

When the Church Changes, Our Manuals Should Too: Rethinking Session Structure, Ordering for Mission, and Pastoral Relations

The Church is changing. That statement will surprise no one serving on a Session today. Congregations are navigating changing patterns of participation, fewer people willing or able to serve on standing committees, new expectations of pastoral leadership, financial pressures, aging buildings, changing neighborhoods, and ministry opportunities that would have been difficult to imagine when many of our congregational manuals were written. Yet sometimes our organizational structures have remained remarkably unchanged. We may have a committee because we have always had that committee. We may elect a particular number of ruling elders because that was the right number when the congregation was twice its present size. We may conduct an annual pastoral evaluation because an old personnel policy tells us to do so, even though neither the Session nor congregation has articulated strategic priorities against which pastoral ministry could meaningfully be evaluated.

This is where polity, social science, and practical theology meet.

The *Foundations of Presbyterian Polity* begin not with organizational charts, committees, or even Sessions, but with God and God's mission. The Church exists because it has been called into God's work in Jesus Christ. F-1.0301 describes the Church as the Body of Christ, called to be a community of faith, hope, love, and witness. The Church points beyond itself, through word and work, to God's transforming grace in Jesus Christ.

Even our ordering is theological. F-1.0203 reminds us that Christ gives the Church "its faith and life, its unity and mission, its order and discipline." It goes on to say that in the worship, service, and government of the Church, matters are to be ordered according to the Word "by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

That is a remarkably helpful principle when thinking about a Manual of Administrative Operations. Our structures are not sacred artifacts. They are tools through which the Church orders its common life for participation in Christ's mission. Reason and sound judgment also give us permission to learn from social science, organizational theory, leadership studies, conflict transformation, nonprofit governance, and other disciplines that can help us order our common life more faithfully and effectively.

The Manual as a Living Missional Document

Every Session should periodically ask whether its Manual of Administrative Operations describes the congregation that actually exists today and, more importantly, whether it equips the congregation for the ministry God is calling it to undertake tomorrow. This is more than updating old terminology to match the current *Book of Order*. Good organizational practice draws together our Presbyterian practical theology, the

constitutional responsibilities of councils, what we are learning about healthy organizations and leadership, and a congregation's locally discerned strategic direction.

A useful provision in a Session manual might therefore require an annual review of the congregation's **ordering for mission**. The Session would ask whether the congregation's committees, ministry teams, staffing relationships, policies, and leadership structures fulfill the requirements of the Constitution, provide appropriate authority and accountability, make good use of the gifts of the people, and actually support the congregation's current strategic and missional priorities.

This reflects another important Presbyterian conviction. The congregation is not an isolated religious nonprofit. F-1.0302a affirms the Church's unity in Jesus Christ. There is "one Church" because there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God. Christians share the gifts given to them for the benefit of the whole community. A local congregation therefore orders its ministry as a particular expression of the one Church and its participation in God's mission.

Right-Sizing the Session

One practical application is the Session's size. Some congregations continue trying to fill large classes of ruling elders because their manuals were written for a congregation of a very different size. The result can be vacancies, repeated recruitment of the same people, or a governing council so occupied with maintaining its own structure that little energy remains for discernment and mission.

A congregation might instead establish a range appropriate to its circumstances. For example, a manual could provide for no fewer than two ruling elders when there is an installed pastor, no fewer than three when pastoral leadership is non-installed, and no more than twelve ruling elders in active service.

The precise numbers are less important than the principle behind them. Structure should be sufficient for shared discernment, accountability, continuity, and representative leadership without creating organizational weight for its own sake. A Session should be large enough to govern faithfully and small enough to govern effectively (Note: social science shows that groups over twelve are a nightmare to govern and for governance purposes).

Ordering the Congregation for Mission

The same principle should apply to the rest of the congregation's organization. Committees, ministry teams, boards, task forces, and staff structures are means by which ministry is accomplished. They should not become ends in themselves.

