REPORT OF THE
SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE
NATURE OF THE CHURCH AND THE
PRACTICE OF GOVERNANCE

APPROVED BY
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To: Pastors of Churches and Clerks of Sessions Where There Is No Installed Pastor, and Stated Clerks and Executives of Presbyteries and Synods

Dear Friends:

The 205th General Assembly (1993) directed that the section titled “Nature of the Church” of the final report of the Special Committee on the Nature of the Church and the Practice of Governance be published and distributed to all congregations. In accordance, the Office of the General Assembly is distributing this document to the governing bodies and congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The Special Committee on the Nature of the Church and the Practice of Governance was charged with the responsibility of producing a thorough study of the nature of the church. The enclosed document represents the committee’s efforts to fulfill that directive. The report begins with an assessment of our denomination’s current situation and contains fifty statements that explore the biblical nature of the church, examine the Reformed tradition, consider the history of the church in North America, inspect the confessions, and search its polity.

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Sincerely,

James E. Andrews
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly
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SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH AND THE PRACTICE OF GOVERNANCE

PREFACE

Anyone who becomes a member of the PC(USA) is also a member of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. Each is a member of that church by baptism with water in the name of the triune God, and a confirmed member of the PC(USA) by personal profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord (Book of Order, G-5.0101).

Fundamentally, this is the nature of the church: a community of baptized believers in the Lord Jesus Christ seeking individually and together to be Christ’s faithful disciples to their life’s end.

The PC(USA) has a particular understanding of the nature of the church and a form of governance growing out of that understanding. However, its principles are not intended to exclude any member of the universal church from its fellowship. They only describe Presbyterians and where they find their place in the whole people of God, the body of Christ.

Presbyterian polity is adaptable; it changes in detail as situations change, but does not change in basic principles. This report seeks to identify those principles and apply them to the current situation in the church and the world in its recommendations.

Section II. Nature of the Church, is built around the original assignments to the special committee. The General Assembly instructed it to study the biblical, historical, theological, and constitutional basis for the Presbyterian understanding of the church and its governance.
THE CURRENT SITUATION

The special committee was appointed to suggest solutions to particular issues that have emerged since the 1983 reunion of the former two Presbyterian denominations. This was to be done in light of a study of the nature of the church.

A painful truth is that in spite of significant accomplishments in these first ten years of a reunited church, the denomination is fragmented and uncertain about its future.

We are preoccupied with a leadership crisis—from congregational life to General Assembly leadership expectations. We struggle with the paradox of an increase in giving from congregations, while a decreasing amount of dollars find their way through a governing body system financially dependent on congregational support. We have produced a denominational curriculum about what it means to be Reformed at a time when people join congregations for reasons other than denominational affiliation. The approaches we have taken, while important, have not been linked to a comprehensive strategy about the future of the PC(USA).

A key question is: How does our history—principles, hard-won theological positions, previous conflicts, leaders of the past—inform us today? In what way are we prepared to receive the lessons of history? How do these voices from the past inform us today?

On the other hand, in what ways are we—and perhaps all Christian bodies—different denominations than we have ever been before, thus making the lessons of Presbyterian history less applicable? Our historically participative denominational life is fragmented by increasing delegation to smaller groups of people, while decreasing broad participation, knowledge, and care about denominational decisions. Since 1972, our emphasis on labeling all church activity as “mission” has genuinely blurred the concepts and challenges of choosing mission priorities for all levels of the church’s life. Governing body councils—from the General Assembly to the presbytery—have often been empowered by or assumed power for a governing body, thus decreasing ownership in both process and outcome. With a majority of congregations composed of people in the middle class, we struggle to meet budgets, as if “meeting a budget” were a sign of faithfulness to God and the gospel.

Our pluralism and diversity are both marks of our understanding of faith, and a dilemma in our organizational life. How does the historic understanding of the call to ministry (for all service) become balanced with diversity on committees? Or should it? The issue of participation in
ordained leadership of gay and lesbian persons is one example of Presbyterians setting a boundary of acceptable behavior. What boundaries are appropriate in the life of the church today? If boundaries are set to assure particular leadership qualities and the perpetuation of particular theological positions, are constitutional questions for ordination sufficient boundaries?

In a denomination with unclear focus about mission direction or theological position, we have used polity and the Book of Order to set boundaries rather than discovering ways to use biblical and theological witness.

Throughout the life of the special committee, the denomination has found various arenas, formal and informal, to acknowledge its uncertainty and try to explore some answers.

The tasks given to this special committee unfortunately do not invite, or require, us to attempt to solve these seemingly unsolvable issues. It would be a misunderstanding to assume that the identification of principles of Presbyterianism which follow—accompanied by a series of recommendations, including changes to the Book of Order—are in any way a proposed method of solving the much more complex issues in the life of the denomination.

It is our belief that an understanding of the nature of the church is essential for anyone beginning to address these issues. As we began that process, we realized that we, like the church at large, came with various perceptions, experiences, and levels of knowledge about history, biblical understanding, and theology. The report on the nature of the church is, at best, simple. Summary statements reflect an acknowledgement of principles and practices that we believe to be important to understanding the history and background of Presbyterian life for today and for the future.

Although we as a committee were often far from unanimous about particular recommendations, we came to have consensus around certain things:

- The denomination is at a major turning point. The direction in which it turns will affect its institutional and mission future, its membership, and its vitality.
- People of genuine faith in the PC(USA) have very different perceptions about the present, the past, and the future.
- A distinctly Presbyterian faith is obscured in the current life of the denomination in light of its pluralism of belief and participation of persons from various denominational backgrounds.
- Distinct characteristics about how Presbyterians have understood faith and order can be found in the current Book of Order, but the Book of
Order cannot be the primary unifying document for our denomination in either its practice or its theory.

- Lack of understanding of Presbyterianism—historically and currently—promotes dependence on future delegation of authority to councils and individuals, and accentuates the Book of Order as a way to develop uniformity when no other uniformity exists.

- Diversity of opinion about social issues, biblical interpretation, theological positions, and life experience increases a lack of consensus about direction in mission priorities.

- In claiming to value racial ethnic and theological diversities, we choose to manifest those by requiring membership on committees and councils rather than learning the cultural, racial, and theological values we want to incorporate into our denominational life.

- Money, rather than seeking God’s call to the PC(USA) at this time, has become a driving concern in the governing bodies of the denomination. A crisis in money has been present for at least twenty years; however, the current crisis of money at the General Assembly-level is the most public one of recent history. The crisis is partly one of management, but it is also a crisis of fewer and fewer Presbyterians knowing how to give generously as God has given them—a problem of attitude and faith.

- Membership decline leaves the PC(USA) with less societal influence and leaves congregations with buildings beyond their capacity to maintain. The average age of our membership is increasingly older. We have virtually no sustainable evangelism program in our congregations, most of which often operate on the principle that worked forty years ago: If we simply open the doors, people will come. We have failed to retain many of the children who were brought up in the Presbyterian tradition. Unless our membership is excited about the denomination and about being part of its future, the PC(USA) will not grow or sustain itself.

- Congregationalism is increasing. The good news is the sense of more responsibility and initiative from congregations. The bad news is the independence and lack of sustainable connection from congregations to each other or to governing bodies.

- Our Reformed understanding says that we are Reformed, always to be Reformed. How do we demonstrate the covenant relationship with God in seeking God’s reformation of our church and our partnership response?

- Our concept of representation has changed. While we maintain that ministers and elders serve uninstructed by their constituencies, persons are often selected or appointed to represent certain cultural, racial, or theological perspectives in the denomination. Nonordained persons also serve. We have yet to see the long-term consequences, both positive and negative.
We continue to be ecumenical in our activity. In spite of our mix of faith and denominational backgrounds in congregations, we find ourselves institutionally (and historically) at odds with some recommendations from the COCU in its report, “Churches in Covenant Communion.”

