



*Beloved, do not believe every spirit,  
but test the spirits to see whether they are from God...*

1 John 4:1a

Dear Friends,

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) traces its heritage to a reforming movement, and has built into its governance a capacity and processes for ongoing reform. *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* – the reformed church is always in need of reform, according to the Word of God. This disposition toward testing and refining our life as a church takes various forms, including in the description of the office of “ruling elder” in the *Book of Order*: “Ruling elders are so named not because they ‘lord it over’ the congregation (Matt. 20:25), but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life” (2.0301). (Think “ruler” in the sense of “measuring stick,” not “command giver!”)

Just as the Johannine church was called to test the spirits to ensure that they supported the church’s God-given witness to Jesus as an enfleshed Messiah, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) engages in an extended period of discernment and prayer to test the faithfulness of proposed amendments to the church’s Constitution. When we consider changes to the way we organize ourselves and make decisions in the *Book of Order*, the following steps are required:

1. A presbytery communicates an “overture” to the General Assembly, proposing a change. Under the current Book of Order, the overture must have the concurrence of another presbytery. Therefore, no change to the Book of Order can be considered by the General Assembly unless at least two presbyteries have agreed to it.
2. A number of advisory and advocacy committees elected by the General Assembly, including the Advisory Committee on the Constitution, analyze and offer feedback on the proposed amendment.
3. The proposed amendment is referred to one of the working committees at the next meeting of the General Assembly, which holds hearings and considers the proposal, possibly altering it or substituting a new proposal to achieve a similar goal.
4. The proposal comes to the floor of the full General Assembly where it is debated and may be further amended.
5. If approved by the General Assembly, the proposed amendment is communicated to all of the presbyteries of the PCUSA. At this stage, the proposed amendment can’t be changed, but presbyteries have the opportunity to approve or disapprove it. If a majority of presbyteries approve within one year of the adjournment of the General Assembly, the amendment is incorporated in the next edition of the Book of Order.

I want to point out that every step I've described above takes place at one or more meetings, convened and adjourned with prayer, by a body of presbyters who have made solemn promises to carry out their ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ. That is a lot of serious, faithful testing of the spirits! And this doesn't even account for informal gatherings for discussion, individual prayer and study, and other forms of discernment that unfold outside of the formal process.

At our Stated Meeting on January 23, National Capital Presbytery will take part in the process of considering two proposed amendments to the *Book of Order*, Amendments 24-A and 24-C. ([You can find a description of these, as well as the other amendments proposed in this cycle, in a booklet distributed by the Office of the General Assembly.](#)) The Bills and Overtures Committee will be bringing the other proposals to the March Stated Meeting.) At this meeting we will reach the end of a time of discernment which began in September, when members of our community gathered in small groups for discussion, and which continued through other gatherings in October, November, and December.

Many thanks to those of you who have participated, and to those of you as well who have joined in prayer during this season. Thank you for voicing your questions, your excitement, your fears, and your hopes for the church, and for taking the time to listen to the voices of others. When I step back and see not only this presbytery, but other presbyteries coming together in a similar way and praying, talking, and listening toward being a more faithful expression of Christ's Church, I am awed and hopeful at the way the Spirit speaks to and through us!

Grace and Peace,

David