

September 1, 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

My name is Carol Hunley and I am a ruling elder at Southminster Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I am writing to you in my capacity as a member of the new Form of Government (nFOG) Task Force that was reconstituted last year at the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (GA). I would like to share a few thoughts, perhaps even a few “ahas,” with you as fellow ruling elders regarding my work on the task force.

First, I would like to summarize my background so that you understand the lens through which I have been viewing this work.

I am a lifelong Presbyterian and attend the same congregation where I was confirmed. I have served this congregation as teacher, deacon, elder, and member/leadership on numerous committees. Three years ago, I was called to serve on Pittsburgh Presbytery’s council; last year, as chair of council, I represented Pittsburgh Presbytery as a commissioner to GA, serving on the committee tasked with assessing the recommended revisions to FOG (I know, unfortunate acronym!).

As a mother of three with a career that takes more of my time than I would like, I confess that it has only been through the GA committee and now the nFOG task force that I have taken time to truly study and understand our church polity. My understanding previously had been formed by studying the individual section of the *Book of Order* that pertained to my need at a point in time. I feel that I may not be alone in this and I am hopeful that this letter may be of benefit to others in this category. To be fully transparent, I am also hopeful to be able to gain support for, or at least a better understanding of, some of the changes being proposed by nFOG.

While I have attended many presbytery meetings and have long understood that presbyters were comprised of equal numbers of pastors and elders, it has only been through my work on nFOG that it has sunk in that our Constitution calls for parity between ministers and elders in the leadership of our church at all levels. This is clearer in the revised FOG in the use of the terms teaching elders (aka ministers of the Word and Sacrament) and ruling elders. This is consistent with the Greek derivation of the word presbyter, meaning elder. I feel that we need to do a better job as ruling elders of accepting accountability for the leadership role we have agreed to in our ordination vows, not only in our congregations, but in our church.

Pittsburgh Presbytery is unique in that we have almost 150 congregations with over 43,000 members within our boundaries, encompassing a single county in Southwestern PA. Therefore, I dare say that some of the prescriptive rules contained in the current FOG have not presented the same challenge to us as has been experienced in some of our sister presbyteries. During this past year, I have come to understand some of the challenges that exist within our 173 presbyteries and over 10,000 congregations, fifty percent of which

have 100 members or less. It is difficult to form prescribed committees at the presbytery or synod level, for example, where geographies would require an overnight stay for members to attend meetings.

The nFOG lifts up the same constitutional standards that currently exist, but it eliminates many regulatory requirements for structures or procedures that do not fit all contexts within our church. For example, there is no requirement for committees called Committee on Preparation for Ministry or Committee on Representation. The functions described in the current FOG for these committees, however, are just as important as ever and must be fulfilled by governing bodies, referred to as councils in nFOG (sessions, presbyteries, synods, and GA) within their context through whatever structure might work best for them.

I am a banker and not a theologian or an expert on ecclesiology, and therefore I am not the best member of the task force to make a convincing argument that the nFOG reinforces our Reformed theology and allows for a more missional ecclesiology. My simplistic view of our work, however, is that this polity allows the church to *be* the church and teach the Word and spread the love of our Lord and Savior without worrying about meeting detailed operational requirements that have been amended, and then amended again to the point where there are those in the church that can not meet them.

The task force made a concerted effort to fulfill its charge from GA of encouraging participation throughout the church in responding to our work. We engaged in listening through electronic media (nFOG Web page, Facebook page) and in-person meetings with numerous congregations, councils, denomination-sponsored gatherings, and other entities. The final version has taken into consideration feedback received in many forms from over 100 sessions, presbyteries, synods, entities, and individuals.

I have been personally disappointed at the level of mistrust that exists within our church, as evidenced by some of the feedback we have received. This work is *not* an effort to “water down” our polity or to in any way de-emphasize our commitment to standards such as inclusion and diversity. Rather, we feel that the nFOG strengthens the church’s commitment to our standards, including inclusiveness and diversity. We do not specify system-wide structures; instead, we empower councils to carry out this constitutional mandate in a way that is locally effective. We should trust each other to be accountable to uphold our standards! If not, no document can create that trust or accountability.

The final revision of the Form of Government is now available on the nFOG Web site (www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment). I encourage you to read it and understand the change it represents. I am hopeful that there will be many more ruling elders who have aha moments when understanding this work and realize the positive change that it could represent in terms of our working together to *be* the church.

I am humbled and honored to serve with my fellow members of the nFOG task force. They are all faithful servants and I think they have served you, as members of our church leadership, well.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to read our work and if you have a minute – visit us on Facebook (yet another learning for me during my time on this task force was learning how to get on Facebook!).

In Christ's name,
Carol Hunley