We find ourselves wandering in a cultural desert with no more sense of direction than the society that envelops us. Like the Hebrew people in Exodus 16 and 17, we cry out for nourishment, for leadership, for a vision beyond ourselves of who we are called to be. In Exodus, the Hebrew people had crossed the Red Sea and were wandering in the wilderness. Hungry and discouraged, they complained to Moses that they would rather be in the fleshpots of Egypt than in the ambiguity and uncertainty of the desert. They wanted food. Moses prayed to God who told him that food would be provided. The next morning, and for the week following, manna appeared on the ground like frost. It was gathered and there was enough for everyone for the time they needed it.

The next complaint was for water to quench their thirst. Again, Moses prayed to God, who told him to take the rod God had given him and to strike the rock. Water flowed from the rock and the people’s thirst was satisfied.

As the people continued, they encountered the Amelekites and were called into battle. Aaron and Hur accompanied Moses to the top of a hill overlooking the battle. Moses was told to hold the rod of God over his head. When he did so, the Hebrews took advantage in the battle. When his arms grew tired and the rod fell from over his head, the advantage fell to the Amelekites. The battle was won when Aaron and Hur stood by Moses and held his arms up so that God’s command was fulfilled.

What does this passage of Scripture say to us today? God provides nourishment for us, individually and corporately, when we need it—as much as we need. God’s resources are for the moment and not for hoarding. God responds to our thirst by giving us relief in unexpected places. And, God gives us victory in our struggle when we learn how to work together, not independently, to achieve God’s purposes.

We are the Church
Yet who are we? Presbyterian, Reformed
Old New Tradition Change
Spirit-led Spirit-filled
We are the Church.
And our center, the core of our being
is to worship
Love
Enjoy
God forever;
To worship the gift of God in Christ
Emmanuel, God with us.
To worship is our center
our renewal
our recreation
our joy.
As we pray
As we sing
As we study
As we dance
As we laugh
As we cry
As we eat
As we commune
Together,
Guided by the Holy Spirit
The Spirit of our God
Emmanuel, God with us.
In worship we are filled
empowered
moved
To see ourselves in God’s world
As God’s stewards
Stewards of the gifts of God
for all God’s people.
We understand this in community
And so we are the Church
The people of God
The Body of Christ
One and Many
Seeking and Found
Human and Divine
Past Present Future
Sacrament and Word
God’s people
God’s Word
God’s Church.

THE BIBLICAL WITNESS

As a community of believers in the triune God, called out and called together through God’s Holy Spirit, the church bears witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah for the world’s salvation.
God’s will is that there will always be a witness to God’s power and saving grace (Matthew 16:13–19, Acts 14:17). God called the church to be that witness.

Jesus Christ is the center of the church’s life.

The church is called to bear witness to God’s saving work in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh who has come among us full of grace and truth (John 1:14; Acts 1:8). The church seeks to live Christ’s teachings and to be governed by him as Lord of the church and Savior of the world. Christ alone is Head of the church, and all its members are equal in him (Galatians 3:28). The Word of God incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth and written in the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures) and the New Testament are authoritative for our understanding of the nature of the church. The Presbyterian Form of Government is based on our interpretation of these Scriptures (Confession of 1967, 9.27–30; Directory for Worship, 2.2001).

Through its preaching, teaching, sacraments, and service, the church bears witness to Jesus Christ.

The church is commissioned to preach, teach, make disciples, and baptize in the name of the triune God (Matthew 28:18–20). As disciples, people of the church are called to lives of repentance because Jesus has said, “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34, NRSV). The church also witnesses to God’s reign in the way it feeds the hungry, gives drink to the thirsty, welcomes the stranger, clothes the naked, cares for the sick, and visits the imprisoned (Matthew 25:31–46). Scripture teaches that the evangelistic task of making disciples, preaching, and teaching, repentance as well as social witness and service, belong to the church’s essential nature.

The church stands in continuity with the people Israel through the new covenant. Its nature and being bear witness to the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures) and the mighty acts of God.

Jesus said that he came not to abolish the law or the prophets of his Hebrew heritage but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). In the same way, we have claimed this heritage. We have come to know the Creator God, to see ourselves as creatures made in the divine image and called to be stewards of God’s world. But we have rebelled against God and radically corrupted what God intends us to be.²

The Hebrew Scriptures teach us what God expects. We are to seek righteousness; to act justly and humbly in obedience to God’s will for us (Micah 6:8). Our attitudes and actions are bound together in love of God and neighbor (Deut. 6:4, Lev. 19:18). God’s law is written upon our hearts (Jer. 31:31–34).
We claim our spiritual forebears through the Old Testament as our spiritual forebears. The ten commandments guide us in understanding God’s will and point out “the goal toward which throughout life we are to strive.”

Though we stand under judgment, God’s mercy redeems us. We claim prophets and judges, priests and poets of the Hebrew Scriptures as part of the Church’s heritage and tradition. We sing as our own the songs of Zion.

The New Testament is God’s new covenant with us in Jesus Christ the Messiah.

The church is grafted on the tree of Israel. The apostolic church, described in the witness of the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the epistles and pastoral letters, and the book of Revelation, is part of our tradition.

The church is not enslaved to tradition; it lives by the renewing power of the Holy Spirit.

The church came into existence when the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost; people heard the good news in their own languages (Acts 2). On that day, God formed a new people whose center is the new life in Christ bestowed by the Holy Spirit. The church has continually sought to balance respect for its tradition and openness to direction of the Holy Spirit.

Openness to the Holy Spirit is the biblical basis for the Reformation principle of ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, translated “the church reformed, always to be reformed,” by the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

As the members of the New Testament church sought to understand themselves as the people of God, they developed a number of images to describe the church.

Two of the most powerful are “body of Christ” and the “servant people.”

- “The body of Christ.” The church is a body of which Christ is the Head (1 Cor. 12:12, 27; Rom. 12:4–5; Eph. 1:22–23; 4:15–16; Col. 1:18; 2:19). Believers are members of that body who carry particular functions. Baptism welcomes them into that body. They are also “in Christ” and have been “built together . . . into a dwelling place for God” (Eph. 2:22).

Through the Lord’s Supper, we celebrate our union with God and with one another. We are one with all who share Christ’s body within our own congregation and the church universal. To fracture that oneness is to wound but not to destroy the body. “Body” is a metaphor of structure and
function, and from it we derive our understanding of the organic nature of
the church.

- “People of God” is an Old Testament image. The derivative concept
  of “servant people” has its roots in Isaiah (Ch. 53, for example). An early
  Christian hymn (Phil. 2:6-11) reflects Jesus’ obedience in sacrifice, becoming
  a servant. Christians are exhorted to have the same obedience (Phil.
  4:12). In the Gospel of John (13:1-20), Jesus washes the disciples’ feet, dra-
  matically exemplifying the servant calling of Christ’s church. “Servant
  people” signifies the purpose and mission of the church.

- Other images from the Scriptures picture the church as cornerstone,
  the bride of Christ, the vine and the branches, a holy nation, a royal priesthood.
  These images also speak of the relationship between the community
  of believers and their Lord.

The church exemplifies the reign of Christ but is not identical with it.

The church in its humanness is not God’s reign, and cannot bring it
about by its own actions. Whenever the church does the will of God, it
represents God’s reign. The church is reminded that it is a human—as well
as divine—institution that ought not to have pretensions about itself
(Romans 12:3), but to seek obedience to God in work and service. The
church is also seen as the foretaste of the reign for which we pray in the

The giving of gifts by the Spirit for the upbuilding and empowering
of the body called for a hierarchy of love rather than of office (1 Cor.
12:27-14:1).

