

# **Handbook for Clerks of Session**

**Compiled by Staff, Office of the Stated Clerk  
Presbyterian Church in America**



## Foreword

Welcome to the office of the Clerk of Session. You have joined an important group of Elders in the Presbyterian Church in America. As the Clerk of Session, you hold an important position in your church - to strive to maintain the peace and purity of the church. The records you keep will provide an accurate account of the actions of your Session in maintaining the spiritual government of the Church.

As clerk, you will record the history of your church as you write the Session minutes. Your minutes will enable future generations to learn what your church did to carry out the motto of the Presbyterian Church in America: *Faithful to the Scriptures, True to the Reformed Faith, and Obedient to the Great Commission.*

This handbook has been prepared to assist you in keeping the Presbyterian tradition of doing all things “decently and in order.” It contains basic information about your tasks, along with examples to aid you in carrying out your work.

The Handbook does not have constitutional authority, but it does point you to sections of the *The Book of Church Order (BCO)* that are relevant to your duties. Material has been drawn from *BCO*, the Handbook for Presbytery Clerks, and handbooks from other Presbyterian and Reformed denominations.

Please don't hesitate to call us at the Office of the Stated Clerk if you have questions. We are here to help!

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## THE CLERK OF SESSION

*The Book of Church Order (BCO)* requires that every court of the PCA have a moderator and a clerk. By his office, the Pastor serves as the moderator of the Session. The clerks of presbytery and General Assembly are called Stated Clerks. Clerks serving a Session are called Clerks of Session. The Elder elected as clerk should understand the responsibilities and duties of the Session, have knowledge of Presbyterian Church government, and be willing to learn basic parliamentary procedure.

The *BCO* outlines the duties of clerks as follows: “It is the duty of the clerk, besides the recording of transactions, to preserve the records carefully, and to grant extracts from them whenever properly required” (10-4). The Session will often look to you, as Clerk of Session, for direction in the interpretation and application of the *BCO* in matters related to procedure. You may face situations where you are unsure how to answer. In such cases, the Stated Clerk of your Presbytery or the Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly can be an invaluable resource.

As you go about your duties, writing the minutes of each meeting, you will record much of the history of your church. Future generations will be able to learn how your generation advanced God’s kingdom to the ends of the earth.

### Clerk’s Responsibilities at a Glance

- Keep a complete and accurate record of the proceedings of the Session.
- Provide extracts from the minutes whenever properly requested and approved by the Session.
- Keep an accurate and complete roll of the Communicant and non-Communicant membership of the church. (It is permissible to delegate this responsibility to church staff under the clerk’s oversight.)
- Bring all official correspondence to the attention of the Session, and respond as directed by the Session.
- Notify the members of the Session of meetings called by the Moderator, carefully stating the business to be conducted.
- Notify the congregation of all meetings called by the Session, carefully stating the business to be transacted at the meeting.
- Prepare the Sessional records for the annual review by presbytery’s review of records committee.
- Be sure that the annual statistical report requested by General Assembly is completed.
- Complete all correspondence in a timely manner.
- If requested, serve as the clerk (recording secretary) of congregational meetings.

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## SESSION MEETING

Since the Session is charged with maintaining the spiritual government of the church, most Sessions hold stated meetings every month. Often special meetings must be called to address a specific issue that needs attention. *The Book of Church Order* requires each Session to hold stated meetings at least once a quarter (BCO 12-6). Also, the BCO encourages the Session and Diaconate to meet together at least quarterly to confer on matters of mutual interest. Joint meetings of the Session and Diaconate should be recorded, keeping in mind that no joint actions can be taken during these meetings (BCO 9-4).

### Before the Session Meeting

Plan the docket -- The moderator and the clerk should prepare a docket for the meeting, so the business of the Session is conducted in an efficient manner. The docket also becomes an outline for properly recording the minutes of the meeting. (A sample docket can be found in Appendix A.)

Meeting Notices -- The clerk is responsible for notifying all the Session members of the time and place of the meeting. He may also send reminders to committee chairmen of reports that are due.

