

# eLINK Overtures

## *Small Changes that make a BIG Difference*

The *eLINK* Overtures from Beaver-Butler Presbytery that relax the rules by which congregations and presbyteries connect

<b>e</b>	emerging--encourages belief, mission, adaptation and accountability
<b>L</b>	Logical—small Book of Order changes that make a big difference
<b>I</b>	Idea-Friendly—encouragement of flexibility, structure, mission and belief
<b>N</b>	Non-Geographic--flexible connections according to belief and mission
<b>K</b>	Kairos—good time for an evolutionary change in Presbyterian governance

### **Presbytery of Beaver-Butler**

**Overture 00-00.** On Amending the Book of Order to provide flexibility in presbytery and synod membership.

The Presbytery of Beaver-Butler overtures the 217th General Assembly (2006) to:

Make the changes to the Form of Government that will honor the spirit of the Report of the Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. These changes will accommodate the diverse belief systems, theological positions and mission designs that currently exist within the Presbyterian Church (USA) and will encourage the kind of “flexible equilibrium” to which the Task Force calls the church (lines 807-808, Final Report of the Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church).

These changes are:

#### **G-11.000 THE PRESBYTERY**

##### **G-11.0101 Membership**

**Strike:** Presbytery is a corporate expression of the church consisting of all the churches and ministers of the Word and Sacrament within a certain district.

**Insert:** *Presbytery is a corporate expression of the church consisting of churches and ministers of the Word and Sacrament who have chosen to affiliate based on geographic, theological, missional or other considerations of importance to those congregations.*

##### **G-11.0103 Responsibilities**

**Strike:** j. to control the location of new churches and of churches desiring to move;

**Insert:** new section headings for remaining provisions as applicable

Following G-11.0504

Insert: **G-11.0600 Changes in Membership**

- a. *Congregations may choose membership in a particular presbytery based on geographic, theological, missional or other considerations of importance to those congregations.*
- b. *A congregation may seek to change presbytery membership by a two-thirds vote at a properly called congregational meeting.*
- c. *The receiving presbytery will accept the congregation's request for membership by a majority vote at a properly called presbytery meeting.*
- d. *The Minister(s) of Word and Sacrament of the joining congregation become members of the receiving presbytery when it is determined by the Committee on Ministry of the receiving presbytery that their call is in order (G-14.0506-07).*

## **G-12.0000 THE SYNOD**

### **G-12.0101 Membership**

Strike: Synod is the unit of the church's life and mission which consists of not fewer than three presbyteries within a specific geographic region.

Insert: *Synod is the unit of the church's life which consists of not fewer than three presbyteries who choose to affiliate based on geographic, theological, missional or other considerations of importance to those presbyteries.*

### **G-12.0102 Responsibilities**

Strike: k. To organize new presbyteries and to divide, unite, or otherwise combine presbyteries or portions of presbyteries previously existing, to create non-geographic presbyteries in order to meet the mission needs (G-11.0103a; G-12.0102a) of identified racial or ethnic or immigrant congregations; subject to the approval of the General Assembly;

Insert: *k. To vote to receive, by majority vote, existing and new presbyteries that have petitioned for synod membership (G-12.307).*

Following G-12.0306

Insert: **G-12.0400 Changes in Membership**

- a. *A presbytery may seek membership in a particular synod based on geographic, theological, missional or other considerations of importance to that presbytery.*
- b. *A presbytery may seek to change synod membership by a two-thirds vote at a properly called presbytery meeting.*
- c. *The receiving synod will accept the presbytery request for membership by a majority vote at a properly called synod meeting.*
- d. *New presbyteries shall be formed when not fewer than twelve congregations petition a synod for the creation of a presbytery of which they will become member congregations (in compliance with the provisions of G-11.505 of this overture). New presbyteries shall be created by a two-thirds vote of the synod at a properly called meeting.*

## **G-13.0000 THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

### **G-13.0103 Responsibilities**

Strike: m. to organize new synods and to divide, unite, or otherwise combine synods or portions of synods previously existing;

Insert: *m. to provide for the creation of new synods. New synods shall be formed when not fewer than three presbyteries petition the General Assembly for the creation of a synod of which they will become member presbyteries. New synods shall be created by a two-thirds vote of the General Assembly at a regularly called meeting.*