“. . . Elders performed tasks of local government and justice through-
out the biblical period.” The young church adapted the office of elder (in
the Greek, presbyter) from the practices of Israel. Although the record is
somewhat ambiguous, elders evidently had a valued leadership role in the

The office of deacon (Acts 6:1-6) met a crisis for service and leader-
ship. It eventually became one of the established forms of ministry. How it
came into being is instructive for the biblical pattern of leadership: the
need arose, the apostles proposed a solution to the whole community; the
qualifications were that those chosen would be Spirit-gifted and wise.
Seven were chosen and set aside by the apostles with prayer and the lay-
ing on of hands (Acts 6:1-6). This is the scriptural basis for the practice of
ordination.7

As time went on and the church grew, a variety of offices emerged.8
First and Second Timothy and Titus describe more formal structures and
instructions for continuing the ministry.
The New Testament church reflected cultural diversity and theological pluralism, but recognized that Christ is Head of the body.

"Diversity" and "pluralism" have particular meanings in the church today. First century practices do not provide precise answers to complex twentieth-century problems. However, cultural diversity in the New Testament church at times seriously threatened the church's unity. Theological pluralism is reflected in the way New Testament writings interpret the gospel. Cultural differences brought forth a complaint that led to establishing the office of deacon. The early church in its pluralism and diversity was told "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" because "[t]here is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (Eph. 4:3–6).

When diversity of opinion or practice arose, the early church gathered in groups or councils to resolve the conflict.

In Acts 15, church leaders met to seek a solution to a serious difference of opinion regarding the church's mission. Seeking the will of God through guidance of the Holy Spirit, they listened respectfully to both sides of the issue, and made a decision involving some compromise but not on the crucial issue. In Matthew 18:15–20, Jesus counsels private intervention whenever possible in order to prevent open conflict; but when that course fails, discipline is necessary.


As culture and society change, the church seeks to discover God's will for new times and circumstances. The PC(USA) holds firmly to the authority of the Word of God while recognizing the need for intelligent and faithful interpretation in the light of current knowledge, needs, and situations. The Confession of 1967 affirms:

The church . . . has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken [God's] word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that [God] will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture. (Book of Confessions, 9.29)

The New Testament applies the concept of priesthood to the whole church, not to one group within it.

Jesus Christ is mediator between God and humankind (Heb. 9:11–10:18). From this teaching of Christ as the "high priest of the good things that have come" (Heb. 9:11) comes the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy
nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9; see also Revelation 1:6, 20:6; cp. Exodus 19:6, Isaiah 61:6). This teaching of Scripture has been a strong influence in the development of Protestantism.

THE REFORMED TRADITION AND CALVIN

In its theology, the PC(USA) stands in the Reformed tradition, one of the major movements of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation.

Protestant reformers, including those of the Reformed tradition, claimed continuity with the catholic heritage of the church. Their aim was not to recreate the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, but to reform it. They claimed to be in accord with the teaching of the primitive church and the catholic church, and were not uninfluenced by catholic ideas of church order, ministry, discipline, and the church’s role in society. Reformers raised the same questions asked for centuries, but gave different answers. The appeal, however, was not to tradition, but to Scripture.

The Reformation produced the Lutheran, Reformed (Presbyterian), and Catholic (Episcopal) traditions, and the broad Anabaptist tradition, which emphasized a more individualistic piety. (Mennonites, and later the Quakers, are diverse examples of this fourth outgrowth of the Reformation.) Baptist and congregational churches emerged in the seventeenth century out of the Puritan movement; Methodists grew out of the Episcopal tradition in the eighteenth century. Subsequent centuries have given rise to new denominations, such as the Disciples of Christ (the Christian Church), and various pentecostal bodies. All these churches affirm the same basic Christian beliefs, but they differ in their theological emphases and particularly in their forms of government. The Reformed tradition “... developed a republican model of leadership for the church to guard against human fallibility. [The Reformers] rejected both the hierarchical structures of episcopacy and the democratic organization of congregationalism.”

Churches in our tradition derive understanding of the nature of the church and its governance from the teachings of the sixteenth-century Reformer John Calvin.

Calvin defined the church as a communion of

... all those who, by the kindness of God ... through the working of the Holy Spirit, have entered into fellowship with Christ. ... [W]e recognize as members of the church those who, by confession of faith, by example of life, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with us.
Churches in the Reformed tradition have always been inclusive and ecumenical, while maintaining distinctive emphases in the interpretation of the faith.

In common with most Christian bodies, we receive into membership and at the Lord’s table all who profess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We believe in the authority of Scripture as the written witness to God’s work in history and in justification by faith through the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We become members of the church in the Sacrament of Baptism. In the Lord’s Supper, God feeds and nourishes the church on its journey. We believe in daily work as a Christian calling.

The Reformed tradition affirms its faith in the majesty, holiness, and providence of God. We believe God creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in righteousness and in love. At times, the church’s authority conflicts with the authority of the state. Where God’s will dictates civil disobedience, the church must be prepared to obey the law of God and face the consequence of civil disobedience (Mark 12:13-17, Acts 5:29, Romans 13:1-7).¹³

Our belief in the priesthood of all believers has many ramifications: equality of all before God; parity of members and clergy, and clergy with each other; our need, right, and responsibility to pray for ourselves and each other; the concept of Christian vocation; and a nonhierarchical view of the church. We also draw from it the need for biblical and theological education of laity and clergy so that all have access to God’s Word and revelation in history. A distinctive attribute of the Reformed Tradition is the theological concept of predestination. That we have de-emphasized predestination is evidence of our overriding understanding of the theological concept of to be Reformed.

Calvin described the church as the place where “the Word of God [is] purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution. . .”¹⁴

These two marks of the church are followed by a third subordinate mark: discipline. According to our Reformed tradition, Word and Sacraments (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper) form the heart of Christian worship. Where these are present, there is the church. Discipline requires organizational structures and practices to enable the body to live out its faithfulness. Thus, structure, or governance, become one of the marks of the church as a means to faithfulness.

Governance, or discipline, was in the hands of the pastor and elders gathered in conciliar bodies (such as sessions, presbyteries, and General Assemblies today).
This distinguishing mark of churches in the Reformed tradition indicates the great importance given to decisions made by councils of persons especially gifted by the Holy Spirit for governance. These persons are called to ministry by God through the church and set aside by prayer and the laying on of hands (ordination). No individual makes decisions for the body. At the same time, most decisions are not made by the members-at-large but by representatives (officers) they have chosen. In deliberative councils and assemblies, the church makes decisions that seek to keep in balance the well-being of the whole body with the rights of the individual conscience.15

Calvin envisioned four scripturally warranted offices of ministry, each with its own requirements and gifts: pastor, elder, deacon, and teacher.

The pastor ministered to the gathered church through exposition of the Word, application of discipline, and administering the Sacraments. The deacon provided for the welfare of the sick and needy. The elder ruled in order to assure the moral and spiritual guidance of the people so they might grow in love of God and neighbor. The teacher educated the people in the faith.

Following the biblical pattern, deacons were also ordained in recognition of their calls and gifts, but did not govern. The office of teacher was not continued; it has become part of the task of the pastor, maintaining the Reformed tradition’s emphasis on education.

The church believes itself true to biblical witness when it adapts its offices to meet current needs.

Different orders have served the gospel, and none can claim exclusive validity. . . . Every church order must be open to such reformation as may be required to make it a more effective instrument of the mission of reconciliation. (Book of Confessions, 9.40)

Calvin’s political theory has continued to influence government in both church and state. Its enduring legacy is the concept that government is in the hands of representative councils and that the Christian church cannot abdicate political and civic responsibility.

As the Protestant churches broke away from the old relationship in which church and state were one under the Holy Roman Empire, each tradition determined its relationship to the state. In Geneva, during Calvin’s time, the political system “assumed responsibility to God on the part of secular and ecclesiastical authority alike, and proposed as its end the effectual operation of the will of God in the life of the people.” The political order rested on divine authority and natural law. The church was the conscience of the state.
The Reformed tradition became the pattern for churches in Scotland, Germany, France, Switzerland, Hungary, the Netherlands, and England. Each produced confessions of faith to meet specific times and situations.

Churches of this tradition in Europe became known as "Reformed." In English-speaking countries, the name became "Presbyterian," from the Greek word for elders. Scotland, Ireland, and England were the homelands of most early American Presbyterians.

