

**A Guide to
Parliamentary Procedure**
In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)



2nd Edition

Updated to the 12th Edition of Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND PRELIMINARY CONCEPTS

Section F-1.0401 of the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity in the *Book of Order* (quoting Rom. 12:2) states that in its life and work, “the Church seeks ‘not [to] be conformed to this world, but [to] be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds, so that [we] may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.’ ” Section F-3.0205 goes on to say that in our church body, “decisions shall be reached in councils by vote, following opportunity for discussion and discernment, and a majority shall govern.”

The first paragraph of G-3.0105 of the Form of Government of the *Book of Order* states that meetings of councils of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) “shall be conducted in accordance with the most recent edition of *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised* except when it is in contradiction to this Constitution.” And then it notes that “councils may also make use of processes of discernment in their deliberations prior to a vote as agreed upon by the body.”

Thus, there are two ways for discernment to take place before a council takes final action on a matter. The first way is to utilize the motions and procedures of *Robert’s Rules of Order*. This could be called “discernment under the rules;” that is, discernment that occurs within the course of processing a motion and is therefore subject to the procedural rules of our parliamentary authority. The second way is to utilize procedures and processes other than *Robert’s Rules of Order*. This could be called “discernment out from under the rules.”

Discernment under the rules can occur in a variety of ways. For example, when it becomes clear in debate on a motion that a reasonable consensus does not exist on a matter, a council can work to build consensus by granting its members adequate time in debate to carefully listen to the perspectives being presented, and then develop and propose amendments that seek to make the proposed action more acceptable to a greater number. This may require utilizing such motions as extending the limits of debate, considering a matter informally, or postponing to a definite time. Alternatively, referring a matter to a committee can be a way to empower a smaller group to prayerfully consider a matter and seek collaborative solutions.

It can also be helpful to spend time in discernment out from under the rules. The 12th edition of *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised* (RONR) itself acknowledges this practice. In a section entitled “Aids to the Crystallization of Opinion,” RONR states:

The more traditional aids to the crystallization of opinion in societies have been, simply, to take a Recess or to refer the matter to a committee—often a large committee composed of members representing differing views in the society, such as a committee of the whole or one of its alternate forms. In more recent years, a practice has developed of establishing breakout groups with every member in attendance being urged to participate in a group (RONR, (12th ed.) 52:28).

While a referral or consideration of a matter as a committee of the whole are clearly methods for discernment under the rules, discernment during a recess or in breakout groups is not. Such times can be built into meeting agendas, or can be created spontaneously (by means of a motion to recess with directions about what may occur during the recess). They may also take place as separate events that are not actual meetings of the council. And the procedures to be followed in such gatherings can be devised by those who plan them.

Those in ordered ministries of the PC(USA) have promised to “further the peace, unity, and purity of the church” (*Book of Order*, W-4.4003g). This goal is sometimes made even more challenging by a system of governance that relies on majority rule. When matters under consideration are potentially divisive, presbyters may wish to consider options for continuing discernment instead of moving forward with the action. Motions to recess, refer, postpone (either indefinitely or definitely), or even reconsider (if the action has already been taken) are among the options available to members in such circumstances.

This booklet explores some of the parliamentary tools for discernment and decision making under the rules, as well as for getting out from under the rules when it may be helpful to do so. The booklet is not a substitute for RONR. Only the full 12th edition of RONR is the complete current parliamentary authority for councils of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The intent of this booklet is to provide an overview of RONR’s major principles and to serve as a helpful resource for immediate reference in meetings.

RONR seeks to balance the rights of the majority (to prevail), with the rights of all members present (to be heard, to vote, and to hold office), the rights of a minority—especially a minority of at least one-third (to be fully heard and to be ensured

of fairness in vote counts, etc.), and even the rights of those not present (to be confident that the scope of business considered does not exceed what was noticed in the call for the meeting). Generally, when any of these rights is being limited or denied, a vote of at least two-thirds is required. And sometimes a proposed action is simply “out of order” under the current circumstances.

As the *Book of Order* states, our Constitution (*Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order*) takes precedence over RONR in any matter on which they disagree (G-3.0105). Additionally, as described in RONR (12th ed.) 2:14-22, organizations may adopt “special rules of order” that take precedence over the rules in RONR. Those rules are contained and should be clearly identified in each council’s *Manual of Administrative Operations (Manual)* required by G-3.0106 of the *Book of Order*.