NOTE: *Notices of called meetings must include the exact purpose for which the meeting is called. No other business may be conducted at a called meeting other than what is stated in the call for the meeting.*

Printed Reports -- When at all possible, committee reports, Diaconate minutes, and the treasurer's report should be printed and distributed in advance of the meeting. In committee reports, informational items come first and committee recommendations for adoption by the Session come last.

### During the Session Meeting

The accurate recording of the business conducted during the meeting is one of the most important duties of the clerk. This task can be made easier by the use of a template that follows the docket of the meeting. (See Appendix A for a sample.) This template can assist the clerk in keeping accurate minutes.

Minutes do not need to be in the form of a verbatim account of all that was said during the meeting. However, the minutes must include all the actions of the Session, including all the motions adopted and business transacted. The clerk should be careful not to editorialize or inject his opinion into the minutes. For historical purposes, the Session may include additional information, as desired.

Every main motion should be recorded in a separate paragraph. Subsidiary and procedural motions should be recorded in the same paragraph as the main motion. Motions that are lost are not ordinarily recorded. If, however, a request to record a vote is made by an elder; then the lost motion must be recorded in the minutes. All actions of the Session must be in accord with the PCA *Book of Church Order*; and in matters of parliamentary procedure not covered in the BCO, by *Robert's Rules of Order*.

Sometimes it may be necessary to help members word their motions so they accurately reflect the action to be taken by the Session. Helpful questions about every motion are:

- What exactly is going to be done?
- Who is going to do it?
- When will the action be completed?
- How much will it cost?
- Where will the money come from?
- Is the action compatible with *The Book of Church Order*?

When the Session acts to receive members, a careful record must be made as to the reason for their reception. The record should include the full name of the applicant for church membership, names of their covenant children, and the manner of their reception:

- Profession of faith
- Profession of faith and baptism
- Reaffirmation of faith
- Certificate of transfer, which includes the name of the church from which they transferred.

When the Session acts to remove members from the communicant roll, a full record must be recorded including name, names of their covenant children, and the manner of their dismissal:

- Certificate of transfer to another church including the name of the church to which they have transferred.
- Removal from Roll (BCO 38-3 & 38-4)
- Church discipline
- Death

Congregational meeting minutes must also be included in the Minute Book and signed by the Moderator and the Clerk elected for the meeting.



**Session Minutes must include the following:**

- A statement of the date, time, place, and purpose of the meeting (Stated, Called, adjourned stated, etc.) If the meeting is a called meeting the minutes must include the portion of the call that indicates the purpose of the meeting.
- That the meeting was opened and closed with prayer.
- The names of all in attendance or absent from the meeting.
- That a quorum was present for the meeting. (See *BCO* 12-1 for quorum requirements.)
- Communications received, and any action taken because of the communications.
- Reading and approval of the minutes from previous meetings.
- A statement that indicates the review and approval of the Diaconate minutes and the receiving of the Treasurer's report as information. (*BCO* 9-4)
- The actions of the Session including all the motions adopted and business transacted.

**When applicable, the minutes shall include the following:**

- A record of all covenant baptisms, baptisms upon profession of faith, and dates of the celebration of the Lord's Supper.
- Election of commissioners to presbytery and General Assembly meetings.
- A copy of the annual church budget approved by the Session.
- A record of the call and purpose for each congregational or corporation meeting.
- A motion calling for the nomination and election of church officers.
- A record of the officers nominated, trained and examined by the Session. (See *BCO* 24-1 for procedure that must be followed.)
- The December or the following January minutes must include a statement that records the pastor's annual housing allowance approved by the Session. (See PCA Retirement & Benefits Inc. for a suggested form.)
- The *BCO* requires Sessions to “. . . keep an accurate record of baptisms, of communing members, of non-communing members, and of deaths and dismissions of church members.” (12-8) (This information should be included in the December minutes. This record will aid in the preparation of the Statistical Report for General Assembly.)

- A copy of the approved operating budget and the yearly statistical report should be attached to December's minutes (*BCO* 12-5).