The cultural diversity and theological pluralism that characterize our church today are rooted in our Reformation heritage. At reunion, the new church adopted a book that included confessional statements from the other churches within the Reformed tradition.

Congregationalism is also in our heritage. In meetings of Puritan clergymen who met in 1643 "...to construct a Presbyterian church order for the entire British Isles" there was long debate between Presbyterian Puritans who believed in giving power to groups beyond the congregation, and congregational Puritans who saw the congregation as the single source of power. They did not want anything to interfere with the congregation's autonomy. The congregational Puritans from England went to New England and the Presbyterians from Scotland and Ireland settled in the Middle Atlantic colonies and points south.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE NORTH AMERICAN SETTING

As American Presbyterians, we have developed our own traditions, building upon biblical and Reformed heritage, because we believe that throughout history God has spoken through the church to teach us and call us to new ways of being the people of God.

"Denomination" was the form of church that emerged in America.

The concept of denomination was "the most important innovation in the doctrine of the church since the fourth century." In the first century-and-a-half after the Protestant Reformation, Reformed churches were national or state churches or aspired to this position. Only after the British Act of Toleration were dissenting groups granted certain rights to exist. In American colonies, the state church in New England was Congregational; and in the Southern colonies and New York, the state church was Anglican. As dissenters in the South, and as a tolerated group in the middle colonies, American Presbyterians as early as 1729 declared that the state does not have "...a controlling Power over Synods with Respect to the Exercise of their ministerial Authority; or Power to persecute any for
their Religion. . . .”20 Presbyterians have always acknowledged that the church “consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children.”21 However, only with the first American revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith did Presbyterians declare it the duty of civil magistrates “to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest.”22

The political doctrine of separation of church and state in the new nation opened the way for denominationalism. Presbyterians wholeheartedly supported this doctrine. In 1788, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America said “[w]e do not ... wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power, further than may be necessary for protection and security, and at the same time, be equal and common to all others.”23

Thus, after the American Revolution, the Presbyterian church and the American constitution both opposed the concept of a national state church. As a consequence, all churches in the United States are equal before the law. They may also separate from one another and still recognize each other as Christians and cooperate with one another. The transformation of church traditions into denominations has been characteristic of the American church from the beginning of our national existence.

The American Presbyterian experience was first to form congregations governed by sessions, then presbyteries (1706), synods (1716), and the General Assembly (1788-89).

Presbyteries connected pastors and parishioners with a larger portion of the body of Christ. With the development of the denomination, the same became true of the General Assembly. This is often called “Presbyterian connectionalism.” The particular churches, collectively, constitute the church. For Presbyterians, this organic unity of the church is demonstrated by its representative assemblies and the interrelatedness of its governing bodies.

The image of the body of Christ exemplifying the unity of the church is set forth in the “Historic Principles of Church Government” in the Book of Order:

That the several different congregations of believers, taken collectively, constitute one Church of Christ, called emphatically the Church; that a larger part of the Church, or a representation of it, should govern a smaller, or determine matters of controversy which arise therein; that, in like manner, a representation of the whole should govern and determine in regard to every part, and to all the parts united: that is, that a majority shall govern; and consequently that appeals may be carried from lower to higher governing bodies, till they be finally decided by the collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church. For these principles and this procedure, the example of the apostles and the practice of the primitive Church are considered as authority. (G-1.0400)24

15
Since its inception as a national body, the Presbyterian church in its Constitution declared what the church believed and described how the church should be governed.

The first constitution, adopted by the synod in 1788 in preparation for the forming of a General Assembly, included the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, a directory for worship, and a form of government and discipline. These parts of that constitution reflected the influence of the Church of Scotland, but with a decidedly American flavor.

The American tradition was being formed. In the Scottish church, all ultimate authority rested in and came from the assembly. But in the American church, the presbytery was the originating authority, relating particular churches into a larger whole. The 1788 Form of Government declared that “...no act of a General Assembly could become a standing rule without first being referred to the presbyteries, and securing the consent of at least a majority of them.” The presbytery is the very heart of the Presbyterian system.

The Book of Order, which includes the Form of Government, the Directory for Worship, and the Rules of Discipline, has been amended and changed extensively over the years, but has always been taken seriously because of Presbyterian insistence that “...all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40).

A fundamental principle of Reformed theology is that God alone is Lord of the conscience.

This principle was affirmed in the 1788 plan which led to the formation of the first American General Assembly the following year (Book of Confessions, 6.109).

The principle is based on the Reformed belief in the sovereignty of God. “God alone, and not any church governing body or nation or any other human authority, has claim on complete human obedience” (Joan S. Gray and Joyce C. Tucker, Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers, 2nd edition. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990, p. xv). The notion of God’s sovereignty over human conscience affirms that God, as in days of old, continues to make God’s will known directly to particular persons and communities of faith.

The conviction that God’s will is not confined to the traditions of the church, or even to traditional interpretation of Scripture, has far-reaching consequences. For example, in the issue of ordination of women, “[it] was the result of the conscience of some members convincing the whole church that a traditional interpretation of Scripture was in error....”

The story of American Presbyterianism can be told in terms of its splits, divisions, and reunions. Presbyterians, no matter what their convictions, take their faith seriously.
From its earliest days in America, the Presbyterian church experienced conflict over the extent of theological pluralism to be tolerated without loss of unity and doctrinal purity. The church has always lived with factions, which in some case led to schism. In broad terms, a tension between contending viewpoints is manifested throughout our history.

A major controversy arose over the adoption of the Westminster Confession and the Westminster Catechisms. But the first division (New Side-Old Side), which led to separate synods, did not occur until 1741. Issues were revivalist practices and the standards of education for ministers. Separate synods reunited in 1758, thirty years before the General Assembly was formed.

In 1801, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America entered into an Act of Union with the Congregationalists, agreeing to work together in mission and deciding that each could be represented in the governing body of the other. This cooperative venture was rescinded by the conservative majority in the 49th General Assembly (1837). In reaction, two Presbyterian denominations were formed. One was called "Presbyterian-Old School" (the traditional) and the other was called "Presbyterian-New School" (the progressive). In some places, congregations of each school existed side by side in the same city or town.

One issue recurs throughout the church's history: where responsibility for mission should be lodged. The New School supported an early ecumenical venture, independent mission agencies, while the Old School wanted to bring mission under boards and agencies that would be related and fully responsible to the denomination. But the issues dividing them were echoes and foretastes of other (and unresolved) splits and schisms: subscription, ordination of those who govern (both elders and ministers), slavery, ecumenical ventures in mission, and education of ministers.

The most serious schism took place at the time of the War Between the States. The institution of slavery and the role of the church on civil matters were the paramount issues. During the war, New School Presbyterians in the South united with the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America. This church became the Presbyterian Church in the United States, augmented after the war by some border synods and presbyteries. This division between the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. was resolved with reunion in 1983.

The northern and southern branches may have been twins ecclesiastically, but they were little more than second cousins organizationally. A totally new national system had to be devised, and was; but it took until 1987 to put all the pieces in place, and even longer to get them operating fully. Overlapping North-South boundary lines of synods and presbyteries had to be redrawn, but first renegotiated. Overall, some old—and sometimes well-salted—wounds would take more than time to heal, and some new developments hinting at totally different kinds of problems would have to be faced.
In addition to splits and schisms, the PC(USA) has had church mergers, most notably with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (1906) and the United Presbyterian Church in North America (1958). (A chart showing the various divisions and reunions of the denomination is an endnote to this report.)

A distinctive doctrine of the PCUS was the doctrine of "the spirituality of the church" propounded by the Southern churchman James Henry Thornwell. Thornwell maintained that the church's focus was exclusively spiritual; "[t]herefore, the church should not speak out on political or social issues but rather leave such matters to the consciences of its members." While this was the church's distinctive doctrine, it did not always succeed in preventing discussion of social and political issues in the PCUS.