RONR provides a framework of rules and procedures that when followed enables “deliberative assemblies” (decision making bodies) of various sizes and types to consider matters before them and make decisions in an orderly and efficient way. Those rules are based on the following assumptions about decision making in large groups:

- *Only one person should “have the floor” at a time.* Therefore, RONR outlines an orderly process for seeking recognition from the chair and for being “assigned the floor” by the chair. This even includes an orderly process for making motions that “interrupt” a speaker when the motion is of such extreme importance or urgency that the interruption is warranted.
- *An assembly should only consider one matter at a time.* Therefore, while a main motion is under consideration, the only additional motions that are in order are ones that either affect the disposal of that motion or deal with the assembly itself, its procedures, or some matter of privilege, in which case discussion of the main motion is temporarily suspended until that matter is resolved.
- *Once an assembly has disposed of a matter, it shouldn’t be required to take it up again in the same session except for extraordinary reasons.* Therefore, amending something previously adopted by an assembly usually requires a higher vote than was required to adopt it in the first place (even if it was adopted at some point in the distant past); or, as in the case of the motion to reconsider, there are restrictions on when it can be moved and by whom.

SECTION 2: ASSEMBLIES, BOARDS, COMMISSIONS, AND COMMITTEES

RONR is written for use by a wide variety of organizations. In addition to the adoption of special rules of order tailored to the particular characteristics of organizations, some of its terminology may also be challenging to adapt to terms in use in those organizations. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is what RONR (12th ed.) 2:2 calls a “parent body” for the other councils of the church, although we know that there are constitutional limits on the authority of that “parent body.” When the General Assembly meets, it is clearly what RONR (12th ed.) 1:1 defines as a “deliberative assembly.” Additionally, although Presbyterians are quick to point out that voting members at a General Assembly are “commissioners” rather than “delegates,” with respect to the rules followed at a General Assembly (especially related to quorums and voting thresholds), General Assemblies follow the rules in RONR (12th ed) Section 58 for “Conventions of Delegates.” The same is true for Synod meetings. Session meetings, on the other hand, are meetings of all elected members, rather than commissioners, and presbytery meetings are a “hybrid” of the two – composed of all minister members, ruling elders enrolled for terms of service, and ruling elder commissioners from sessions (G-3.0301). Therefore, for quorums and voting thresholds, most presbyteries choose to follow the rules for meetings of members rather than for conventions of delegates.

And then, central to our historic Presbyterian/Reformed understanding of decision making in Christ’s Church is that we are “governed by presbyters; that is, ruling elders and teaching elders (also called ministers of the Word and Sacrament)” (F-3.0202). For that reason, decision making in church councils is limited to ordained presbyters. This is the reason that the *Book of Order* draws a clear distinction between “committees,” to which any willing person may be appointed as a member with all rights of membership, and “commissions,” to which only presbyters may be appointed or elected. For as G-3.0109(b) states, “actions of a commission shall be regarded as actions of the council or councils that created it.” The term “commission” and its definition in the *Book of Order* are particular to our tradition, and are not contained in RONR. But because they make final decisions on the council’s behalf, commissions generally fit the RONR definition of a board, and should follow RONR rules for boards.

SECTION 3: APPROPRIATE FORMALITY AND APPLICATION OF THE RULES

RONR defines a total of eighty-six distinct motions. Some of the more common motions and the rules governing them are described in this booklet, and they should generally be followed in all meetings of church councils and their committees and commissions; however, RONR itself provides variations of its rules under two specific circumstances: boards of “not more than about a dozen members present” (RONR (12th ed.) 49:21), and committees (RONR (12th ed.) 50:25). Since most local church sessions are composed of “no more than about a dozen members,” and since we *all* serve on committees at one time or another, it is important to become familiar with these relaxed rules and their implementation. See Section 8 for further discussion and a listing of these variations.

