

Orientation

*For Those Who May Be Attending a Presbytery Meeting for the First Time and
For Others Who Could Use a Refresher Course*

Presbytery 101 - What is a presbytery?

A presbytery is geography. It is a certain defined area, a specific place. The Presbytery of Grand Canyon includes cities and deserts and forests. This presbytery extends all the way from Yuma to Kingman to the Four Corners. We are a very large presbytery.

A presbytery is people. There are nearly 17, 000 of us in this Presbytery. We have seventy chartered congregations, along with chapels and fellowships that gather each week. We have more than two hundred ministers, and eleven commissioned lay pastors.

A presbytery is a governing body. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has four kinds of governing bodies: sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly. As a governing body, we exercise authority in this geography and among these people. A great deal of our governing is delegated to smaller groups — Presbytery Council, committees, commissions. But from time to time, we meet as a presbytery, as we do five times per year – January, March, June, September and November. The people in this geography gather as a governing body of the church. Our Constitution states that this church is governed by presbyters, both ministers and elders. We gather as a presbytery in roughly equal numbers of ministers and elders. There is parity among us. Both ministers and elders have voice and vote. If you are a newly ordained elder attending your first presbytery meeting, you have equal standing with the biggest “know-it-all” among our two hundred ministers! If your session has commissioned you to be here, you are empowered to take part in the governance of the church at this level.

What does the presbytery do when it meets? We do four things here.

We worship God. We encourage each other. We learn. And we decide. We worship because God is worthy of our praise. Worship is the single most important action of the church, whether it’s a congregation or a gathering of the wider church. We encourage each other by listening to our joys and sorrows, both in this large group and in smaller, less formal conversations. We encourage each other by the stories of transformation in some of our congregations. God is at work among us. We learn from the reports made to us and from the insights of those around us. Our meetings often include a presentation with small group interaction on a matter of great importance for every pastor and every congregation. We hope you will learn something at each presbytery meetings that will make a difference in your ministry. And we decide. Some matters in the presbytery require the wisdom and the consent of the whole body. For instance, we make decisions concerning church leaders and our constitution.

We make better decisions if we agree to abide by certain rules.

The parliamentary procedure we use is not a weapon that one person uses to unfairly take advantage of another. Rather it is meant to enable us to make decisions in a way that preserves the unity of the body. We agree to speak the truth in love in some concrete ways. For instance, speak to the whole body after you’ve been recognized. Begin by identifying yourself — your name, and your congregation or ministry. Address your comments to the moderator. Stick to the topic at hand. Questions are always welcome. If you are unclear about the meaning of an upcoming vote, seek to be recognized so that you can ask a clarifying question. Every governing body in the Presbyterian Church has these two officers — a moderator and a clerk. When the presbytery meets, the moderator presides and the clerk advises. If we become confused, we will do well to seek the clerk’s advice on how to proceed. The moderator and the clerk are both here to serve the presbytery.

One practical matter that hasn’t yet become part of our Constitution — cell phones.

If you have one, please turn it off or switch it to the vibrate mode during our meeting, lest you be subject to church discipline!

Presbytery 102 - Several Principles of Presbyterian Government

Our Constitution spells out several principles of Presbyterian government. Among them is this: “this church shall be governed by presbyters (elders and ministers of the Word and Sacrament, traditionally called ruling and teaching elders” (G-4.0301b.). Thus, the presbytery, a governing body of the church, is made up of presbyters, elders and ministers in equal numbers. All presbyters have been ordained. All presbyters, ministers and elders alike, have answered a number of questions, the ordination questions (G-14.0207 and G-14.0105b). Here are a few of the ordination questions that we have all answered and how they shape our work as members of, and commissioners to, this presbytery.

The fifth ordination question has two parts - “Will you be governed by our church’s polity, and will you abide by its discipline?”

You are agreeing here to be governed by and to abide by the ordering of church life that this church has hammered out over time. This polity is expressed in a Constitution. You may be critical. You may disagree with some things that the majority has agreed to do. But still you promise to abide, which is to remain, to continue, to stay connected, to “play by the rules.” To answer this question with integrity, you must know what our polity and discipline are. You must know us, know what we believe, know what we stand for, know our peculiar ways.