Thornwell's counterpart in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. was Charles Hodge, who debated Thornwell on church polity and governance. The echoes of these controversies still are heard within the church. From 1890 through 1927, the church suffered its own internal civil war between fundamentalists and modernists. At issue was, among other things, a doctrine of biblical inspiration. The "higher criticism" of the Bible, with its interest in and reliance upon scientific methodology to aid in interpretation of the Bible, caused dissension and discussion that continues today.

The Presbyterian denomination joined other Christian bodies during the nineteenth century in a vigorous program of missionary expansion, despite its controversies.

Mission became a hallmark of the church. Denominations set out with zeal to evangelize America, as well as to convert people around the world to Christianity. The goal and passion was to nurture and educate people in the Christian faith as well as in all branches of human knowledge, and to "Christianize" society. A new idea for church support, the free-will offering, developed as a result of the missionary zeal of the denominations and as a consequence of the separation of church and state.

However, it was not until after the Civil War that strong denominational structures were developed to carry out mission. Until the late nineteenth century, the denomination was "a 'constitutional confederacy' of congregations loosely connected by relatively weak institutional structures and a broadly defined constitution."

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the church became a corporate denomination.

In the twentieth century the corporate denomination became the dominant image of the church for Presbyterians. The denomination as a corporation is a bureaucratic, hierarchical organization dependent on managers and capable of delivering goods and
services to congregations as well as mobilizing and coordinating support of national and international mission causes. The characteristics of incorporation permeated national structures as well as congregations.33

The corporate denomination gave visibility both to the concept of unity of the church and to the concept of connectionalism. It led to the first service books and denominational hymnals for worship use, it provided resources for Christian education and enabled the Presbyterian church to work ecumenically at the national and international level with other Christian bodies. The church became an effective agency for mission and social witness.

Yet the church has been uneasy with this corporate model because it challenges the concept of egalitarian and servant leadership. It has also brought changes in concepts of the professional ministry. In addition to being preachers, students, and teachers, ministers today are expected to be professional counselors, small group facilitators, competent administrators, long-range planners, and financial experts—all things to all people.

There has been continuing tension between those who believe the primary task of the church is to convert individuals or to build up church membership, and those who think its task is to be a united voice for social welfare and change.

This false dichotomy has sometimes been described as the conflict between evangelism and mission. Governing bodies have consistently maintained that the church is called to both. Parallel allegiances through members, congregations, and governing bodies have found their primary gifts in one area or another throughout our history.

Presbyterians were active in the Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century and in mass evangelism movements 100 years later. In spite of major evangelism programs in the church through the 1950s and 1960s, interest in evangelism began to decrease in the 1970s. New church development, a fruitful form of evangelism, became a lower priority as other issues appeared to be more pressing. A highly successful youth program and college and university ministries were cut back, leaving these fields open to conservative para-church groups. Membership began to decline.

The church's social witness today is sometimes controversial and is one reason for unrest in the church. Much of the current discussion in the church, as in society at large, centers on issues of sexual ethics. These issues, divisive in both church and society, are part of current discontent due to the church's controversial positions on these issues. Ways in which they are handled sometimes adds to the unrest. For example,

- special interest groups, both conservative and liberal, exert intense pressure to impose their particular points of view on the church;
people both inside and outside the church do not understand that when the General Assembly expresses itself on a particular social issue it speaks to, and not for, the church, providing guidance for individual and group consideration of the issue; and

- when the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly aligns the church with one side in a dispute concerning civil rights, church members do not understand that the clerk does so at the direction of the General Assembly, in a way that is consistent with enacted General Assembly policy statements.

Often, debate about social witness and action sets it over and against the church’s task of evangelism. While the church has always maintained that its mission is to do both, the point often debated is how to do this. There is presently increased interest in new church development as a primary form of evangelism. There is also considerable interest in finding new ways to handle church conflict.34

There has been significant change in Protestant influence in society in the twentieth century. Until World War I, Protestant mainstream churches dominated the U.S. religious scene.

As a result of immigration between World Wars I and II, Protestantism had to share the role of religious spokesperson with Roman Catholics and Jews. This was generally seen as positive. Those who spoke for Protestantism were usually liberals from mainstream churches, although it was liberalism tempered by the theological movement known as neoorthodoxy.35

At the same time, the National Council of Churches (NCC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) came into being. The NCC issued a new translation of the Bible (the Revised Standard Version), letting loose a flood of additional translations and paraphrases. Reformed theologians were in the forefront of WCC leadership. Eugene Carson Blake, then the Presbyterian Stated Clerk, proposed church union, a proposal that led to the Consultation on Church Union.

Beginning in the 1960s, a dramatic shift in Protestant power and influence took place. Liberal Protestantism assumed a major role in social movements, sometimes taking unpopular positions on political and social issues. As a result, conservative Protestant groups, which at the time avoided politics, dominated the religious scene. At the same time, Roman Catholicism was moving in a more liberal direction as a result of Vatican II and Latin American liberation theology.

Today, the Christian faith is seen increasingly as one among many options for belief and commitment. Some people are discovering new insights in Native American religions. The New Age movement is an
umbrella term for many different kinds of religious experience appealing both to church members and nonchurch members today. Eastern religions have millions of adherents in the United States.

We live in a world where great religions, as well as secular faiths, have developed moral visions that are influencing individuals, civilization, education, and community very profoundly. Adherents of these faiths are often persons of profound insight, intellect, and deep piety. We inhabit together one beautiful, fragile, yet renewable globe.* This is a sign of the deep spiritual hunger at the beginning of a postmodern world.

The ecumenical situation has changed, but ecumenism continues to raise important issues for the churches.

One of the revolutionary developments in world Christianity has been Vatican II, in which Pope John XXIII changed the relationships between Roman Catholics and Protestants. From this framework of interfaith understanding, we do much of our work today.

Although the WCC and NCC do not exert the same influence as they did at mid-century, they continue to raise important issues and conduct valuable work. One example is the significant study *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* by the WCC. Another example is the extensive relief work of Church World Service, an arm of the NCC. The Special Committee on the Consultation on Church Union is making a major report to this General Assembly, asking the General Assembly to approve the text *Churches in Covenant Communion* as the definitive agreement for joining with other churches in covenant relationship, working together for the reconciliation of different ordained ministries.

The covenant involves accepting the office of bishop as one of the ordained offices of the church. While members of the COCU special committee maintain that the covenant will retain the Presbyterian office of elder as a gift to the reuniting communions, others believe the covenant is ambiguous on this point.

Expressions of ecumenism are often strong at the local level, where members are leaders in interchurch and interfaith activities. In some communities, Presbyterian churches are union congregations with congregations of other denominations.

Reasons for membership decline in recent decades are many and varied.

In 1973, approximately 40 to 60 thousand members of the PCUS withdrew to create the Presbyterian Church in America and in 1981 another 10 to 20 thousand left the UPCUSA to form the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. But most of the people who dropped out of our churches did not affiliate with any other church. Conservative churches of the pentecostal
type (Assemblies of God, for example) may be growing, but it does not appear that many of their members come from Presbyterian churches.39

Membership decline has often been attributed to opposition to the church's social involvement. Research indicates that this was not the main cause of the decline. Among many reasons are the vast changes in society, growing secularism, and the church's disinterest in verbal witnessing in favor of social witness.40 Failure to keep up with changing demographics through new church development is an additional reason.

Congregations and presbyteries have taken on more mission responsibilities in the past twenty years.

Twenty years ago, major reorganizations took place in the predecessor denominations of the PC(USA). A basic principle of reorganization was that mission was done best by the governing body closest to the area of mission. Thus, ecumenical and world mission was the responsibility of national agencies, and what had been national missions was for the most part shifted to synods and presbyteries. National agencies provided Christian education resources for the churches, but recognized it was up to the local church to use the resources to best meet their needs.

In the UPCUSA, this reorganization led to the development of large regional synods where there had been smaller synods generally following state boundaries. Presbyteries and synods had full-time executives and offices. The synod played a major role in the allocation of General Assembly mission funds to the presbyteries. Presbyteries and synods linked sessions and congregations with the General Assembly. The UPCUSA saw this interrelatedness as program and polity, demonstrating the oneness of the church.