The purpose of rules in a deliberative assembly is only to ensure that business is handled in an orderly and efficient manner. It is not to make meetings overly complicated or cumbersome. In a section entitled “Suggestions for Inexperienced Presiding Officers,” RONR states,

Good judgment is essential; the assembly may be of such a nature, through its unfamiliarity with parliamentary usage and its peaceable disposition, that strict enforcement of the rules, instead of assisting, would greatly hinder business. But in large assemblies where there is much work to be done, and especially where there is likelihood of trouble, the only safe course is to require a strict observance of the rules (RONR (12th ed.) 47:19).

Councils of our church, especially sessions, should carefully review the relaxed rules in Section 8 and determine what level of formality they require.

SECTION 4: ELECTRONIC MEETINGS

Electronic meetings have become commonplace in the church. RONR includes an extensive section on electronic meetings (9:28-36) and also has an appendix of “Sample Rules for Electronic Meetings.” Other examples of rules tailored to meetings of congregations and councils of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are available. Your presbytery’s stated clerk should be able to guide you to helpful resources.

The two most important guiding parliamentary principles for electronic meetings are that they must be authorized in an organization’s governing documents, and the technology employed must allow for “the opportunity for simultaneous aural communication.” Otherwise, the decisions being made have not had the benefit of real discussion.

Unless the *Book of Order* is amended to authorize electronic meetings at all levels of the church, each individual congregation and council must do so in its bylaws (in the case of councils, as contained in their *Manuals*).

Additionally, RONR urges organizations that meet electronically to adopt special rules related to ensuring quorums, seeking recognition from the chair, and other aspects of meetings that work differently when participants aren’t all in the same room together—and that will likely need to be written to apply to the specific technology or technologies being employed. Such rules may either be adopted at the beginning of an electronic meeting for that meeting, or included in a collection of special rules (for councils, these rules would also be included in their *Manuals*).

SECTION 5: MEETING PROCESSES AND MOTIONS

The first orders of business at meetings of church councils are several important organizational matters. Some councils have traditions such as opening devotionals, intercessory prayer times, worship services, educational moments, or the like. In accordance with G-3.0105, all council meetings are officially opened and closed with prayer. Attendance is usually noted—first to determine the presence of a quorum (the minimum number of members required for a meeting to occur), and then also to establish how many possible votes may be cast. Finally, an agenda for the meeting is presented and adopted.

No particular agenda is mandatory. Many councils either have rules in their manuals or long-standing traditions about the order of business, which is perfectly acceptable. Councils have experimented with a variety of creative agendas some of which have included mirroring an order for worship, docketing significant time for discernment and fellowship, and integrating more prayer and worship moments throughout the meeting.

RONR offers a more traditional order for business which it describes as the “usual or standard for one-meeting sessions of ordinary societies” (RONR (12th ed.) 3:16):

1. Reading and Approval of Minutes
2. Reports of Officers, Boards, and Standing (that is, permanently established) Committees
3. Reports of Special (Select or Ad Hoc) Committees (that is, committees appointed to exist only until they have completed a specified assigned task)
4. Special Orders (that is, matters which have been previously been assigned a type of special priority)
5. Unfinished Business and General Orders (that is, matters which have previously come over from the preceding meeting or which have been scheduled for the present meeting)
6. New Business (that is, matters initiated in the present meeting)

While some of these items might not require any action (such as the reports of officers on their activities), when action needs to be taken it is accomplished by means of one or more *motions*—which may be presented as “recommendations” in a report. Recommendations are not *automatically* motions, however. They must be *moved* as such either by the maker of the report or by another member of the body.

The handling of motions follows a number of usual steps—certain of which may be altered for particular motions or circumstances (such as a motion resulting from a committee recommendation, which requires no second). Those usual steps are as follows:

1. A member rises and addresses the chair. In a large assembly, this may be done (by special rule of order) with an electronic recognition system. In a small assembly, it may be done by raising a hand instead of rising and addressing the chair.
2. The chair recognizes the member and “assigns” them the floor.
3. The member makes the motion.
4. Another member (without rising or being recognized) seconds the motion.
5. The chair “states the question” (“It is moved and seconded to ... Is there any debate?”).
6. Members seek recognition from the chair to debate the question, offer amendments, or make other motions that are in order at the time (each of which results in another cycle of these steps!). The chair recognizes and assigns the floor to each speaker. The maker of the motion usually has the right to speak first. If there are a number of speakers, the chair should attempt to alternate between those speaking “for” and “against” the motion. All remarks are addressed to the moderator (rather than to one or more specific individuals).
7. The chair “puts the question;” that is, puts it to a vote by stating the question a final time.
8. The vote is taken, and the chair announces the result (“the ayes have it, and the motion is adopted,” or “the noes have it, and the motion is not adopted”).