An annual review of the congregation's ordering for mission gives the Session an opportunity to ask whether the structures inherited from previous generations continue to

serve the congregation's present calling. Some ministries may need to be combined. Others may need to be discontinued. New structures may need to emerge. Responsibilities required by the Constitution must continue to be fulfilled, but the organizational form used to fulfill them can often be adapted to local circumstances. This review should be connected directly to strategic planning. Structure follows mission. Once a congregation has discerned where God is calling it to focus its energy and resources, its organizational structure should help people accomplish those priorities rather than compete with them.

Recovering Pastoral Relations as Mutual Ministry

The same rethinking can help us recover the value of the **Pastoral Relations Committee**. A Pastoral Relations Committee can be understood as a standing committee of the congregation, subject to the congregation's review, rather than simply another administrative committee of the Session. Its work is relational. It cultivates healthy communication among the congregation, Session, and pastor or pastors; supports pastoral well-being; helps surface concerns before they become entrenched conflicts; and provides a trusted setting to discuss expectations.

But another function may be even more important. The PRC can facilitate an annual **Strategic Mutual Ministry Review**.

This is intentionally different from the familiar model of an annual "pastor evaluation." A pastor cannot reasonably be evaluated against goals the Session has never established. Nor should a pastor independently create a strategic direction for a congregation and then be evaluated according to whether the pastor accomplished it. The Session has responsibility for governing the congregation and guiding its witness. Pastoral leadership and the Session's ministry therefore belong to the Church's shared discernment.

The sequence should be different. The Session first discerns the congregation's mission and strategic priorities. The pastor or pastors and Session then determine together what those priorities mean for their mutual ministry. They ask what progress has been made, what has changed in the congregation or community, what priorities need to be adapted, and what each part of the church's leadership needs to do during the coming year.

The resulting goals are not simply the pastor's goals. They are **mutual ministry priorities**. The PRC can facilitate that conversation without becoming either the pastor's supervisor or a shadow Session. It can help ensure that the review occurs, encourage honest communication, and report to the congregation that its Session and pastoral leadership have undertaken the annual strategic review. In this way, the Session and pastor are jointly accountable to the congregation for intentional discernment, planning, and evaluation of their shared ministry.

From Maintaining Structure to Ordering for Mission

This may require us to change the questions we ask when reviewing our manuals. Instead of asking, "What committees are we supposed to have?" we might ask, "What functions must be accomplished, and what structure best accomplishes them here?" Instead of asking, "How many elders have we always had?" we might ask, "What size Session allows this congregation to discern and govern well?" Instead of asking, "Did the pastor meet their goals?" we might ask, "What did we discern God was calling this congregation to do, and how faithfully did the Session and pastoral leadership pursue that calling together?" Those are different questions because they begin from a different understanding of organization.

Our manuals should certainly establish authority, responsibility, process, and accountability. Good polity requires that clarity. But a Manual of Administrative Operations should do something more. It should describe how this particular expression of the Body of Christ has chosen to order its common life so that the ministry of the whole people of God may flourish.

That means our manuals should change when our ministry context changes. They should incorporate what we learn about healthy organizations, communication, conflict, governance, leadership, and strategic planning. They should remain firmly grounded in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). They should also give Sessions enough flexibility to respond faithfully to the particular communities in which God has placed them.

The goal is not organizational efficiency for its own sake. The goal is a Church ordered for mission: a community of faith, hope, love, and witness, continually discerning how its life together can point beyond itself to God's transforming grace in Jesus Christ.

Sample Amendments for a Session's Manual of Administrative Operations

The following provisions are offered as models that Sessions and congregations may adapt to their local circumstances and existing manuals.

Sample Amendment I: Composition of the Session

The Session is the council responsible for governing the congregation and guiding its witness to God's sovereign activity in the world, in accordance with the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The Session shall consist of the ruling elders elected by the congregation to active service, together with all installed pastors and associate pastors. The number of ruling elders in active service shall be determined by the congregation, upon recommendation of the Session, within the following parameters:

- a. When the congregation has an installed pastor, the Session shall include no fewer than two (2) ruling elders in active service.
- b. When the congregation does not have an installed pastor, the Session shall include no fewer than three (3) ruling elders in active service.
- c. In no circumstance shall the Session include more than twelve (12) ruling elders in active service.