During the PCUS reorganization within the same time period, the boards and agencies were consolidated into a General Assembly Mission Board. The number of synods and presbyteries was reduced, but the size was enlarged, so that these middle governing bodies might be able to hire staff and become more effective units for mission program.

Reorganization following reunion in 1983 continued regional synods. There was renewed emphasis on the principle of mission being done by the governing body best equipped to do it. The focus was on the congregation as a primary agent for mission.41

- Cultural diversity and theological pluralism are dominant characteristics of the religious scene in our time.

Though we Presbyterians have been unified in many ways, especially through confessions, connectional polity, social homogeneity, and belief that we are part of the holy catholic church, the church has always been
diverse and pluralistic. Diversity and pluralism are generally more apparent in agencies and assemblies at the presbytery, synod, and General Assembly level than in congregations, which tend to be homogeneous.

Today diversity and pluralism characterize and influence the church as it intentionally aims to include African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians, and others in its decision making and in its leadership. Ordained women have a major role in church leadership in the PC(USA) today. The church is seeking to take into account differences in economic conditions, lifestyles, and sexual orientation.

Diversity and pluralism also influence theology and worship. Attempts to be gender neutral in language and to see the Bible and theology from a feminist point of view illustrate the effect these changes are having on the church. It is often the case that formerly silent groups are now speaking of faith as they see it.

At reunion, the PC(USA) established a committee on representation in every governing body except the session. In this way, the church sought to rectify its exclusiveness and to bring people of color and women into the leadership of the church. Hiring policies in each governing body have been adopted as a means of achieving that goal.

The Calvinist marks of the church are preaching, sacraments, and discipline. In the twentieth century, the Presbyterian church has added mission, servanthood, and inclusiveness as emphases.

The servant image received a great deal of attention in biblical and theological studies at the middle of the century. Program units of the GAC, which are called ministry units, indicate by their name that they are created to serve and not to be served.

CONFESSIONING THE FAITH

The fundamentalist-modernist controversy early in the twentieth century resulted in a significant decision regarding the confessional basis for the PC(USA) and who should determine that basis.

The issue was the nature of authority and where it was lodged. The 139th General Assembly (1927) determined that the General Assembly did not have the constitutional authority to decide for presbyteries and sessions which articles of faith were essential and necessary for the ordination of ministers and church officers. Responsibility for determining the acceptability of a ministerial candidate’s beliefs and for ordination rested with the presbytery. The decision to move authority from General Assembly to presbyteries and sessions has been called “theological decentralization.”

23
A major shift regarding confessional standards took place with the adoption of a book of confessions.

American Presbyterianism always had the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as the only official confessional standards. In 1967, the UPCUSA recognized several confessions as part of its heritage, and brought them all together in the Book of Confessions. These became the doctrinal standard of the reunited church in 1983, thereby affirning several basic Presbyterian values:

- Confessions are subordinate standards in the church. They are subordinate to the authority of Jesus Christ and to the Scriptures as they bear witness to him (Book of Confessions, 9.03).
- Many different strands of Reformed theology are part of our tradition as Presbyterians in the Reformed family of faith.
- The church confesses its faith in light of the times in which it lives. Obedience to Jesus Christ “is the ground of the church’s duty and freedom to reform itself in life and doctrine as new occasions, in God’s providence, may demand” (Confession of 1967, 9.03).
- Confessions are time-bound because they emphasize those basic truths of the faith that are most relevant to the time in which they are declared. For example, the theme of the Confession of 1967 was reconciliation; the Brief Statement of Faith reflects the diversity and pluralism in the church today.
- The Book of Confessions bears witness to ecumenicity. Confessional documents are the faith statements of many communions besides the PC(USA), yet there is a marked unity among them, with recognizable themes from the trinitarian framework of the Apostles’ Creed to the same framework for the Brief Statement of Faith.

Ordained officers agree to be guided by these confessions.

For most of our history, ministers, elders, and deacons have declared at their ordination that they would receive and adopt the Westminster Confession as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures. With the adoption of the Book of Confessions, and reunion in 1983, ordination vows were changed. The ordinand “. . . receive[s] and adopt[s] the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our Church. . . .” These confessions are accepted as “. . . reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do . . .” and the ordinand promises to be led and guided by them (Book of Order, G-14.0405b(3)).

The Brief Statement of Faith, adopted in 1991, sees the church as community, affirms the Calvinist marks of the church, and declares that women as well as men are called to the church’s ministry.
THE CHURCH’S POLITY

Presbyterian polity reflects our theology.

Presbyterian polity reflects a theological understanding of the way God acts through human beings in the governance of the church. Ordination recognizes the call of the Holy Spirit, the individual’s acknowledgement of the call, and the church’s confirmation of it.

Governance is the way in which we live out our call to be the church and to carry out mission.

Our form of government is based on the Bible as interpreted in our Reformed tradition in each generation and delineated in the Constitution of the church, particularly its Book of Order. The biblical basis for the governance of the church has enabled it to maintain unity of order and belief. The confessional statements guide, summarize, and equip the church in interpretation of the Scriptures.

The PC(USA) affirms certain basic principles.

Some of the principles set forth in these chapters of the Book of Order are: The particular churches, wherever they are, taken collectively, constitute one church. The unity of the church is demonstrated through representative assemblies. It is the right of the people to take part in the government of the church through their representatives. Thus, the church is governed and directed by assemblies of persons ordained to office, both pastors and elders.

In the governing bodies “[p]resbyters are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ” (G-4.0301d). Decisions are reached by the vote of the people assembled, following opportunity for discussion or deliberation. Ecclesiastical jurisdiction is a shared power, to be exercised jointly and in parity by presbyters (ministers and elders) gathered in these deliberative governing bodies. Appeals can be carried from one governing body to the next, beginning with the session, until a decision is made by the collected wisdom and united voice of the whole church (G-1.0400).

Parity means equality in decision making. In the governing bodies beyond the session, parity means an equal number of elders and ministers gathered in common assembly, all equal in responsibility and authority. Parity also means that each minister is equal in power and authority with every other minister. Presbyterians do not have bishops or other officers whose voice or vote carries more weight than any other minister.

Our representative form of government enables members to use varied gifts in Christ’s service in the church.
Even in the New Testament church, all members did not govern. Though each person has gifts, these gifts are used for different functions. Persons whose call is to some vocation other than the parish ministry are no less able to exercise their gifts of governance in councils and governing bodies.

The Holy Spirit speaks differently through different people. The Book of Order affirms this principle when it lists the variety of valid ministries in G-6.0104. It specifically indicates the privileges of Certified Christian Educators (G-14.0700, G-11.0407, and G-11.0503).

We respect and are guided in governance by those ordained as officers. Nevertheless, we are all equal under God. The Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers teaches the equality of all who seek the will of God in Jesus Christ and the responsibility of each person for the welfare of all. Within this framework, an essential principle of Presbyterian polity is the right of the people to elect elders and deacons and to call a pastor, with the consent of the presbytery.

Our concept of representation has changed. Who participates in decision making is one of the major questions before the church today.

Historically, ordained ministers and elders are selected by the people to seek the will of God together in assembled councils—session, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly. They participate uninstructed by their constituencies, but promise to lead the people as they are led in the conciliar body by the church’s confessions and by obedience to Jesus Christ. (Ordination vows for church officers. See Book of Order, G-14.0207).

Although the Book of Order is clear on the theological mandate that “[p]resbyters are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ” (G-4.0301d), the acknowledged practice of representation often is misunderstood to mean presbyters are obliged to represent those who elected them.

Another development has been opportunities for non-ordained persons to contribute gifts, knowledge, and skills in decision making through service on committees that do not take actions for or on behalf of a governing body. The 202nd General Assembly (1990) put the matter positively when it declared “when a [governing body] delegates any of its stated responsibilities to a committee, commission, or council, the delegated body must be . . . composed of elders and ministers” (Minutes, 1990, Part I, p. 238).