SECTION 6: THE RANKING MOTIONS (MAIN, SUBSIDIARY, AND PRIVILEGED)

As stated above, only one main motion can be considered at a time; however, while a main motion is “pending” (being considered), certain other motions that either affect the disposal of the pending motion or deal with the assembly itself, its procedures, or some matter of privilege, may be in order. These are called, collectively, “secondary motions.”

Thirteen of the motions in RONR are called “ranking motions,” because they stand in a strict hierarchy—meaning that while any of them are pending, the only additional ones that are in order for consideration are those of a *higher* rank than the immediately pending item. Some of the ranking motions may only be made as secondary motions. Others may be made when no item of business is pending, in which case they are “incidental main motions,” with less restrictive rules.

The ranking motions are on Chart #1 in the center of this booklet, and the characteristics of the motions assume that they are offered as secondary motions (while another motion is pending). The “Main Motion” (which includes ranking motions when offered as incidental main motions) is the lowest ranking motion (#1), while the motion “To Fix the Time to Which to Adjourn” is the highest (#13). So for example, while a motion to limit speeches on a matter to a certain number of minutes is pending (rank #6), a motion to refer the matter to a committee (rank #4) is not in order; however, a motion to take a recess (rank #11) *would* be in order.

Parliamentarians sometimes describe these motions as a “ladder,” which can be a helpful image. Each of the thirteen motions is like a “rung” on the ladder. We can go up and then back down the ladder as many times as necessary in the process of making a decision, being careful to hit the same rungs going down that we hit on the way up. The first seven of the ranking secondary motions are called “subsidiary motions,” because they have the effect of either perfecting the main motion or altering the manner in which it is considered. The remaining five ranking motions are called “privileged motions.” They affect the meeting itself, as well as the rights and privileges of its members.

Some of the primary characteristics of these motions are included on Chart #1. But it is important to note that not *all* of the characteristics are included. It is also important to note that simple “yes” or “no” requirements on a chart do not always tell the whole story. For instance, in the section on the seconding of motions, RONR states:

The requirement of a second is for the chair’s guidance. ... If the chair is certain that the motion meets with wide approval ... [the chair] can state the question without waiting for a second. However, until debate has begun ... a point of order can be raised ... and then the chair must proceed formally and ask if there is a second. ... After debate has begun or, if there is no debate, after any member has voted, the lack of a second has become immaterial and it is too late to make a point of order that the motion has not been seconded” (RONR (12th ed.) 4:12).

Below are a few important details about each of the ranking motions.

1. Main Motion

Main motions are items that bring a matter before an assembly while no other motion is currently pending (under consideration). Well-worded main motions clearly state a proposed action—including instructions for who will carry out the action, when, and why, and if the action has monetary implications, from where the funding will come.

2. Postpone Indefinitely

The motion to postpone indefinitely is a way in which an assembly can dispose of a main motion without having to state whether a majority are for or against the action. An item that has been postponed indefinitely cannot be considered again in the same session of the council (at the same General Assembly, for example) unless a majority of the members vote to reconsider the postponement (see motion to reconsider). This motion can be very useful in cases where a council is aware that a reasonable consensus on an important or controversial matter does not yet exist—and isn’t likely to emerge at the current meeting.

It can also be a way for those who are against the adoption of a motion to “test the waters” by determining if they are in the majority before they invest time and energy into attempting to amend the motion into one that is more to their liking, or working to temporarily dispose of it by referral or a motion to postpone definitely.

Unlike most subsidiary motions, debate on the motion to postpone indefinitely can go into the merits of the main motion, as opposed to being limited to whether or not to postpone it. Therefore, much can be learned about the perspectives of members during debate on this motion, before moving forward with other options.

