

Frequently Asked Questions about the New Form of Government
Office of the General Assembly
June 2011

When will the new Form of Government take effect?

The new Form of Government will take effect on July 10, 2011, which is one year after the adjournment of the 219th General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

What has changed with the adoption of the new Form of Government?

The same basic polity that has defined the core work of the councils (governing bodies) of the Presbyterian Church continues with the new Form of Government. This revision is not so much about the “what” that councils do – our essential polity – as it is about the “who” and the “how.” Increased flexibility in structures and procedures in a less regulatory environment is the major change that has occurred. The new Form of Government allows councils to increase their focus on God’s work and how the church can most effectively participate in that work in each situation, rather than being focused on an increasingly lengthy and burdensome list of requirements.

Will a council need to immediately revise its manual of operations?

Existing manuals – already required of presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly, and also in use by many sessions – remain in force until changed by a council. Revisions do not have to be made immediately, affording a council time to determine what structures and procedures will work best to carry out its identified mission for Jesus Christ. The “Advisory Handbook for Councils” identifies policies and procedures required by the new Form of Government for each council, most of which should already be in place and would be revised only if and when a council deems it necessary.

What about sessions that have no manual?

Sessions will need to create a manual of their policies and procedures that will, at the least, need to define certain discretionary powers now given to them. These are described in the Advisory Handbook and include such things as quorums, adequate notice for special meetings, any changes to the nominations process, and so forth. Many of these might already exist as standing policies (prior actions) of the session. The size of the manual will depend on how detailed the structure is that the session has in place.

What happens to existing Authoritative Interpretations under the new Form of Government?

Authoritative Interpretations (AIs) of the Constitution can only be made or rescinded by the General Assembly. All current AIs remain in effect until changed by a future General Assembly, which is precisely the situation that has always existed with any amendment to the Form of Government that has been previously interpreted. A task force is currently working to make recommendations to the 220th General Assembly (2012) on the continuing status of all AIs, based on guidelines provided by the Advisory Committee on the Constitution to the 219th General Assembly (2010).

How will accountability be enforced in the new Form of Government?

The new Form of Government continues the long-standing Presbyterian principle of right-of-review of one council by the next higher council (F-3.0206, G-3.0108). Emphasis is also placed on the need for consultation between councils on mission strategy, structures, and procedures. Enforcement of administrative and judicial directives relies even now on trust and mutual accountability, undergirded by our belief that all church power is ministerial and declarative (F-3.0107).

Our work together as Presbyterians gathered in congregations and councils of the church will continue to be guided by this important declaration: “The polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) presupposes the fellowship of women, men, and children united in covenant relationship with one another and with God through Jesus Christ. The organization rests on the fellowship and is not designed to work without trust and love” (new G-1.0102; compare to current G-7.0103). No Form of Government can legislate this trust and love, but by answering the new Form of Government’s call to work cooperatively and collegially to identify and implement the mission of each council of the church, we may find a deepened sense of commitment and connection to Jesus Christ and each other as the journey progresses.

What impact will the adoption of Amendment 10-A have on the text of the new Form of Government?

The passage of Amendment 10-A that changed the text of current G-6.0106b will also change the text of the same passage in the new Form of Government, G-2.0104b. The new language of the amendment will replace the current language in G-2.0104b. The same is true for several other amendments adopted this year. At the end of each amendment in the booklet published by the Office of the General Assembly (Booklet #3) is a statement that indicates the impact of the adoption of the amendment on the new Form of Government.

When will the new edition of the *Book of Order* that contains the new Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and new Form of Government be available?

It is anticipated that the print version of the new *Book of Order* will be in the warehouse by the second week of July, after which orders will begin to be processed.