The second part of the fifth question - “Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God’s Word and Spirit?”

This question reminds you that you do not work alone. You have fellow workers, in your congregation, in our presbytery, and throughout the whole church. You promise to be a friend to them. What does this mean? You will pray for your fellow presbyters by name, those on your session and those in our presbytery. You will celebrate their victories; you will grieve their losses. You will sincerely wish them well in their ministry. You will reach out in love to those who are hurting. You will listen carefully to them, even when you do not agree with what they are saying. You will thank God for those colleagues whose gifts and styles of ministry differ widely from yours. You and your friends in ministry are subject to authority, that of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. Under that authority, we all live in relationships of mutual accountability. As a presbyter, you are an individual, but in another sense, you are not your own.

The seventh ordination question: Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?”

We want you to love the church, as it is, not the church of your dreams but this church in which both wheat and tares are growing. We want you to seek the wellbeing of this imperfect church. Everything you say and do, as we meet here, will be done with the intention of building up the church, that it would be the church the Lord wants it to be, at peace with God and with itself, unified in purpose and mission, and pure in its devotion and character. We ask you to seek all of these goods at the same time, not one to the exclusion of the others. All three — peace, unity, and purity.

The ninth ordination question begins with material specific to each office, but then asks both ministers and elders, “Will you be active in government and discipline, serving in the governing bodies of the church; and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?”

Here we ask you to be expansive in the way you live out your ministry. Most of us spend the bulk of our time and energy in one congregation. Even so, you are part of something larger, and that becomes clear when we meet as a presbytery. You serve the whole church in your own place, and in governing bodies such as this presbytery. You think expansively. Your aim at all times is to show both the love and justice of Jesus Christ, the Lord of all. What we do here, while gathered as a presbytery, is part of the ministry that is ours as ministers and elders. This is not a distraction from our real work. Rather, this is one of the settings in which our real work is done. Our hope and our prayer, for the Presbytery of Grand Canyon as we meet is that each of us would live out the promises we made on the day we were ordained.

Presbytery 103 - Our Mission

It's a beautiful day in Arizona, and you're in a meeting! A very long meeting! Why are we here? We come together as something called a "presbytery," ministers and elders in equal numbers, a governing body of the church. But why this Presbytery? What is our reason for being together? We call your attention to our written agenda. After "adjournment," you will find the duly approved mission of the Presbytery of Grand Canyon.

The mission of the Presbytery of Grand Canyon is to celebrate and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ by:

- *nurturing each congregation and minister member,*
- *assisting and challenging each congregation to engage in ministry and mission with other congregations and denominations*
- *developing and redeveloping worship communities*
- *being a connectional, communicative link in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

We intend to do this in four ways that are listed. Note that three of them deal specifically with congregations. The Presbytery's very reason for being is the health of its congregations. Thus, when the Presbytery meets there ought to be some connection between what we do here and the life of our congregations. Congregations and ministers ought to receive some benefit as a result of our gathering. You may have a more modest hope for a meeting of the Presbytery. You may see it as something to be endured. Your idea of a good outcome may be for us to "do no harm." But our mission statement would tell us to expect more — expect to be nurtured, expect to be challenged, expect to be encouraged. We will worship God, we will make decisions, we will be given some information, and we will learn together. Our gatherings should help us fulfill our mission. Some elders and ministers come here weary and discouraged. We wonder if something we do here might fulfill our mission of nurturing each congregation and minister member. A word of encouragement, spoken at the right time in the right way, can make a difference. So we're spending a beautiful day in Arizona in a meeting. Wouldn't it be great if it were time well spent, not wasted but invested in a mission that results in stronger and healthier congregations? May it be so!

Presbytery 104 - What's with all this paper?

If you've taken part in a lot of Presbytery meetings, you're so accustomed to it that you no longer notice. But if you're new, you can't help but wonder — what's with all this paper? You look around and see the old hands. They never look up, no matter who is speaking. Their focus is on their papers, which they sort and shuffle like a riverboat gambler. This is our fourth orientation, Presbytery 104, and the topic is paper. There are three types of paper that we use in these meetings.

