

LESSON ONE: What is Polity?

POLITY is how a church is governed and includes a structure and a system of rules.

WHY DO WE NEED POLITY? While we are all guided by Jesus Christ who set up the spiritual church, the practicing church is made up of humans in need of guidelines and organizational structure.

There are THREE kinds of polity practiced in the Christian church.

1. **CONGREGATIONAL POLITY** – “Direct government of the church by the people who make up the congregation. . . . Each local church is autonomous” and does not require the approval of a higher body to tell anyone what to believe or how to believe it. Examples of churches with Congregational Polity include Baptists, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and various Pentecostal and non-denominational churches.
2. **EPISCOPAL POLITY** – “Power is lodged in the highest ranking bishop and is delegated downward through the clergy. . . . Various rankings of clergy are also a facet of the episcopal system,” i.e. Bishops ordain clergy. “Episcopal polity places a strong emphasis on the unity of the church. . . . Individual congregations are not independent entities but rather parts of an indivisible whole: the body of Christ.” Examples of churches practicing Episcopal polity include the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Methodists, Anglicans (Episcopal Church), and Wesleyans.
3. **PRESBYTERIAN POLITY** – “Each of our congregations is governed by a group of presbyters [from Greek word *presbuteros* meaning elder] elected by the congregation and known as the session.” Polity is based on scriptural direction which is studied and then voted on before it is written into *The Book of Order*. “There is no hierarchy of presbyters in the Presbyterian church; ministers of the Word and elders differ only in the function they are called to perform.” In governing bodies they function as equals.

From scripture, we also learn and apply the understanding that “power within the church is to be exercised by groups of officers rather than individuals. . . . We believe that the Holy Spirit speaks most clearly on matters of government through the prayerful deliberations of groups of presbyters. . . . Presbyterian polity holds that groups are less likely to fall into error than is an individual.”

POINTS TO PONDER

1. *What are some benefits to Presbyterian polity?*
2. *If you were asked how the Presbyterian Church differs from other churches in terms of church government, how would you answer?*
3. *Who is the head of your church?*

LESSON TWO: Fundamentals of Presbyterian Polity

PRESBYTERIAN POLITY (3 CHARACTERISTICS)

1. **REPRESENTATIVE** – The PCUSA is governed by groups of people (presbyters) elected by the people. “Officers elected by congregations or governing bodies to represent them in higher governing bodies cannot be told how to vote.” If they are “representatives,” so to speak, why can they not be told how to vote? In *The Book of Order*, G-1.0100, we read that “*it belongs to Christ alone to rule, to teach, to call, and to use the church as he wills, exercising his authority by the ministry of women and men for the establishment and extension of his Kingdom.*”

Rather than solely “representatives” who listen to the voice of the people, officers are asked to listen for God’s voice through the church and are therefore called **commissioners**. They are independent decision makers who can not be bound to vote with the voices of those who have elected them. They are to listen for the voice of God above all other voices.

Delegates may be instructed beforehand and are then obligated to act in accordance with their instructions. In all things, officers are responsible to Christ.

2. **CONSTITUTIONAL** – The PCUSA has a Constitution which seeks to put our beliefs and polity into writing. The Constitution includes creeds, confessions, and catechisms that proclaim the Reformed faith of our church. While these guide us, giving voice to the history of the church and telling the stories of Christians who preceded us in the faith, they do not detract from the authority that the church gives to scripture. When the congregation elects the officers of the church, they elect them to lead them using the guidelines and boundaries spelled out in the Constitution of the church.

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) is made up of *The Book of Confessions* (the faith of our polity), and *The Book of Order* (the workings of our polity).

3. **RELATIONAL** – The PCUSA polity is rooted in the understanding that the church is united – this understanding of the unity of the WHOLE church is called the **church universal**. This is based upon Ephesians 4:5-6 which reminds us that all Christians have “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.” We also recognize our relatedness using the metaphor presented in I Corinthians 12 that we are many members but one body . . . the body of Christ.

The PCUSA attempts to live out this understanding of the larger church by joining with other denominations to accomplish God’s work whenever we can. Within our own denomination, we practice the relational aspects of unity by sharing beliefs and polity. Further, we acknowledge that there is no “individual” church, but that we are rather in relationship with other churches and with the higher governing bodies who also call upon us to share in the work of the church.

All quotations are taken from Gray, Joan S. and Joyce C. Tucker, Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers, John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1999.

The structure of the church is set up so that we are always in relationship with more churches, the larger body of Christ. Congregations are in relationship with a presbytery which is related to other presbyteries through a synod which is related to other synods through the General Assembly (GA). Changes in the way our relational church works are brought about by the **overture process** in which a presbytery may send a proposal (overture) to General Assembly for consideration. Elder commissioners to General Assembly (meeting every two years) are made up of equal clergy and lay representation.

Thus, when an action occurs by a governing body, it affects the whole church, showing us to be united. When a presbytery examines a minister for ordination, they do so for the whole denomination. When a session examines officers for ordination, they do so for the whole church.

POINTS TO PONDER

- 1. Consider the following scenario. Your church sends you as a commissioner to a meeting of Central Florida Presbytery and you are asked to vote on an issue that you know your church is divided on. How will you decide how to vote?*
- 2. How will you use the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) as an officer?*
- 3. If you are an officer in your specific church, will you have to be re-ordained to serve as an officer at a different PCUSA church in the future?*

LESSON THREE: Where Does the Power of the PCUSA Come From?

Any power exercised by any governing body of the church comes from Jesus Christ, the head of the Church. All rules set down by governing bodies are to be based on the will of God as revealed through the scriptures.

It is always established that the leaders of the church are spiritual leaders before all else.

The power of the church operates not to punish, but to demonstrate loving concern. "No civil penalties can be sought for religious wrongdoing."

The particular powers of a governing body are spelled out in the Book of Order (See G-9.0102).

POINTS TO PONDER

- 1. As an officer you will have the opportunity to vote on amendments that will govern the church in the future. What will you do to help you to discern God's will before you make these decisions?*
- 2. What does it mean to be a "spiritual leader" in the PCUSA?*