3. Amend (Including Substitute Motions)

Amendment is the most common and frequently employed secondary motion. It is the means by which motions can be “perfected” by the body to achieve a greater consensus, or to address specific concerns. In the simple form of amendment, particular consecutive words within a single paragraph of a motion are amended by either striking out words, adding/inserting words, or both.

In addition to the distinction between simple amendments and substitute motions, amendments can also be either “primary” amendments or “secondary” ones; that is, it is possible to “amend an amendment.” There are limits to what can be

altered, however. For example, if the primary amendment is to strike out certain words, the only secondary amendment in order would be to remove some of the proposed words to be stricken. The addition of *new* words, or striking more words would need to come later, after the first amendment was either adopted or defeated. And only one secondary amendment is allowed at a time.

Substitute Motions

Any amendment that goes beyond the limit of “consecutive words within a single paragraph” is a more complex form of amendment called a “substitute.” The primary difference in how the two forms of amendment are handled is that when a substitute motion is offered, an assembly is given the opportunity to “perfect” *both* the motion as it was presented, *and also* the substitute motion by means of secondary amendments, after which the assembly debates and votes on the question, “shall the substitute motion become the main motion?” If a majority votes to make the substitution, then the substitute motion becomes the main motion, and the process continues.

Minority reports from a committee to an assembly are generally presented as substitute motions—in the hope that the body will vote to substitute their report including its recommendations for the report and recommendations adopted by a majority of the committee. Councils may have established processes for how these reports are to be composed, presented, and handled by the assembly, which should be clearly stated in their *Manuals*. For example, the General Assembly’s practice for handling minority reports is as follows:

- The committee offers its report and moves the adoption of its recommendations.
- The minority offers its report and moves that it be substituted for the committee’s report and recommendations.
- The moderator calls for amendments to the main motion (the committee’s report and recommendations). When no more amendments are offered, the moderator declares that it is “perfected,” after which no additional substantive changes can be made to the motion unless the body votes to reconsider the declaration.
- The moderator calls for amendments to the substitute motion, ending in a similar declaration.
- The moderator states the question, “shall the substitute motion become the main motion,” which is debated and put to a vote. The debate can include the merits of both the main motion and the substitute motion.
- The result of this vote is only to accept or reject the substitute motion; therefore, the question is then on the adoption of the main motion—which is either the perfected original main motion or the perfected substitute motion which has now become the main motion. *Only this vote* becomes the assembly’s “final action” on the matter.

4. Commit or Refer

Referral of business items to a committee is a time-honored and effective way to encourage thorough and thoughtful consideration. Sometimes matters are referred to existing standing or special committees. Other times, the motion to refer includes the *creation* of a special committee to handle the consideration. If that is the case, then the motion needs to be specific about who will serve on the committee and in what role(s), and who names the committee and when. Motions to refer can include any instructions to the committee about processes to follow, timelines for their work and reporting, and any other details an assembly wishes to give them.

5. Postpone Definitely

This is the usual way that an assembly makes adjustments to its schedule in the midst of a meeting—either when some other important matter needs to be addressed, or when it becomes evident in the midst of the consideration of a matter that additional time or information is needed. The motion maker would say something like, “I move to postpone this matter until 2:00 p.m. so that we can read the committee’s rationale over the lunch hour,” or “I move to postpone this matter until after the report of the property committee,” or so on.

If the council or entity involved meets at least quarterly, a motion can even be postponed until its next stated meeting. Or it can be postponed to an “adjourned meeting,” which is an agreed upon continuation of the current meeting held at another time and perhaps place—but such a meeting must already have been established, or be established by means of the privileged motion to “fix the time to which to adjourn” before the postponement is adopted.

6. Limit or Extend Limits of Debate

Unless an assembly has adopted a special rule that states otherwise, members may speak twice on any motion on the same day (although anyone who hasn't yet spoken is entitled to preference in recognition), and speeches may be up to ten minutes in length. Many assemblies find it necessary to limit speeches more severely than this, and they may do so even in the midst of the meeting by a two-thirds vote. Occasionally, the opposite is also true, and previously adopted limits need to be relaxed. The same motion and rules apply. The motion maker simply says something like, "I move that debate be limited to five minutes per speaker."