All minutes should be typed or legibly written in ink. Since the Session's records must be archived, minutes should be kept in a bound or lock-type journal; and not a loose-leaf note book to prevent pages from being lost. The pages should be consecutively numbered, leaving no blank pages between meetings and no records left unattached.

### **After the Meeting**

- Write the minutes using the minute template upon which you have taken notes as a guide.
- Complete any necessary correspondence as required by actions taken by the Session.
- Send transfer of the communicant's membership certificates to other churches (<https://www.pcabookstore.com/c-112-certificates-forms>).
- Update the church membership records as required by action the Session (Additions, removals, etc.).

## MEMBERSHIP ROLLS

The Membership Rolls of the church should contain information about those who are members of the local church. It is the Clerk of Session's responsibility to maintain or to oversee the maintenance of the Rolls as required by *The Book of Church Order* (12-8). These Rolls should be kept in addition to the entries made as part of the Session minutes. Most presbyteries require that an accurate roll be included in the Session minute book every calendar year to be submitted for the annual review of Sessional records. Names of members shall be placed upon, removed, or deleted from these Rolls only by the action of the Session.

### The Session shall maintain the following membership rolls:

- **Communing Members** – A Communing Member of the Church is one who has made a profession of faith in Christ, has been baptized, and has been received by the Session into the membership of the church. (*BCO* 6-2)

Record the name, date received into membership, and method of reception (profession of faith, profession of faith and baptism, reaffirmation of faith, or certificate of transfer.) Record the date of removal from the roll and whether by death, transfer to another church, removal from Roll, or discipline (*BCO* 46-1, 38-a, 38-b & 38-4).

- **Non-communing Members** – The children of believers who have made a profession of faith are non-communing members of the church. As children of the covenant they are entitled to Baptism and to the pastoral oversight, instruction, and government of the Church. (*BCO* 6-1)
- **Associate members** – Believers temporarily residing in a location other than their permanent homes may become associate members of a church without transferring membership from their home church. An example of an associate member would be a member of the military or college student living nearby. Associate members may not be elected to church office or vote in a congregational meeting. (*BCO* 46-4) Be sure to record name, date of affiliation, name of home church, and date of return to home church.

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## CONGREGATIONAL MEETING

**Call to Meet**— A congregational meeting may only be called by the Session or when it is properly requested to do so by a percentage of the congregation. (*BCO 25-2*)

**Notice of Meeting** – A public notice shall be given at least one week before the meeting. A notice of four weeks must be given if officers are being elected. The notice must clearly state the purpose of the meeting. No other business may be conducted at the meeting except what is stated in the notice. (*BCO 25-2*)

**Minutes**— Minutes of the meeting are recorded by a clerk (recording secretary) elected by the congregation. Most congregations elect the Clerk of Session as clerk of the meeting because he is familiar with the *BCO*.

### The minutes must include the following:

- Date, time, and the purpose of the meeting.
- Opening and closing of the meeting with prayer.
- The election of a clerk and, in the absence of the Pastor, a Moderator.
- A declaration by the Moderator or Clerk of the presence of a quorum.
- A record of the actions taken during the meeting.
- If elders or deacons are elected, private ballot or voice vote may be taken. In either case, a majority of those present shall be required to elect. (*BCO 24-4*)
- When the meeting is called for the election of a Pastor then a private ballot is preferred but not required. This enables everyone to vote his own conscience
- Action taken by the congregation to approve each pastor's terms of call.
- If the congregation does not approve the minutes before adjournment, then an indication of the Session's appointment to approve the minutes.

### **Voting In Congregational Meetings**

- All communicant members in good and regular standing (regardless of age) are eligible to vote in a congregational meeting. Proxy or absentee voting is never permitted.
- It is important to remember that local church bylaws may not contradict *The Book of Church Order*. For example, a local church could not have a bylaw to allow absentee balloting or one that would prevent communicant members under a certain age from voting.