The first are "C" Papers.

They're called "C" because they go out with the call to the meeting, two weeks prior to our gathering. They are numbered C-1, C-2, and so forth. We send these out over the Internet to those who have access to it. For others, we mail them in a large envelope. The "C" papers give you background information for decisions you'll be asked to make. The actual motion that will come before the Presbytery will be clearly stated as "Motion," followed by the text you'll be voting on. If you read and reflect on "C" papers before you come, you'll be well-positioned to listen and decide with discernment. You can make notations in the margins if you have questions. Then at the appropriate time, if your question is not addressed, you can go to a microphone and ask your question.

The Consent Agenda is a "C" Paper

General Parliamentary Rules provide for use of what is termed a Consent Agenda. The purpose of using a Consent Agenda is to group in a single action a number of non-controversial matters or those that are closely related in order to save time during a presbytery meeting. A Consent Agenda includes: Actions of the Trustees/Council, the Committee on Ministry, and the Preparation for Ministry Committee on behalf of the presbytery in accordance with the authority granted in the Standing Rules; Actions and/or reports

of the Council or Committees that are provided to the presbytery for information; Report from the Stated Clerk on actions of Administrative Commissions for Ordination/Installation, reports on review of presbytery records, reports on the submission of statistical reports, reports on correspondence received and/or sent on behalf of the presbytery are reported as items of information. The Consent Agenda does not include the Election of Commissioners to General Assembly and Synod; Election of Officers of the Presbytery; Changes to the Bylaws and Standing Rules or Policies of the Presbytery; Items, actions or issues that could be considered controversial. **What do I do if I have a question about an item on the Consent Agenda?** Any member of presbytery or elder commissioner may object to any item on the Consent Agenda including both items for approval and items for information. During a discussion of the Consent Agenda the Moderator will ask if anyone wishes to remove an item for discussion. It is at this time that any member/commissioner has the right to be recognized and ask for an item to be removed and considered separately. Such removal is done without debate or vote. The items removed for separate discussion are handled during the remaining time allotted on the agenda for consideration of the Consent Agenda or handled under Unfinished Business at the end of the presbytery meeting if there is not enough time to discuss the issue during the consideration of the Consent Agenda.

The second are “P” Papers

The packet you receive when you register contains “P” papers and are those that weren’t ready when the call to the meeting went out. Or in some cases, a “P” paper is a revision of an earlier “C” paper. This is common with our agenda. Sometimes a change is necessary. In this case, you go with the “P” version. You will notice on your agenda that various “C” and “P” papers are linked with particular reports. What those riverboat gamblers are actually doing is using the agenda to get their papers in order. Sometimes things proceed quickly, and it helps to sort out your cards before the play begins.

The third kind of paper is neither “C” nor “P”

These papers come from various committees, congregations, informal groups, or individuals. Some are giving you information. Some are asking you to do something. Some are inviting you to come to some gathering. A few of these will be highlighted during our meeting. You’ll be encouraged to pull it out and read it. But even if one of these papers isn’t discussed, who knows? It may have a message so valuable to you that it made the day worthwhile.

Is it a good thing that we use all this paper?

We suppose that reading routine items saves us a lot of time — that may be a good thing. And churches with recycling bins will make some money when their commissioners return. But it would not be so good if we spent all our time looking down at our papers, sorting and shuffling; and then got up to leave, only to discover that there were some people here too. There are people here. It may be good at some point to lift your head, look around, even say hello.

This document: *Orientation For Those Who May Be Attending a Presbytery Meeting for the First Time and For Others Who Could Use a Refresher Course* is an adaptation of presentations by Rev. W. Gale Watkins, Pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church, while he served as Presbytery Moderator 2004–2005. These presentations were made over the course of four presbytery meetings as a way of introducing First Time Attendees to the work of the presbytery. We commend this information to you in hopes of facilitating attendance at your first presbytery meeting in the Presbytery of Grand Canyon and that you will find it an enjoyable and worthwhile experience.