The congregation may, upon recommendation of the Session, adjust the number or classes of ruling elders within these parameters as the missional, pastoral, and organizational needs of the congregation require. Such adjustments shall respect the terms of service and other requirements of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Sample Amendment II: Ordering for Mission

The congregation exists to serve the mission of Jesus Christ and the Church's calling. Its structures, committees, teams, ministries, policies, and administrative practices are therefore instruments for mission and shall not be regarded as ends in themselves. The Session shall annually review the structures and ordering of the congregation's life and ministry. This review shall determine whether the congregation's organization:

- a. Fulfills the responsibilities and functions required by the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.);
- b. Provides appropriate authority, accountability, participation, and oversight for the ministries entrusted to the congregation;
- c. Supports the congregation's current mission, strategic priorities, pastoral needs, and available human and financial resources;
- d. Makes faithful use of the gifts of members and those serving in the ordered ministries of the Church; and
- e. Strengthens the congregation's participation in the mission and unity of the whole Church.

In conducting this review, the Session shall remember that the congregation is not an isolated organization but a local expression of the one Church of Jesus Christ. The Constitution affirms that there is "one Church" because there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" and calls Christians to share the gifts God has given them for the benefit of the whole community (F-1.0302a).

Consistent with its responsibility to govern the congregation and guide its witness, the Session may establish, combine, reorganize, or discontinue committees, ministry teams, task forces, and other organizational structures as it determines necessary for mission, except where a particular structure, responsibility, or action is reserved by the Constitution to the congregation, Session, another council of the Church, trustees or corporate body, or another designated body.

Following its annual review, the Session shall make such changes within its authority as it determines appropriate and shall recommend to the congregation any changes requiring congregational action.

Sample Amendment III: Pastoral Relations Committee

1. Purpose

The Pastoral Relations Committee (PRC) shall be a standing committee of the congregation and shall be subject to the congregation's review. Its purpose is to cultivate and sustain healthy, faithful, and mutually supportive relationships among the pastor or pastors, Session, and congregation so they can participate more effectively together in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.

The PRC serves as a trusted means of communication among the congregation, pastor or pastors, and Session. It shall encourage mutual understanding, accountability, healthy pastoral relationships, and shared evaluation of the congregation's ministry and strategic priorities.

2. Responsibilities

The Pastoral Relations Committee shall:

- a. Provide a regular and trusted setting for communication among the congregation, pastor or pastors, and Session, including the sharing of concerns, hopes, expectations, opportunities, and emerging needs;
- b. Support the pastor or pastors in the exercise of pastoral leadership and assist the congregation in understanding the responsibilities, opportunities, and needs of pastoral ministry;
- c. Encourage the spiritual, vocational, and personal well-being of the pastor or pastors, including appropriate attention to continuing education, sabbath, vacation, workload, boundaries, and sustainability in ministry;
- d. Foster healthy communication and assist in addressing concerns, misunderstandings, or emerging conflict before they become destructive to the common life and mission of the congregation;
- e. Encourage mutual accountability and shared ministry among the pastor or pastors, Session, and congregation;
- f. Work with the Session and pastor or pastors to develop and conduct an annual Strategic Mutual Ministry Review;
- g. Report annually to the congregation concerning the mutual ministry and strategic review process, while maintaining appropriate confidentiality; and
- h. Refer matters involving personnel administration, allegations of misconduct, ecclesiastical discipline, or matters requiring formal ecclesiastical action to the appropriate council, committee, presbytery, or civil authority.

3. Strategic Mutual Ministry Review

The PRC shall facilitate an annual Strategic Mutual Ministry Review between the Session and pastor or pastors. The purpose of the review is not principally to evaluate the individual performance of the pastor, but to evaluate the shared ministry of the Session and pastoral leadership in relation to the congregation's mission, strategic plan, and priorities.

The Session is responsible for discerning and establishing the congregation's mission and strategic priorities within the responsibilities entrusted to it by the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Accordingly, pastoral goals and priorities shall arise from and support the mission and strategic priorities the Session establishes. A pastor shall not independently establish ministry goals apart from the Session's discernment and direction for the congregation's ministry.

