant changes in the nFOG allow presbyteries to require congregations to support all aspects of the presbytery's budget and also allow the General Assembly to require presbyteries to support all aspects of the General Assembly budget. Churches could be forced to pay whatever per capita and mission funds the higher governing bodies demand. The constitutional language that presently empowers session to make such financial decisions simply disappears. (See new language in 3.0201c; 3.0202f; and 3.0106 [last para.]

Court decisions based on the current *Book of Order* language on per capita would be rendered obsolete. New decisions would be required, and would have to be based on the new constitutional language.

- **Governance-by-Manual Eliminates Presbyterians' Rights**

Stripped-down provisions and vague language in the nFOG remove a huge amount of governance from the Constitution and provide that it lodges in various governing-body manuals or minutes as local rules and policies.

In the “manual” approach, significant legal precedents would disappear. Any matter no longer explicitly provided for in the Constitution would not be subject to disciplinary or remedial review. The church courts will not touch cases dealing with rules found outside the Constitution—such as in manuals.

The “rulebook” and “manual” approach to governance will be cumbersome at best, but, at its worst, it is a denial of minority rights, which have always been a principle of Reformed church governance and a basic assumption of parliamentary process.