There has long been tension over where authority lies among the governing bodies.

The General Assembly affirmed early in our history that matters should finally be decided “by the collected wisdom and united voice of
the whole Church” (G-1.0400) and through its most inclusive and representative governing bodies.

The Book of Order states:

The General Assembly is the highest governing body of this Church and is representative of the unity of the synods, presbyteries, sessions, and congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). (G-13.0101)

... The General Assembly constitutes the bond of union, community, and mission among all its congregations and governing bodies. (G-13.0103)

The presbytery is at the heart of the Presbyterian system as the governing body with originating authority.

The unity of the Presbyterian church is the unity of an organism.

In 1927, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. declared:

The Presbyterian Church is not a unity in the sense that it consists of an undivided oneness without distinguishable parts; neither is it a group of smaller bodies with common history and tradition which find it advantageous to work together in close harmony for the accomplishment of purposes common to ... them. Our Church is an organism. Its unity is not a unity of articulation, part touching part, like the bones of a skeleton, but the unity of life, the parts united by vital bonds, thus constituting a living whole and that whole imparting impulse and strength and order to the several parts, as the body to its members.

"One expression of the organic nature of the church is the statement that "[o]rdination for the office of minister of the Word and Sacrament is an act of the whole Church carried out by the presbytery . . .” (G-14.0401).

In recent years, one major issue has been the authority of polity over confessions.

In 1975 the UPCUSA Permanent Judicial Commission ruled in the Kenyon Case that a candidate for the ministry who could not in conscience ordain women to church office could not himself be ordained. The candidate would be violating the ordination vow to endorse the church’s government and honor its discipline, since the Book of Order requires that men and women be elected to church office. “A candidate who chooses not to subscribe to the polity of this church may be a more useful servant of the Lord in some other fellowship whose polity is in harmony with the candidate’s conscience,” the UPCUSA said (Minutes, UPCUSA, 1975, Part I, p. 257).

The Ellis case came up in the Presbyterian Church U.S. a few years later. The issue was again the ordination of women, in which the man was already ordained, but was seeking to transfer from one presbytery to another. He agreed to ordain women if he had to, but it was against his conscience to do so. The presbytery knew his views on the matter, but chose to receive him.
The case was appealed, and the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly supported the presbytery on the grounds that what he said he would do was more important than his conscience on the matter.

This was reaffirmed a few years later when Ellis sought to transfer to another presbytery in the new PC(USA). This time, in addition to his conscientious objection to the ordination of women, he objected to the Confession of 1967 and to receiving unconfirmed children at the Lord’s Table. The General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission of the reunited church again ruled in his favor, saying that these objections were not enough to prevent him from ministering in the PC(USA). With the Ellis case, the precedent has been set for a more lenient interpretation of the ordination vows.44 Acceptance of the church’s polity may not require endorsement of every provision of the Book of Order, if governing bodies are not thwarted in their responsibility to function by the provisions of the Book of Order. Conscientious dissent from the church’s polity is allowed, so long as the dissenter does not act to prevent its full implementation.

The General Assembly’s definitive guidance to a presbytery on an ordination issue has been enforced by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission.

In 1978, and in response to a request for guidance on the matter from a presbytery, the UPCUSA General Assembly adopted a policy statement that an open and avowed homosexual person could not hold an ordained office. It did not, however, revoke the ordination of homosexual persons ordained before 1978. The PCUS General Assembly took the same position the next year. Both the policy statement and position paper were considered definitive guidance binding on ordaining bodies—that is, sessions and presbyteries.

The ruling was tested for the first time in November 1991, when Downtown Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York, called Jane Spahr, a lesbian ordained to the ministry in 1974, as co-pastor. Rev. Spahr acknowledged her sexual orientation after 1978.

After a series of appeals, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (PJC) ruled that Rev. Spahr could not be called to this church because the call was contrary to the standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). (The full text of the PJC decision can be found in the report of the Office of the General Assembly to the 205th General Assembly (1993).)45

Polity has been used to enforce the church’s efforts at inclusiveness.

Since the early 1970s, the church has recognized its racial, ethnic, and gender diversity. Our church is predominantly white and has historically
been governed by white, male leadership. Attempts have been made by constitutional changes and committees on representation to incorporate this diversity with its unique gifts into the life and governance of the church.

We cannot make up for long years of injustice or adjust easily to pluralism and diversity in the church. Whenever efforts are made to enforce change or to require conformity, there are those who lose confidence in the governing bodies. Finding unity in the midst of diversity is one of our current challenges.

Governance carried out through the church's polity is not an end in itself, but is the means by which the church can accomplish its purpose.

Presbyterian polity recognizes the sovereignty of God, which makes all authority subordinate to God's authority and the object of God's judgment and grace. Clergy and lay people, women and men, have been brought into special forms of ministry through its unique concept of parity in ordination. It believes that the Holy Spirit calls persons to serve God in the church and in society, and sees its mission in these terms. It testifies to the oneness of the church through the interrelatedness of its governing bodies. While providing for liberty of conscience, there has been an orderly process for protecting that liberty while seeking the will of God together in gathered assemblies.

**THE PRACTICE OF GOVERNANCE AND THE FUTURE CHURCH**

The future of the church is in being open to God's spirit and seeking God's will. To look back is not to deny the future; to look forward is not to forget the past. The future is found in strong and active spiritual guidance. What we do, we offer only for God's glory. "Soli deo gloria."

The future of the PC(USA) is based upon the only Christian foundation for any age: "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). As the church is loyal to and proclaims the incarnate One who died for our sins and rose again for our justification, its future rests secure in the hands of God.

The framework for the effective life and ministry of the PC(USA) must continue to reflect the unity and connectedness of the church, while at the same time working around and through those human divisions for which no foreseeable human solution is apparent. Within the framework of our Reformed heritage and Presbyterian polity there are fundamentals that
must be preserved. However, we recognize we cannot be all things to all persons.

It is the conviction of this committee that the church will live in the future by certain basic principles:

- Our theology and polity must be continually subject to the principles of reformation by the Word of God, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

- The Book of Order should delineate the broad principles of Presbyterian polity, rather than requirements that turn it into a manual of operations.

- The church of the future will be as strong as the trust of its officers in the integrity of all levels of governance, as well as the trust of its members in elected leadership.

- Effective leadership in the PC(USA) must be educated and knowledgeable in Scripture, Reformed theology, church history, and Presbyterian polity. To this end, effective training programs must be prepared and offered for ministers and elders.

- The congregation is the primary base for ministry. The presbytery is the primary base for mission. Congregations and presbyteries must be empowered and enabled by our polity, not restricted by it. Other governing bodies will participate in mission and ministry as it is appropriate.

- The church of the future will be inclusive of all who trust in and follow Jesus Christ and submit to his Word; in whose presence “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28); and the church will reflect the gifts of the Holy Spirit regardless of gender, age, race, sexual orientation, or marital status.

- We are being called to be and to do; to live, act, and serve in a global community, to be informed by an ecumenical vision of a church made one in unity; to experience Christ within our body and with the Spirit wherever we are called.

The power of the church in the future rests solely in the hands of the sovereign One who has promised power through the Holy Spirit. The crucified and risen Christ is elevated by the church before the world. Jesus has invited others to join him, and to add to the church those who are being saved. As a church entering the twenty-first century, we are in danger of not knowing who we are and where we are going. In the future, we may not be the most popular church, but we can be faithful to God’s call to God’s people.
We are persuaded that the future of the PC(USA) will not be found in amendments to the Book of Order. Governance in the Reformed tradition is not a foremost adherence to a set of procedures; it is the constant struggle to be faithful to the God who called the church into being and whose spirit reforms the church when it is able to hear and respond.

The task, it seems to us, is not how to respond to a series of referrals and issue statements that result in recommended changes to the Book of Order. The task, which belongs not just to this special committee but to the church as a whole, is "How will we be born anew in God's spirit?" both for the challenges of today and tomorrow.