As part of the annual review, the Session and pastor or pastors shall together:

- a. Review the congregation's mission, strategic plan, and current ministry priorities;
- b. Evaluate progress toward previously established priorities;
- c. Identify changes in the congregation, community, or ministry context that may require adaptation of the strategic plan;
- d. Establish mutual ministry priorities for the coming year;
- e. Clarify the respective responsibilities of the Session, pastor or pastors, staff, and other ministries in advancing those priorities; and
- f. Identify resources, support, development, or organizational changes necessary for the congregation to pursue its mission faithfully and effectively.

The resulting priorities shall constitute mutual ministry priorities, reflecting the shared responsibility of the Session and pastor or pastors for the congregation's mission rather than functioning solely as individual performance goals for the pastor.

4. Accountability to the Congregation

Because the PRC is a standing committee of the congregation, it shall be accountable to and subject to the review of the congregation.

The Session and pastor or pastors are likewise accountable for their respective responsibilities in carrying out the congregation's mission and strategic priorities. The annual Strategic Mutual Ministry Review provides a regular means for the congregation to be assured that its pastoral leadership and Session are engaging together in strategic discernment, evaluation, and planning.

The PRC shall make an annual report to the congregation concerning the completion of the Strategic Mutual Ministry Review, the general strategic priorities identified through that process, and other matters appropriate for congregational awareness. The report shall not include matters involving pastoral confidences, personnel information, individual concerns, or other confidential matters.

5. Membership

The PRC shall consist of the pastor or pastors and members of the congregation elected by the congregation in the manner established by the Manual of Administrative Operations. Members should represent the breadth of the congregation and should be persons recognized for Christian maturity, trustworthiness, discretion, ability to listen, respect for differing perspectives, and capacity to assist in reconciliation and constructive communication.

The Session and PRC shall maintain regular communication, but the PRC shall not be construed as a committee of the Session. Its relationship with the Session is collaborative, particularly in facilitating the Strategic Mutual Ministry Review.

6. Meetings and Confidentiality

The PRC shall meet regularly, ordinarily at least quarterly, and additionally as circumstances require. Members shall exercise appropriate confidentiality and discretion, so the committee remains a trusted setting for candid and constructive communication. Confidentiality shall not prevent the committee from fulfilling reporting requirements, referring matters requiring action to the appropriate council or authority, complying with civil or ecclesiastical reporting obligations, or taking appropriate action when the safety or well-being of persons is at issue.

7. Limits of Authority

The PRC is relational, advisory, and facilitative. It does not exercise the constitutional authority entrusted to the Session, congregation, presbytery, or another council of the Church; supervise the pastor or pastors; administer ecclesiastical discipline; or exercise personnel authority unless the appropriate body has otherwise assigned it a particular responsibility.

Its particular responsibility is to strengthen the relationships necessary for faithful mutual ministry and to ensure that the Session and pastor or pastors engage in a regular process of strategic review, shared priority-setting, and accountability to the congregation.

Rationale for the Proposed Amendments

These proposed amendments share a common principle: **the congregation's structures should support its participation in Christ's mission.**

Right-sizing the Session permits congregations to maintain meaningful shared governance without requiring organizational structures developed for a different era or congregational size. An annual "Ordering for Mission" review asks the Session to examine whether the congregation's actual organization continues to fulfill constitutional responsibilities while serving its locally discerned mission and strategic priorities.

The Pastoral Relations Committee completes the framework by creating a congregational structure for healthy relationships and mutual accountability. Through the annual Strategic

Mutual Ministry Review, the Session and pastor or pastors evaluate their shared ministry against the congregation's strategic priorities. This shifts pastoral evaluation from an isolated assessment of an individual pastor to a Reformed understanding of ministry as shared, accountable, and ordered toward the Church's mission.

Together, these provisions encourage congregations to regard their Manuals of Administrative Operations not simply as repositories of rules inherited from the past, but as living instruments of practical theology. They provide constitutional clarity while allowing structures to adapt as congregations, communities, and opportunities for mission change.

*Rev. Christian D. Boyd, DLitt, DMin, MBA
Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of Milwaukee
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*