

The Proposed New Form of Government

Some Questions and Observations by the Presbyterian Coalition

One of the major pieces of business coming to this General Assembly is a rewrite of our Form of Government. The Form of Government is one of three sections of our *Book of Order* and is integral to the way we govern ourselves and carry out ministry together.

Why are we seeing this proposal?

The last General Assembly, at the recommendation of the Office of the General Assembly, asked a task force to bring a rewrite to this assembly.

What is the purpose of this rewrite?

The task force hopes to create a document that has more flexibility in the way we govern ourselves, in the belief that this will help us be more missional. Some think that shortening the *Book of Order* is itself a worthy goal. (This rewrite would shorten the current *Book of Order* slightly.)

What are the major changes?

Some of the changes are obvious. Others are harder to see. The report prepared for commissioners is 55 pages, but the comparison documents (current to proposed version and proposed to current version of the Form of Government [FOG]), which are posted on the web, are a total of 242 pages. These comparisons do not show clearly all that is stricken from our existing Form of Government as an ordinary amendment would. The language of the new FOG is less specific and, in important places, introduces new terminology and new practices.

Recognizing the changes and understanding their implications requires careful study and some experience in the processes of the General Assembly, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission, Committees on Ministry, and other entities. The Presbyterian Coalition has prepared a “White Paper,” titled *Altering the Covenant*, which will guide you in your analysis of the proposed Form of Government (which we call the “nFOG”). What follows is a summary of the points raised in the white paper where both citations from the nFOG and illustrations are provided.

A New “Foundations” Section

There is a proposed new section of the *Book of Order* called the “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity,” which the Task Force says “clearly sets apart a foundation for our entire polity.” It is roughly equivalent to the first four chapters of our existing Form of Government, but there are changes.

- What will a new “foundational” section mean? Will it be a kind of “super-constitution”? What is its relationship to the other parts of the *Book of Order*?
- What are the implications of the changes in this section that affect Christology and the role of Scripture?
- How do the changes affect our constitutional concepts of diversity and inclusivity?

New Requirements and New Freedoms

The nFOG introduces both new requirements and new freedoms, some of which may permit actions not allowed by the existing *Book of Order*.

- Per capita and mission funds are combined in the nFOG. And the power of governing bodies to “tax” sessions is increased. Without the specific language of per capita, it is uncertain that previous court decisions upholding the voluntary nature of these payments will survive.
- Currently the GA and the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GA PJC) are the two bodies empowered to interpret the constitution “authoritatively”; that is to make a determination of the meaning and application of sections of the constitution. The nFOG would

change that to give authority solely to the Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC). And there's no provision for a review by the GA.

Inadequate Check and Balances

In many ways, our church government, like the U.S. Government which was modeled on ours, is based on a system of checks-and-balances to ensure that protections for all are provided. The change outlined above, regarding the ACC, would undo a major check in our system. There are others.

- What is the significance of the new powers of a presbytery over its ministers and congregations? What recourse would ministers and congregations have if they disagreed with a decision of presbytery, such as removal of a pastor? Who would decide these things for the presbytery?
- How will minister/elder parity be achieved in presbytery?
- What kind of authority and powers will presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly be giving up to small, delegated bodies?

Vague Language

Much of the language in the nFOG is vague, making it difficult to determine exactly what is meant or what could result from the changes proposed. In some cases, specifics are omitted--for instance, the subjects for the ordination examinations.

- To what extent will the vagueness and omissions require that we turn to the courts or the GA to decide again what has already been decided?
- Would the "foundational" principle of inclusiveness (defined, among other ways, with the odd term "all genders") trump the exclusive principle of "fidelity and chastity" as found in G-6.0106b?

Increased Local Rules and Policies

One of the ways the nFOG achieves its slightly shorter length is by relegating many of the policies and processes currently outlined in the *Book of Order* to local handbooks and policies. The task force report contains a 17-page list of new rules and policies that local governing bodies would need to devise. And we find that their list is not all-inclusive.

- In the nFOG, there are no Committees on Ministry, Committees on Preparation for Ministry, Nominating Committees, Committees on Representation, or even a General Assembly Council.
- What will it mean for presbyteries and sessions to develop all these rules and policies?
- What is the recourse if a presbytery doesn't follow its own policy?
- How will our connectionalism be affected if we're all doing very basic things in different ways?

As you read the proposed new Form of Government and consider the concerns raised in our critique called *Altering the Covenant*, we urge you to ask yourself: Will these changes be helpful to the church? Only if you can answer "yes" with certainty should you support the nFOG. Any other answer suggests that it is better to use the slower and more careful process of overture and amendment where changes to our existing Form of Government are needed. **The Presbyterian Coalition believes the proposed new Form of Government should be disapproved at this assembly, and if not disapproved, then postponed for study and action by sessions and presbyteries, through the overture and amendment process.**

For a more thorough critique of the proposed new Form of Government, contact

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