

Rules and Tips for Presbytery Meeting Commissioners

One of the hallmarks of Presbyterian polity is that the church is governed by presbyters (i.e., ruling elders and teaching elders) who come together in councils (i.e., sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly). The presbytery is a council serving as a corporate expression of the church within a particular district. The presbytery governs and makes decisions at meetings attended by commissioners, i.e., teaching elders and ruling elders. Commissioners are the body of Christ trying to discern God's will and carry out God's business for National Capital Presbytery. They are not at a presbytery meeting to reflect the will of their church or their session. As stated in the Book of Order, F-3.0204, "Presbyters are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ."

I. Who Attends Presbytery Meetings?

All teaching elders who are members of National Capital Presbytery are entitled to voice and vote at presbytery meetings. In addition, the Book of Order requires presbyteries to adopt a plan and communicate it to sessions for determining how many ruling elder commissioners each session is entitled to send to presbytery meetings. NCP has adopted such a plan. Under the plan, each year after all of the statistical reports for the prior year have been completed and verified, a formula is applied that determines the number of ruling elder commissioners for each church. This information is conveyed to the clerk of session of each church, generally in April. These ruling elder commissioners have voice and vote at presbytery meetings.

Also, under the NCP plan, ruling elders who are the moderator or vice-moderator of presbytery, or who are either chairpersons of presbytery or Leadership Council committees, or who are a presbytery officer, or who are serving in an "exempt" staff position, or who are Certified Christian Educators or Associate Certified Christian Educators have voice and vote at presbytery meetings.

Finally, there are other people, who are not commissioners, who may attend. Presbytery staff not entitled to vote, guest speakers, and interested observers are often present at the meetings.

II. When and Where Are Presbytery Meetings? And What is Open Space

There are six stated presbytery meetings each year, normally on the fourth Tuesday in January, March, May, June, and September, and the third Tuesday in November. The meeting itself generally starts at 6:00 p.m.; but Open Space begins at 4:00 p.m. Sometimes there are also called meetings to deal with particular business. Most meetings are held at National Presbyterian Church.

Open Space is a relatively new initiative that is becoming increasingly popular. The goal of NCP Open Space is to provide time and space for presbyters to network and share ideas, build relationships, and launch new mission initiatives or partnerships arising from their own passion and leadership. Presbyters come at 4:00 and have a choice among several offerings—such as the Middle East, leadership, mission, the environment, clerk training, bridging the conservative/liberal gap among churches—and they can go and come as they please to the sessions. Information on Open Space is available on the NCP website at: <http://www.thepresbytery.org/home/presbytery-meeting/ncp-open-space/>. Information is available

on specific Open Space offerings at: <http://www.thepresbytery.org/home/presbytery-meeting/open-space-topics/>. The closer the date to the meeting, the more topics will be listed.

III. The Docket, the Packet, and How Business Gets to the Presbytery Floor

Every presbytery meeting has a “docket,” a list of business items, such as motions, that will be handled at the meeting and that includes information on the worship that will be a part of the meeting. The docket is formulated by a committee, Worship & Theology, which is under the direction of the Leadership Council. W&T assembles business items it has received, usually from the Leadership Council or another committee of Presbytery, locates speakers and worship leaders, arranges for music, and attends to other meeting details. Reports and sometimes appendices are also assembled and together with the docket are compiled into the “packet.” If a Session or a special group wants to get on the docket, call the Stated Clerk at 240.514.5352.

Although the general outlines of business to be handled at a particular meeting are often known a month or more in advance, the actual wording of all motions and reports must be submitted to Janet Biermann, Assistant to the Stated Clerk, 15 days prior to the presbytery meeting. The various pieces are all assembled into a finished packet, which is posted on the NCP website at least ten days prior to the presbytery meeting.

Next, the Communications Director, LaJuan Quander, sends out an email to all Teaching Elders and Clerks of Session telling them that the packet is available. Clerks of Session should make sure their ruling elder commissioners know when the packet is posted. Commissioners are expected to go on the website to register for the meeting and, if they wish, order a meal. Commissioners should also read the docket and the accompanying material prior to coming to the meeting. Commissioners can print the documents if they wish or just read them on line. Wireless access is available at National Presbyterian Church.

IV. Who is Up Front at Meetings?

The Moderator or Vice-Moderator will always be presiding over the Presbytery meeting—to ensure fairness and to lead the meeting. The Stated Clerk will always be next to the Moderator or Vice-Moderator—to provide parliamentary and meeting guidance to the Moderator. The Minute Clerk sits next to the Stated Clerk—to keep the running minutes, refer to documents, and keep time.

