

What Has Changed?

One of the major changes that has taken place over the summer in our denomination has been the passage of the new Form of Government (nFOG). This change to part of our constitution could have some very positive benefits for our presbytery.

The previous Form of Government had shifted away from being a constitution with general principles and values to more of a manual of operations that added specific rules for what could and could not be done. If one church or presbytery had a bad experience with one situation, they would take an overture to the next General Assembly to get the rules changed so that this could never happen again. As a result, we ended up with a lot of individual answers that were applied to the entire denomination, when the entire denomination didn't need those individual answers. That answer was really needed in that congregation or that presbytery, but the rest of us had to live with their new prohibitions. What is needed in the northeast or the south is often not the same thing that is needed out here on the west coast. In terms of policies and procedures (not theology), one size does not fit all. But, the Book of Order began to prohibit all of us from doing things, when the prohibition may have only been needed for some of us.

The good news is that much of the regulatory nature of our constitution has now been removed. Many of the obstacles that were getting in the way and making ministry more difficult have now been eliminated from our constitution. Presbyteries and congregations are still free to maintain these rules in their own manuals of operation, if it makes sense for them to do so. But, now the rest of us do not have to be hamstrung by someone else's rules.

This moves us from a "manual of operations" style of constitution to more of an "enabling" style of constitution. It moves us away from a lot of specifics for day to day operations and more into general principles that we need to abide by. This could push us back more into our Reformed roots for conversations about what our covenant is. What are we willing to covenant about with one another? What kind of covenant would we agree to? How do we achieve accountability and maintain proper ethical standards and behaviors without being micro-managers?

What will this change mean for us?

Changing to the new Form of Government means that we have moved from a permission-withholding document to a permission-giving document. Instead of the first, initial, knee jerk answer to every question being, "No, we can't do that" or "No, the Book of Order won't let us do that", the first response now becomes "Let's talk about it. Maybe that would be a good idea." It moves us from governance as a "leash" that is holding us back to governance as a catalyst, encouraging us to venture out into new forms of ministry. It moves us from unity as top-down uniformity to a more collegial unity that must be centered in Jesus Christ.

Under the new Form of Government, the key questions change. The old question was usually "Does the Book of Order allow us to do this?", and the answer was often "no". However, since the Form of Government is now silent on many day-to-day issues, the question changes to "Is this a good idea? Does this make sense? Is God leading us to consider this? Will this help us participate more fully in the mission of God in our community?"

In some congregations and presbyteries, the old Form of Government was used as an excuse to say no to new, creative, and innovative ideas. But, by returning to a constitution with general principles and values, the new Form of Government might actually open the door for some new imagination. It supports the emphasis in our presbytery to encourage missional experimentation. It encourages us to pray together, to read scripture together, to ask questions and have conversations together to discern how God might be leading us forward into the future. This is a good thing.

In recent years, we have become lazy. Whenever an entrepreneurial idea was raised, people would often respond by saying, “The Book of Order doesn’t allow that”, without much prayer and conversation about whether this might be the leading of God’s Holy Spirit. The new Form of Government eliminates our excuse to be lazy. Instead of using the Book of Order as an excuse not to try new forms of ministry, we will actually have to have conversations about the merits of the new proposals and pray together to discern if God is wanting us to launch a new pilot project.

Now, some people think that the new Form of Government will make us more missional. This is not true. A document, a new polity, will not force us to move back into our neighborhoods or require us to join with what the Spirit is doing there. Only actively engaging with our communities will make us more missional.

Not every presbytery will experience the benefits of the nFOG. A presbytery that has a regulatory, permission-withholding culture, will continue to read that attitude into it, and may not see any positive change. Our deepest needs are not polity change or structure change but culture change.

The new Form of Government was written to provide us with more flexibility in our methods of ministry. This could result in the pursuit of new possibilities that begin to emerge. We need to be ready to act on the opportunities that are surfacing. We need to be ready to move with the Spirit of God, whom our Reformed theology teaches us, never acts in contradiction to the written Word of God.

I don’t know if the nFOG will be good for every presbytery. But, I believe it will be good for ours. Allowing people to dream and imagine and experiment with new ministry methods is a good thing. Who knows? Maybe God will use this to remove some barriers to joining in the work of Christ’s Holy Spirit in our neighborhoods.