7. Previous Question

Previous Question (commonly known as "Calling the Question") is the means by which an assembly can end debate on one or more pending items even when there are some who still wish to keep debating. The motion requires a two-thirds vote. In its simplest form ("I move the previous question"), it only affects the *immediately pending* question. But it can also be made on the immediately pending question and any or all other consecutive pending questions. For example, if the immediately pending question is a secondary amendment, the previous question can be called on the secondary amendment, the secondary and primary amendments, or on "all pending questions;" namely, the secondary and primary amendments, followed immediately by the main motion either as amended or not.

8. Lay on the Table

The motion to Lay on the Table (or "Table") is a means of temporarily suspending consideration of a matter because of a very urgent matter that has arisen. It is quick and relatively easy—because it is not debatable, and requires only a majority vote; however, it *also* requires a majority to then take the matter from the table, and bring it back to the assembly. It is *not* the motion that should be used if the intent is to make the matter go away entirely. The motion to Postpone Indefinitely is a more effective way to accomplish that end. Likewise, Postpone Definitely should be used when postponement should be an option for discussion rather than a pressing need because of present circumstances.

9. Call for the Orders of the Day

When an assembly has agreed to deal with particular matters at certain times, it is in order for a member to call the chair's attention to the fact that the agreed upon time has arrived, even if another speaker currently has the floor.

10. Question of Privilege

Questions of Privilege can be wide ranging, but are generally related to an assembly's processes or arrangements—such as the inability to hear a speaker, or heating and cooling issues, but also including such various matters as the need to dismiss visitors and meet in "executive session," correcting inaccurate information that has been distributed or spoken, or requesting that a member be called to order for speaking inappropriately.

11. Recess

While recesses are typically taken in long meetings for the purpose of attending to physical needs, they can also be helpful as a way for leaders to consult about meeting processes, or for "sides" in a debate to meet and work out their differences, or for other reasons. As stated above, a recess might be taken for a specific period of time in order to conduct a discernment process. If a recess is moved as a privileged motion (while another item of business is pending), it is not debatable and can only be made for an *immediate* recess; however, it can still be amended with respect to the recess's duration. If it is made when no motion is pending, it can be debated and the motion can be to set a recess for some future time in the meeting. When a recess is concluded, the meeting is called back to order and business resumes *exactly* as it stood when the recess was taken, beginning with whatever motion was immediately pending at the time.

12. Adjourn

Adjourning brings the current meeting to an end. It is therefore nearly always a privileged motion, and it is important that assemblies do not adjourn without ensuring that necessary details of the next meeting have been established.

13. Fix the Time to Which to Adjourn

The time “to which to adjourn” means the time at which an assembly that still has business to accomplish will hold another meeting to complete its work. It is therefore the highest ranking motion because it could be necessary even while a motion to adjourn is pending.

SECTION 7: ADDITIONAL MOTIONS

The remaining seventy-three motions in RONR are either “Incidental” motions, or motions “that bring a matter again before the assembly.” As with most of the ranking and privileged motions, when incidental motions are made with no other motion pending, they are generally handled as any other main motion would be. If they are made while another motion is pending, they are usually handled immediately, if they are deemed to be in order. But as always, only the full description in RONR gives all the details.

Chart #2 in the center of this booklet lists a number of these motions, and some of their characteristics. Further descriptions of a few of them are given here.

Reconsider

Reconsideration is a special way that an assembly can take a matter back up in the same session at which it was first decided when it believes it has acted rashly or when in the aftermath of a decision, additional information comes to light that is likely to change the vote. The motion maker is required to have voted with the prevailing side (or in committees, to have not voted on the losing side). The motion is *only* in order at the same session as the original action, or in assemblies of multiple days, no later than the next day after the action. After that, the motion to Rescind or Amend Something Previously Adopted must be used.

Rescind; Amend Something Previously Adopted

Generally, an assembly can either rescind or amend an action taken at some point in the past, as long as the action has not already been carried out and cannot be undone. Unlike the motion to Reconsider, *any* member can make the motion; however, it requires either previous notice (which means announcing the intent to offer the motion at a prior meeting or in the call to the current meeting), a two-thirds vote, or a majority of the entire membership (not just those who are present and who vote on the motion).

Since actions of administrative commissions in the PC(USA) are considered actions of the appointing council, this is the motion by which any member of a council may attempt to alter an action of a commission of that council.

