



Centreville Presbyterian Church

Presbyterian Church (USA) Polity 101 White
Paper

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A Brief Overview of the Government of the PC(USA)

For those of you who are not familiar with Presbyterian Church polity, Centreville Presbyterian Church (CPC) is encouraging you to take a few moments to review this basic information regarding our governing structure.

Our congregation is part of the Presbyterian Church (USA), or PC(USA), which has a membership of approximately 1.8 million members within about 10,000 churches¹. PC(USA) is governed under a constitution that consists of our Book of Confessions and our Book of Order. **The Book of Confessions** is made up of eleven confessional documents that declare the beliefs of the PC(USA). **The Book of Order** gives description and rationale for the organization and function of the PC(USA) at all levels.

Our denomination has a representative form of government, with varying levels of government and administration comprised of representatives, similar to that of the United States government. This form of government is different than other churches. Some, like the Methodist church, are hierarchical, with governance administered through a hierarchy of bishops. Others, like Baptist, are Congregationalist, with each local church governing itself independently, allowing all decisions to be voted on by the congregation.

PC(USA) has four levels of government as outlined below.

The session is the governing body of each particular Church. It is comprised of the pastors of the church and elders elected by the church's congregation. CPC's session meets the third Tuesday of every month and as called for special session. The session receives new members into the church, conducts judicial cases, and ordains and installs elders and deacons. CPC's session is made up of its two pastors ("Teaching elders") and twelve elders ("Ruling elders") each serving three-year terms. The elders listen to the opinions, suggestions, and ideas of the congregation and are responsible for discerning the leading of the Holy Spirit in governing the church.

The presbytery (there are 173 presbyteries) consists of all the churches and ministers of the Word and Sacrament within a certain geographical area. Each church in the presbytery is represented by elders commissioned by the session. The presbytery ordains, dismisses, installs, and removes ministers, and establishes and dissolves congregations. CPC is part of the National Capital Presbytery, which is made up of 110 PC(USA) churches in the DC, Maryland, and Northern VA area², and normally meets six times a year (January, March, May, June, September and November).

Synod (there are 16 synods) is the intermediate governmental unit responsible for the mission of the church throughout its region. It is composed of commissioners elected by the Presbyteries in its region, and meets at least biannually.

The General Assembly (GA) is the highest governing body of our denomination. The GA meets every other year (e.g. 2014) and consists of commissioners elected by presbyteries. The GA can make changes to the polity and governance of PC(USA) in two ways: Authoritative Interpretations and Amending the Constitution.

Authoritative Interpretations of our constitution carry the authority of the GA and are binding on the governing bodies of the church. Authoritative interpretations are made by the GA or through a decision of the Permanent Judicial Commission of the GA. The most recent interpretation of a provision of the Book of Order shall be binding. Authoritative Interpretations are effective immediately.

Amending the Constitution through amendments to the Book of Confessions or the Book of Order must be approved by the General Assembly. Proposed amendments are submitted by the Presbyteries and reviewed and (potentially) brought forward to the GA by GA committees before being voted upon. Once passed at the GA, they must go back to the presbyteries and be voted on. Amendments to the Book of Confessions become effective if two-thirds of the presbyteries approve, while proposed amendments to the Book of Order become effective when they receive a majority vote from the presbyteries.³ This process typically takes about a year after GA has met to be completed.

¹ See <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/2012-summaries-statistics-comparative-summaries/>

² <http://www.thepresbytery.org/churches/>

³ Presbyterian Coalition's 'Brief Overview of the Government of the PCUSA at www.presbycoalition.org