

## **nFOG Report**

### **Presbytery of the James**

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#### **Background**

The Presbytery of the James provided opportunity in two regions of the presbytery for ministers and elders to review and comment on nFOG. One group met two times; the other group met four times. Ministers and Elders participated in the discussions. It was a useful experience and helpful to all participants.

A surprising result (to many) of the study is that we really came to appreciate the current Form of Government for a number of reasons: (1) its historic context and meaning; (2) its focus on collegiality; (3) its common language and terminology that enables a national church to be connectional; (4) its clarity.

#### **Specific areas of concern**

These areas raised concern for our study groups:

**1. *The use of manuals.***

Much of the detail of the current BOO would be in manuals. If disputes arose, how would resolutions be worked out particularly between presbyteries or even congregations. The manuals would not have the visibility, accountability or stability of the current constitution. Presbyteries and congregations often have changes and gaps in leadership (moderators, stated clerks) that make careful updating and availability of manuals almost impossible.

**2. *The mission of the church.***

The focus of the nFOG is that the church is the mission of God. Discipleship, worship, obedience are minimized and barely mentioned. The goal of the church to “glorify God and enjoy him forever” is missing. For example in 1.0302a “teaching them to obey all that I have told you” is dropped from the partial Matt. 28, quote. Absent is the understanding that the church in Reformed theology is both the object and the subject of missional theology. The focus is the coming reign of God which human missional effort will secure. But, isn’t the “reign of God” already established? And won’t it be Christ who returns to consummate the reign of God after much human misery resulting from sin described in the Gospels and Revelation? The Foundations present a view of human history that is evolving in an upward trajectory culminating in the reign of God.

**3. *Relationship of Foundations to Form of Government***

The relationship of the Foundations to the Form of Government still remains unclear and may be interpreted as a “super” section. If that is the case, how will it affect interpretation of the G –sections? F-3.0305 says, “The statements contained in this section, “The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity,” describe the ecclesiological and historical commitments on which the polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) rests. [does that not make it a super section?] “Provisions of any part of this Constitution are to be interpreted in light of the whole Constitution. No provision of the Book of Order can itself invalidate any other. Where there are tensions and ambiguities between provision, it is the task of councils and judicial commission to resolve them in such a way as to give effect to all provision.” [Does this not assume that there are ambiguities that will require court interpretation? And how will the court then interpret the relationship of the Foundations to the Form of Government?]

**4. *Deacons***

There is confusion of whether the Deacons are required or options. The assumption is that Deacons are required; however in G-1.0201 it indicates that a new church “if it desires” may not have Deacons...so the ambiguity needs to be cleared up.

**5. *Terms of Office***

Does not provide the option of the session declaring that after one term, a person will take a year off from session. Maybe we need a statement here or in another place that things are only permissible if noted or if not noted, it is optional for the council?

**6. *Lack of collegial spirit***

Throughout the document between presbytery and other councils and individuals, there seems to be a lack of collegial spirit. Emphasis seems to be on the presbytery’s role and a diminishing of cooperation with congregation/session/individuals. G-1.0201 leaves out cooperating with the congregation in establishing new congregations and electing elders/deacons in those new congregations. (nFOG, G-1.0201, “The presbytery shall prepare, examining...”) The current FOG, G-7.0202a “[the new congregation] making provision in cooperation with the presbytery for their preparation...” G-2.0701 in the nFOG, the presbytery can dissolve a pastoral relationship without a congregational meeting. In the current FOG, G-14.0610, there “shall always be” a congregational meeting. The nFOG feels like a “heavy-handedness” rather than a collegial spirit of cooperation and concern.

**7. *Loss of common terminology (i.e., COM and CPM)***

In the nFOG this lack of common terminology will cause confusion and difficulties for presbyteries, clergy and candidates to work together across presbytery lines. It also introduces confusion in the process where before there was none. In the nFOG it will not be possible to have COMs as they are currently understood, since COM’s according to the current BOO are composed of clergy and elders. The nFOG states that all committees are composed of clergy and lay. Only administrative and judicial commissions are made up of elders and clergy. With the church’s concerns over ordination, this could be a substantial change that may be lost in the details.

**8. *Written Standard Ordination exams***

It appears that the five areas for the written ordination exams found in the current FOG at G-14.0431 (Open Book Bible Exegesis; Bible Content; Theological Competence; Worship and Sacraments; and Church Polity) are not in the nFOG but will be either in a GA manual or left up to the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates to determine. This change allows the exams to be changed without the consent of the whole church. Several concerns arise in this matter (1) areas for the exams are more subject to contemporary theological movements within the church (2) the unity between ministers who took the exam last year and those who took it 5-10-20 years ago may be eliminated (3) candidates would not know how to prepare themselves in seminary for the areas to be tested since the areas may change from year to year.

**9. *Purpose of ACC***

In the current G-13.0222 G-13.0112b it says that the ACC reports back to the GA and the GA votes on AIs. That is omitted in the nFOG, leaving the confusion that the ACC may make AIs especially since the heading is "Interpreting the Constitution."

**Conclusion**

These comments are made in the spirit of working together for a better constitution. However, we have concluded that the current constitution, while not perfect, is very helpful for the mission and ministry of the church. Our conclusion is that nFOG will not help the church and should not be adopted. Nevertheless, the work of the nFOG Task Group is gratefully accepted by the church (and our presbytery in particular) as it has enabled us to appreciate, support, and work even more closely with our current Form of Government.