Point of Order

A Point of Order is essentially a challenge to how a matter has been handled by the assembly; that is, whether provisions of the constitution, bylaws, or rules of order of the organization have been applied correctly. It is made by a single member, and must usually be stated almost immediately to be in order. It can therefore interrupt the chair or a speaker. If someone says, “Point of Order!” the chair is required to ask them to state their point, and then “rule” whether or not the point is “well-taken.” If it is well-taken, then the matter is immediately corrected. If it is not well-taken, then business resumes.

Appeal

Likewise, any member can “Appeal from the Ruling of the Chair” with respect to any ruling the chair makes (including on a Point of Order), although this motion requires a second. The effect of the appeal is that the assembly itself decides the question. Since the assembly has elected its presiding officer, the “presumption” is that the presiding officer’s ruling was correct. For that reason, the chair has the privilege of both beginning and concluding the debate on an appeal, and the question on which the vote is taken is, “shall the ruling of the chair be sustained?” An “aye” vote therefore affirms the chair’s ruling, and a “no” vote overturns the chair’s ruling.

Requests and Inquiries

Every member of an assembly has the right and the responsibility to be well-informed. A **Request for Information** can be made at any time. If the request is related to meeting procedures (for example, if a member is unclear about what motion is currently pending), the request is called a **Parliamentary Inquiry**. These requests are usually in order, and are generally either answered by the chair or someone to whom the chair directs the question.

Requests should never be used as a means to *make* a point or argue for one position or another, and any attempt to do so should be ruled out of order. If the request essentially challenges the meeting process, the motion **Point of Order** should be used. And if the request is for anything *other* than information (for example, a request to speak louder or turn up the heat in the building), then the request should take the form of the privileged motion **Question of Privilege**.

Consider Seriatim

If the matter under consideration in an assembly is a resolution of more than one section or paragraph (such as a policy or a revision of one or more sections of a manual), it may be preferable to consider it “seriatim,” which means one after another in a series. When considering a motion in this way, each paragraph, section, or the like is opened for debate and perfection as a separate question (to which every member has the right to speak, even if they have exhausted their right to speak on another section), but the motion is not put to a vote until all sections have been perfected, and the whole document, as perfected, has been open to debate. Considering a matter seriatim requires a majority vote; however, the chair has the prerogative of proceeding as though it has been ordered by the assembly. If the chair does so, a member may instead move to consider the matter as a whole, which also then requires a majority vote.

SECTION 8: PROCEDURE IN SMALL BOARDS AND IN COMMITTEES

The amount of formality necessary in meetings is greatly affected by the size of the gathering. When a family has a decision to make, its members may gather around the dinner table and talk it through, finally reaching a consensus – without a single family member making a motion, or anyone needing to vote! But at a General Assembly meeting of our PC(USA) church family’s elected commissioners and delegates, we need extensive and well-defined rules for every aspect of the meeting.

As noted in Section 3, most of our church sessions and most of our council’s commissions meet the RONR (12th ed.) 49:21 standard of “not more than about a dozen members present,” which means that some or all of the relaxed rules for “small boards” may be in order. And in practice, many sessions simply operate under these relaxed rules by custom or tradition without even realizing that they are doing so. However, the council’s *Manual* should state clearly which rules the council and its commissions will follow.

Below is a list of the rule variations.

Small Boards – RONR (12th ed.) 49:21

- Members may raise a hand instead of standing when seeking to obtain the floor, and may remain seated while making motions or speaking.
- Motions need not be seconded.
- There is no limit to the number of times a member can speak to a debatable question. Appeals, however, are debatable under the regular rules—that is, each member (except the chair) can speak only once in debate on them, while the chair may speak twice.
- Informal discussion of a subject is permitted while no motion is pending.
- When a proposal is perfectly clear to all present, a vote can be taken without a motion’s having been introduced. Unless agreed to by unanimous consent, however, all proposed actions must be approved by vote under the same rules as in larger meetings, except that a vote can be taken initially by a show of hands, which is often a better method in small meetings.
- The chairman need not rise while putting questions to a vote.
- If the chairman is a member, he may, without leaving the chair, speak in informal discussions and in debate, and vote on all questions.

