

How the New Form of Government Would Harm Congregations: A Summary

The proposed new Form of Government (nFOG) would significantly change congregational life by limiting the powers of the session. The nFOG would create a centralized, top-down governance, with the session at the bottom of the structure, following instructions from and sending required financial support to the higher governing bodies.

In some instances the nFOG would change our governance with the introduction of new language. Other changes are accomplished by retaining the current language, but redefining the meaning of words. A critical redefinition applies to the word "church." The nFOG explicitly defines the lower-case word "church" always to mean "denomination" (footnote 1, first page of "The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity"). Presbyterians should consider the implications of the altered meaning as it is applied to the mission of the congregation.

Examples of changes the nFOG introduces which would harm congregations

- Sessions currently have the authority to support or not support the denomination's per capita and mission budgets. Under the nFOG, sessions would be required to pay per capita assessments (nFOG G-3.0202f) and to support the denomination's mission budget (nFOG G-3.0113).
- Currently the session is responsible for the "mission and government" (G-10.0102) of a congregation. The nFOG would remove the session's responsibility for determining the congregation's mission and instead would require the session to lead the congregation in participating in the mission of the denomination (nFOG G-3.0201c). The denomination's mission uses strategy and priorities determined by the hierarchy of higher governing bodies, going from the General Assembly, to synod, to presbytery, to congregation, leaving the session out of the line of authority (nFOG G-3.0501a, G-3.0401a, G-3.0301c, G-3.0303).
- Members of a congregation now voluntarily put themselves under the leadership of their *congregation's* officers, whom they elect (G-7.0103). In the nFOG church members would put themselves under the leadership "of the session and higher councils (presbytery, synod, and General Assembly)" (nFOG G-1.0103f).
- Instead of speaking of membership in a "particular church" (congregation), as our current Form of Government does (G-5.0302), the nFOG describes individuals as members of the denomination (nFOG G-1.0402).
- Currently the congregation is "understood as a local expression of the universal Church" (G-4.0102), but in the nFOG the congregation is "the basic form of" the denomination (nFOG G-1.0101).
- Currently a Pastor Nominating Committee must receive the presbytery Committee on Ministry's *advice* on the ministers being considered and presbytery approval is sought only after the congregation elects a pastor (G-11.0502d, G-14.0532). Under the nFOG, the congregation can only consider ministers the presbytery has *pre-approved* (nFOG G-2.0803).

- Currently there must always be a meeting of the congregation to vote on dissolution of a pastor's or associate pastor's relationship with a congregation (G-14.0610). The nFOG allows dissolution of an installed pastoral relationship without a congregational meeting if the presbytery finds that the denomination's mission under the Word "imperatively demands dissolution of the relationship without such a meeting" (nFOG G-2.0901).
- Currently the types of business allowed at a congregational meeting include "matters related to the permissive powers of a congregation" (G-7.0304a), but the nFOG does not give the congregation any "permissive powers" (nFOG G-1.0503).
- Currently, congregational representation in presbytery by elders takes into account the uneven distribution of members among the churches of the presbytery—some congregations being larger and some smaller. No church is left without elder representation and the Form of Government assigns elder representation based on the size of the congregation's membership (G-11.0101). Under the nFOG the guarantee that elder representation will be proportionate to the size of a congregation's membership is lost (nFOG G-3.0301).
- Currently, church financial records are open to inspection by authorized "church officers" (G-10.0401b), but the nFOG (through redefinition of words) requires that the records be open to inspection by moderators and stated clerks of denominational governing bodies (nFOG G-3.0205b).
- Provisions for review of session records in the nFOG (nFOG G-3.0108a) are similar to the current provisions (G-9.0407d). However, the advisory handbook (which the General Assembly will be asked to approve) includes a long list of questions for presbytery use in reviewing sessions such as, "Are any directives from the presbytery properly recorded?" (nFOG advisory handbook referring to nFOG G-3.0106, G-3.0202).
- Currently, governing bodies are described as being "separate and independent" (G-9.0103), but under the nFOG the governing bodies are described only as "distinct" (nFOG F-3.0203).
- The types of diversity required by our current Form of Government (G-4.0403) are not controversial and are consistent with current ordination standards, including G-6.0106b. The nFOG states, "The PC(USA) shall guarantee full participation and representation in . . . governance . . . to all persons or groups within its membership" (nFOG F-1.0403).

These points are a summary of a more complete analysis contained in "How the New Form of Government Would Harm Congregations." The more comprehensive paper quotes from the current Form of Government and the corresponding provisions from the proposed nFOG. That paper also offers a more detailed exploration of the nature and significance of the harmful changes the nFOG would introduce into congregational life.

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