

“To Guide, Control, and Nurture”

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As many of you are aware, our previous General Assembly in 2022 approved a new “D” section of the Book of Order, now renamed the Church Discipline section. This received the concurrence of the presbyteries and entered the Book of Order with the 2023-2025 edition.

This past weekend, PJC members from throughout the Synod had the opportunity to be introduced to the new Church Discipline section in a workshop given by the Rev. Greg Goodwiller whose work includes membership on the committee that developed the new Church Discipline section and service on the Advisory Committee on the Constitution.

The Church Discipline section still begins with the sentence:

The power that Jesus Christ has vested in his Church, a power manifested in the exercise of church discipline, is one for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing.

The rewrite also adds additional emphasis to two other judicial concepts which have been present but not as prominent as in the past.

The first is “conciliate and mediate.” As the introductory section says, “The traditional biblical obligation to conciliate, mediate, and adjust differences without strife is not diminished by church discipline.” (D-1.04) The judicial process is a tool, but it is not the only tool and there is a biblical obligation to work things out between parties.

The second is “Accountability.” The next section (D-2.01 - 2.03) discusses how the process prompts accountability - the accountability of councils (sessions, presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly) through the remedial process and the accountability of individuals through the disciplinary process.

Overall, the details of the various judicial processes have not changed much in the new Church Discipline sections. The revision attempted to do three things. First, to reorganize the previous sections into the two clear divisions of remedial and disciplinary process. This included repeating information, as necessary, that is the same in the two processes. The second is to incorporate into the new text additional points and clarifications that have been determined by authoritative interpretations of the General Assembly or in previous General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission decisions. And finally, there are many places where sections were revised to be clearer and contain improved definitions of items which through experience there may have been confusion in the past. And there are some technology updates regarding the use of technology for communication and meetings.

I would highlight two particular details of the new Church Discipline which might have more direct implications for those of you who have gotten this far in my discussion.

You might be familiar that in reviewing complaints and accusations there have been four tests of a complaint. Briefly, does the complainant have standing to file it? Is it filed in a timely manner? Is it filed with the council that has jurisdiction? And does it present a claim upon which relief can be granted? There is now a fifth question that needs to be answered in the affirmative for the complaint to be received: "The complaint alleges facts that if proved true would constitute an irregularity or delinquency." (D-4.0501a)

The second item is interesting because it is not contained in the Church Discipline section but results from the disciplinary process contained in it. The Form of Government now includes another possible item of business for a congregational meeting (G-1.0504g) "receiving a disciplinary decision against a member of the congregation as required by D-9.0102."

Those attending the workshop got good training in the new Church Discipline section and even the opportunity to put into practice some of the review details contained within it.

If there are any questions about the new section I would do my best to answer them or help you find the answer. During the training we even had the point where Rev. Goodwiller received a question that he had to look up and return with the answer after a break. He acknowledged that at points our judicial process is complicated and sometimes deals with questions that can be murky and far from clearcut. But it is a process still ever being reformed much as all of our polity documents are.