## **ELECTION OF RULING ELDERS AND DEACONS**

*BCO* 24 provides direction for the nomination, training, examination, election, and ordination of church officers. Each step in the process should be carefully recorded in the minutes of the Session including:

1. The call for nominations from the communicant members of the congregation.
2. That the nominees were informed of their nomination and required training classes.
3. That the candidates were examined in all the areas required by the BCO:
  - a. Christian Experience
  - b. Knowledge and views of English Bible
  - c. Knowledge and views of the System of Doctrine
  - d. Knowledge and views of the form of government
  - e. Duties of the office
  - f. Willingness to give assent to the ordination questions.
4. The calling of congregational meeting 30 days in advance of the election.
5. The requirements for the conduct of the congregational meeting are found in 24-2 to 24-5. A few points to remember:
  - a. The congregation determines the number of officers to be elected either by the size of the Session or Diaconate or the number they choose to elect. It is permissible for the Session to recommend the number to be elected; however, the congregation must approve the Session's recommendation.
  - b. A simple majority of those present and voting is required for election.
  - c. The minutes of the meeting should record the results of the election.

The ordination and installation of the newly elected officers is an action of the Session that is to take place during a duly constituted Session meeting (See BCO 24-6).

## CALLING OF A PASTOR

The PCA believes that each congregation has the right of electing its leaders (Pastor, Elders, and Deacons). This principle is based upon the clear teaching of Scripture and stated as one of the Preliminary Principles of the PCA. When a church is without a Pastor, the responsibility of finding a new Shepherd falls upon the congregation, not the Presbytery or General Assembly. The *BCO* contains specific instructions concerning the formation of the pulpit committee and the election of the Pastoral Candidate.

### 1. Election of the Pulpit Nominating Committee

*BCO* 20-2 states: “A church shall proceed to elect a pastor in the following manner. The Session shall call a congregational meeting to elect a pulpit committee . . .” The committee is a nominating committee since it only recommends a pastoral candidate to the congregation for election.

*BCO* 20-2 provides that the committee “. . . may be composed of members from the congregation at large or the Session, as designated by the congregation.” The Session may make recommendations as to the size and shape of the committee, but the congregation must elect its members. (The Stated Clerk’s Office has published “A Manual For Calling a Pastor” to assist congregations in this process. Go to <http://www.pcaac.org/get-involved/pastor-search-information/churches-seeking-a-pastor/>)

### 2. Election and Call of the Pastoral Candidate

When the committee is ready to recommend a pastoral candidate to the congregation they should first notify the Session. The Session will then call a meeting for the “purpose of receiving a report from the Pulpit Committee and to conduct any business that may arise from it”. It is important to remember that the Session’s responsibility is to call a congregational meeting, but it is not their right to veto the committee’s recommendation.

*BCO* 20-3 recommends that a PCA minister or ruling elder should be elected to preside, but if that is not possible then any male member of the congregation may preside. The following sections give directions as to how the nomination should be presented and how the election is to be conducted. (See Appendix B for a sample docket.)

After prayer for guidance, the Moderator shall ask “Are you ready to proceed to the election of a Pastor?” If the congregation declares themselves ready, then the moderator calls for nominations and proceeds to voting by ballot. A

majority of those present shall be required to elect. When the congregation has voted to issue a call, it must first appoint those who will sign the call as well as those who will prosecute the call before presbytery.

A sample form of call can be found in Appendix J in the *BCO*. Also, PCA's Retirement and Benefits, Inc. has prepared PCA Call Package Guidelines to assist congregations in the formulation of a call. (<https://pcarbi.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/RBICallPackage17-2.pdf>)



## JUDICIAL MATTERS

The *BCO* states that “Discipline is the exercise of the authority given to the church by Jesus Christ to instruct and guide its members and to promote its purity and welfare.” It goes on to instruct that it “. . . is for building up, and not for destruction. It is to be exercised as under a dispensation of mercy and not wrath.”

Whenever the Session finds it necessary to exercise church discipline, the “Rules of Discipline” should be carefully studied by the entire Session, so that it is conducted according to guidelines set forth in the *BCO*. A procedural checklist for the Rules of Discipline can be found in Appendix C.

If discipline is administered, a careful record of the case *must be* included in the minutes according to the instructions in *BCO* 32-18.

Some PCA churches have established “Judicial Commissions” to adjudicate cases of church discipline. (See Appendix C for helpful guidelines.)

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