ENDNOTES

1. C. G. Karl Barth, Against the Stream, London: SCM Press, 1954, p. 226: "The true Church is the multitude of those who are called, called out, called together and called up by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, as the Word of God to which the Bible testifies."

2. "Sin is a radical corruption of what we are equipped and sustained to be, a turning away from God and God's interdependent commonwealth, a diminution and fragmentation of the abundant and good life that befits us. Where sin goes unrecognized, so too do the corruptions and persistently destructive tendencies of every person, community and institution." Douglas F. Ottati, "The Spirit of Reforming Protestantism," The Christian Century 109 (December 16, 1992): 1163.

3. In The Institutes, Book II, vii, 12, John Calvin discussed the "three uses" of the law. The third use was, for Calvin, the principal use. The law, he writes, is for believers "the best instrument for them to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire, and to confirm in them their understanding of it." By frequent meditation on the law, the servant of God will "be aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression." (Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, ed. John T. McNeill, vol. 20. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, pp. 360-61.) Calvin's view of the law was a contrast to Luther, for whom the chief purpose of the law was to condemn so we would know we were saved by nothing but God's grace.

4. Jack Stotts of Austin Seminary has suggested that we are not in a time of a unified Israel (Christendom), but may have returned to a time analogous to that of the Judges, when there was no centralized authority and yet somehow the tribes remained unified in their worship of the one true God. (Occasional Paper No. 2 of the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit.)

This idea has been amplified in the analysis of Walter Brueggemann that the Hebrew Scriptures reflect a monarchical, centralized, establishment view, while we are now at a place in history that may be compared to parts of the pre-monarchic time ("new church start"), or the post-exilic ("textual community"). Both of these times seem to need "strategies for survival," and either may be chaotic, unformed, diverse, and flexible. Walter Brueggemann, "Rethinking Church Models Through Scripture," Theology Today 48 (July 1991): 128-38.

5. Note this is translation other than what is in the Book of Order, G-2.0200.


\(\text{Gk. presbyteros, "elder"; presbyterion, "council" or "assembly of elders"},\) a group of (usually older) men appointed to oversee the life of a congregation. The early Christian
office of elder doubtless originated from OT and Jewish models (see, e.g., Num. 11:16–17, 24–25). In NT times, each Jewish community had its council of elders (note the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem and “the elders” at Qumran). Paul and Barnabas appointed elders “in every church” (Acts 14:23; cf. 20:17–38; 1 Pet. 5:1–4; James 5:14; Rev. 4:4). In some instances, elder and “bishop” were apparently equated (Titus 1:5–9). For reference to a council of elders (presbytery), see 1 Tim. 4:14. . . .

7. The 1992 report from the task force studying the theology and practice of ordination to the General Assembly was very helpful to the special committee. It proposed “God Service” as the biblical framework for ministry. This proposal grew out of a fresh study of the office of deacon.


Ministry is described both in quite general terms (1 Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:7: “[Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you.”]) and with a variety of more specific titles: deacon, . . . bishop, . . . elder, . . . pastor, . . . teacher, . . . evangelist, and prophet. Ministers exercising the same function may have been given different titles in various areas of the church. It is not clear what function each title included. . . . Baptism was administered, the Eucharist celebrated, and sermons preached; but the NT writings do not state which “officials” presided at these activities. Those who held office were believed to be endowed by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4–11). Their ministry was a gift from God (Rom. 12:4–6; Eph. 4:7–11). Such gifts and endowments of the Spirit were not confined to “officials,” however, and were many in type, including healing, speaking in tongues, and administration; all Christians were expected to be endowed with them and use them to benefit the whole church.

9. A clear example of how the Presbyterian church has applied this principle is in the ordination of women to the offices of minister, elder, and deacon. Until the second quarter of the twentieth century the Presbyterian church did not ordain women because it believed it was unscriptural to do so. But gradually the church saw that the guiding principle in this matter was set forth well in Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Led by the Spirit, through the orderly process of confessional amendment in presbyteries, the Presbyterian church was led to change its ordination practices. What was done early in the century was confirmed toward its end, when the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted A Brief Statement of Faith in 1991, which said simply, the Spirit “. . . calls women and men to all ministries of the Church” (Book of Confessions, 10.4). On the subject of biblical authority and the Presbyterian church, we find the following in The Re-Forming Tradition:

The church must recognize the urgent need to recover the authority of scripture as the Word of God, and it must regain its ability to interpret biblical authority in a way that will give life and meaning to Christian teaching. For American Presbyterians, there is no recourse to simple formulas of inerrancy or infallibility . . . [yet] the key to the renewal of American Presbyterianism and mainstream Protestantism is a recovery of theological insight and biblical wisdom, and it must include a reaffirmation of the Bible as the authoritative guide to Christian faith and witness. (Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks, The Re-Forming Tradition. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, pp. 282–83.


10. Massey H. Shepherd, Jr. writes in The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible that “[a] corollary of the doctrine of the priesthood of Christ is the NT application of ‘priesthood’ to the whole company of the faithful in the church.” He goes on to say, “In no instance . . . does any NT writer ascribe the title of priest to any individual member or order of ministry in the church. . . .” (Interpreter’s Dictionary, ed. by George A. Buttrick and Keith R. Crim. Vol. 3. Nashville: Abingdon, 1976, p. 890.)
12. Calvin, Institutes, IV, 1, 3, and 8 (pp. 1015 and 1022-23 of the aforementioned version).
13. “Reforming Protestantism is theocentric. Its leading affirmation is that, first and foremost, we belong to God. By this first principle, reforming piety means metanoia: not thinking about ourselves and our isolated groups but being caught up in the messianic event of Jesus Christ—the person-for-others who embodies a way of life oriented by radical devotion to God, the Word who discloses the faithful God-for-others.” Ottati, "Spirit," p. 1163.
15. Calvin scholar John T. McNeill notes that Calvinists “. . . have favoured and fought for representative government and rejected the various forms of absolutism” in both church and state.
16. McNeill, History, p. 185. See also Hunt (editor), Calvinism and the Political Order.
24. These principles were set forth by the 1797 General Assembly.
26. Dowey, pp. 214–15:

The Westminster Confession was written by a congress of Puritan clergymen of the Church of England that met in 1643 by order of the Long Parliament. Their wider task was to construct a Presbyterian church order for the entire British Isles. Parliament had agreed to this in a Solemn League and Covenant concluded with the Scottish church and nation. . . . It is remarkable that the Westminster Confession, offered as “Humble Advice” to a revolutionary Parliament in a tumultuous age, is the most patiently constructed, the most massive and intricate, of Reformed confessions—also, that it was to have its influence not in England but Scotland and, more curiously, in an America where no parliament could convene a church synod.
27. In Joan S. Gray and Joyce C. Tucker, Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers, p. xv.


32. The Re-Forming Tradition, p. 100.


34. An example of a new approach to dealing with controversial issues in the church is the paper "Sensible People," available from the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit.


   It was in the 1930's, when American self-confidence was prostrated by the Great Depression, that neo-orthodoxy entered the Presbyterian and other American churches. It came just as the rather futile fundamentalist-modernist controversy was waning, and offered a kind of middle ground on which extremists might unite. It accepted the conclusions of modern critical Biblical scholarship and acknowledged the relativity of culture and of all human values. It emphasized man's finitude and the reality of human sin, but insisted that the absolute God, by an inexplicable act of grace, makes himself known to individual human beings in a paradoxical "point of contact" by his Spirit. This action of God's grace is to be received by a "leap of faith." ... It brought a breath of new life to Christian thinking in Europe and America. In Presbyterian classrooms, pulpits, and pews it contributed to greatly deepened interest in Christian truth.


40. The Re-Forming Tradition, pp. 55, 60-63, and 279-81.

41. On this reorganization, see Loetscher, Brief History, pp. 173-80.


44. David B. McCarthy, "The Emerging Importance of Presbyterian Polity," in The Organizational Revolution, tells the story of these and other cases that illustrate the importance of polity today.