V. Standard “Floor of Presbytery” Process: Concerning an Item of Business and Some Simple Parliamentary Guidelines.

N.B.: to say anything on the floor of presbytery, you must go to a microphone and be recognized by the moderator.

Main/Original Motions

- The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) designates Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised, as the parliamentary authority to be used in governing body meetings.
- All business of presbytery is started by placing a main motion on the floor.
- There can be only one main motion on the floor at any given time, and that motion must be disposed of permanently or temporarily before another main motion can be before presbytery.

- An original motion for an item of business is typically made by a committee chair or less frequently by a commissioner from a church.
- Motions from committee chairs do not need to be seconded; otherwise an original motion needs a second if it is introducing business.
- The commissioner making the motion cannot speak to the motion until it is seconded.
- The Moderator calls for debate, with the motion maker speaking first.
- Commissioners then debate or can ask questions about the motion.

While at the Microphone

- All debate remarks are addressed to the Moderator only, not to another commissioner.
- Debate is conducted by alternating between speakers for/against the motion, under the direction of the Moderator.
- To speak, go to a microphone and, when called upon by the Moderator, first state your name and church—e.g., “John Doe, Elder Commissioner, Anywhere Church” and then whether you are speaking for or against the motion.
- While lining up at the microphone, be sensitive to speakers who simply have clarifying questions vs. wanting to debate. Sometimes a question clears up a debate point very quickly.
- The maker of the motion has the option to be the last to speak.
- Debate is sometimes regulated by time/procedural rules. For example, debate may be limited to two or three minutes per speaker. Or an item of business may have a time limit due to the docket timing.

Amendments

- Amendments can be a key part of the debate process.
- To make a motion to amend, simply rise, be recognized, and state your name and church and then say “Mr. /Madam Moderator, I have an amendment.” The Moderator will ask you to read your amendment and will then call for a second. An amendment can also be made to an amendment.
- When there has been a motion to amend, debate on the main motion stops temporarily and presbytery will then debate the amendment.
- You must put your amendment in writing and get it to the stated clerk during the amendment debate. If you know you will have an amendment prior to the meeting, call the stated clerk’s office. Typically PowerPoint screen projections of the amendment can be made in advance—which helps all commissioners to understand the amendment.

Substitute Motions

- These get tricky. A substitute motion seeks to replace the motion on the floor with a substitute. If you think you want to make a substitute motion and know that prior to the meeting, call the stated clerk’s office for guidance.
- If during the debate on the main motion you want to move a substitute motion, when the Moderator recognizes you, move your substitute. The Moderator will seek a second and

then explain the substitute motion process to the commissioners. Make sure a written copy of the substitute motion gets to the stated clerk quickly.

- The issue the presbytery will be debating is “shall the substitute motion become the main motion.”
- History shows that substitute motions can be confusing. Ask questions from the floor if you are unclear about what you are voting on!

Other Motions

- Motions to refer/commit/postpone, etc., are also in order during debate. In all, there are about 82 possible motions a commissioner could make! If you want to do something and do not understand the official process, simply seek to be recognized by the Moderator and, once recognized, ask about how you can best accomplish your objective. Or check with the stated clerk beforehand.

Ending Debate

- Debate will end in one of three ways:
 - The Moderator sees that no other commissioners wish to speak.
 - Time has expired on the piece of business and time has not been extended.
 - The question has been “called.”
- When the time allotted has expired on an item of business, the Moderator will indicate that fact to commissioners. Commissioners can then choose to extend for a particular number of minutes or not. Debate ends if time is not extended.
- At any point during debate, a commissioner can rise and after being recognized and stating name/church can say “Mr/Madam Moderator, I move the previous question” or “I call the question.”
- The Moderator has the right to not entertain the motion to end debate, and may exercise that option if others are still seeking to debate and the time allotted has not expired.
- The motion to move the previous question must be seconded. There is no debate on the motion, and it takes a 2/3 majority to approve ending debate.

Voting

- Voting is generally done by voice vote first. Depending on the motion a majority or 2/3 of those voting will be required.
- If the voice vote is inconclusive, either the Moderator or a commissioner can call for “division.”
- If division occurs, the Moderator will appoint tellers to tally hand votes.
- In some cases, a written ballot will be held. This is usually decided on by the Leadership Council prior to a presbytery meeting, although any commissioner can make a motion for a written ballot process.

Last Thoughts..

- Remember...we are the Body of Christ trying to work together to glorify God and to undertake God’s work for National Capital Presbytery. We don’t serve Robert and his rules.

We serve an awesome God and God's rule of love. Don't let process get in the way of listening to each other and having an honest debate to discern what God wants us to do for our presbytery!