Strike: n. to approve the organization, division, uniting, or combining of presbyteries or portions of presbyteries by synods;

Strike: p. to warn or bear witness against error in doctrine or immorality in practice in or outside the church;

Strike: v. to authorize synods to exercise power in receiving ecclesiastical bodies suited to become constituents of those governing bodies and lying within their geographic bounds;

Insert: *v. to authorize synods to exercise similar power in receiving ecclesiastical bodies suited to become constituents of those governing bodies;*

Insert: new section headings for remaining provisions as applicable

### **Rationale**

The 213th General Assembly (2001) directed the Moderators of the 213th, 212th, and the 211th General Assemblies to appoint a Theological Task Force reflecting the theological and cultural diversity of the church to “lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity, in and for the 21st century. . . . This discernment shall include but not be limited to issues of Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination standards and power” (*Minutes*, 2001, Part I, p. 29). One significant outcome from the Task Force involves allowing presbyteries and synods a certain amount of latitude (what the report calls flexible equilibrium [lines 918-919] ) in matters of polity.

***“Our faith is in the God of Israel who raised Jesus Christ bodily from the dead. This is the one faith confessed by the people of God: ‘one Lord, one faith, on god and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.’ (Ephesians 4:5-6)”*** (Task Force Report, lines 51-53)

“It is by following Jesus Christ, as attested for us in Scripture, that the unity of our faith will be made visible today as it has in the past.” (Task Force Report, lines 58-60)

Jesus Christ alone is head of the church. Jesus alone is the source of the church’s unity.

G-1.000 c affirms that: “Christ gives to his Church its faith and life, its unity and mission, its officers and ordinances.” The Task Force Report reminds us that our unity is rooted in Christ and that the church’s purity does not spring from “technical or legal means,” but from Jesus Christ. Attempting to keep the Church unified and pure without providing freedom for Christ’s Spirit to move is not helpful.

G-1.0301 (1) (a) affirms that: “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.” Flexibility in presbytery and synod membership provides options for theological and missional partnerships not possible under the rigid geographical criteria that worked well in other times.

G-3.0401 d affirms that God is calling us “...to a new openness to God’s continuing reformation of the Church ecumenical, that it might be a more effective instrument of mission in the world.” The Task Force points out that “there are many signs that, on a changing cultural landscape, old models are breaking down and new forms of denominationalism in the United States are developing at local, regional, and national levels” (lines 905-907). These new forms cannot emerge from strict adherence to existing structures; they must be permitted and nurtured by a denomination willing to seek flexibility and equilibrium.

The intended purpose of flexible equilibrium in presbytery and synod membership is to provide safe opportunity for congregations and judicatories to express shared, deeply held convictions. To seek flexibility regarding essential belief, as the Task Force does, without providing a corresponding freedom of association based on those very convictions is contradictory and ultimately self-defeating.

Under a more flexible system of presbytery and synod membership the coercive power of the upper judicatories is diminished (for example, in discipline and enforcement) and that of lower judicatories (congregations and presbyteries) increases.

A flexible plan of presbytery and synod membership provides an affirmation of the Missional Church's understanding of non-hierarchical structures and ministries. It affirms the congregation as the primary agent of mission and ministry and the presbytery as secondary agent for the support, encouragement, and accountability of congregations and pastors. Any other judicatories are tertiary agents for the support, encouragement and accountability of the presbytery.

Allowing congregations flexibility in their presbytery membership, and presbyteries in their synods membership, provides the basis for mission and ministry under a generous and broad orthodox creedal Reformed Christianity. Membership flexibility acknowledges the current era of diverse styles and forms while maintaining the historic unity of the church.

Competing factions within the Presbyterian Church (USA) appeal to “Historic Presbyterianism.” Flexible equilibrium is, by contrast, future-oriented while at the same time providing an affirmation of “Presbyterianism” in its connectional-accountable sense. It acknowledges the need for one another while rejecting both institutional coercion and radical ecclesiastical autonomy.

A flexible plan for presbytery and synod membership allows congregations and judicatories to work for reformation and renewal in local congregations and in presbyteries only as they serve the local congregation. This flexibility allows the denomination to focus on positive change rather than defensive battles.

For these reasons, we urge the 217th General Assembly (2006) to approve this overture.