Note, especially, the fourth bullet point regarding “informal discussion.” In many small sessions and administrative commissions, the way decisions are reached is that an open general (informal) discussion of the matter takes place, and then once a consensus is reached, a member states that consensus in the form of a motion, which is then adopted (usually, unanimously). This is entirely in keeping with the rules for small boards. And in keeping with the *next* bullet point, isn’t

even an absolute requirement for a member to make the motion. It can simply be assumed by the moderator, and written up by the clerk.

Committees – RONR (12th ed.) 50:24-25

RONR further states that committees (regardless of size, unless instructed otherwise by the parent assembly or board), operate with all of the relaxed rules for small board. Additionally, it is noted that committee moderators are “usually the most active participant in the discussions and work of the committee.” It then notes several specific additional modifications of rules, as follows:

- The motion to Rescind or to Amend Something Previously Adopted requires a two-thirds vote *unless* “all committee members who voted for the motion to be rescinded or amended are present or have received reasonable notice, in which case they require a majority vote” (RONR (12th ed.) 35:2).
- The motion to Reconsider, contained in RONR (12th ed.) 37:35 when made in a committee:
 - 1) can be made and taken up regardless of the time that has elapsed since the vote was taken, and there is no limit to the number of times a question can be reconsidered. Likewise, the rule requiring unanimous consent to renew a defeated motion to Reconsider does not apply in committees.
 - 2) can be made by any member of the committee who did not vote with the losing side; or, in other words, the maker of the motion to Reconsider can be one who voted with the prevailing side, or one who did not vote at all, or even was absent, and
 - 3) unless all the members of the committee who voted with the prevailing side are present or have been given reasonable notice that the reconsideration will be moved, it requires a two-thirds vote to adopt the motion to Reconsider.

SECTION 9: VOTING

The final step in decision making (or in processing any motion) is to vote. Most votes require a majority of those present and voting. So, for example, if there are 12 members present, but three of them choose not to vote (which is called “abstaining”), then a majority of the nine members “present and voting” would be five. Other votes require a greater consensus (such as a two-thirds vote, or a majority of the entire membership). There are a number of methods by which votes are taken—whether at the will of the chair, by vote of an assembly, or as required by its rules, as follows:

- **Unanimous Consent**

Much routine business may be handled by means of “unanimous consent,” which means that the chair simply says, “is there any objection?” If no one immediately seeks recognition or says “I object,” then the chair says “seeing no objection, it is so ordered.” In this form of voting, if *anyone* objects, the chair then proceeds to take the vote by another method.

- **Voice Vote**

Voice vote is the most usual form of voting. The chair says “all in favor, say aye,” pauses briefly while members respond, then says, “all opposed, say no,” and pauses again for responses. The chair then declares which side “has it,” and says the motion is either adopted or not adopted, gives any direction required as a result of the motion (such as, “the clerk will compose and send the approved letter”) and then announces the next pending item of business (which also occurs with the other methods, once a definitive decision is reached).

- **Rising Vote (or Show of Hands)**

If the chair or anyone else is unsure of which side prevailed on a voice vote, any member has the right to demand a “division,” by simply calling out “Division!” A division is *not* a counted vote. It is simply a re-taking of the vote by either raising hands (in a small assembly) or standing. In some large assemblies, special “voting cards” are issued to voting members that may be raised for a division.

- **Counted Vote**

A counted vote can always be ordered by the chair. But otherwise, it requires a majority vote of the members—yes, sometimes you have to vote on how to vote! And of course in some meetings there are electronic forms of voting available that present counted votes more efficiently (and are therefore used more frequently in the meeting).

- **Ballots and Roll Calls**

Finally, some votes are taken by ballot or roll call. Ballot votes have the effect of protecting the secrecy of the voter's choice, and are often used for elections or votes on controversial matters. Roll call votes have the opposite effect, since all voters' responses are recorded in the minutes. Either of these methods, if not specified in a council's *Manual*, requires a majority vote.

It should be noted that when voting electronically, it is not always evident whether the vote is a simple counted vote (i.e., not necessarily secret), a ballot vote, or a roll call vote. This should therefore be clearly stated in the rules for the meeting, based on the technologies utilized.

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