

Information for Reviewers of Church Sessional Records

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From Book of Church Order 2011:

http://www.opc.org/BCO/FG.html#Chapter_XIII

CHAPTER XIII THE LOCAL CHURCH AND ITS SESSION

4. The session, which is the governing body of the local church, consists of its pastor, its other ministers, and its ruling elders. It shall choose its own moderator annually from among its members.

5. The session shall convene at the call of the moderator, the presbytery, any two members of the session, or upon its own adjournment. A quorum of a session is two ruling elders, if there are three or more, or one ruling elder if there are fewer than three, together with the pastor or one of the pastors of the local congregation. In no case may the session conduct its business with fewer than two present who are entitled to vote.

6. When the pastor is unable to be present, or when for other reasons it seems advisable, another minister, normally of the same presbytery, acceptable to the session and the pastor, may be invited to be present for counsel; he shall be without vote, but may be elected to moderate the meeting.

When a church is without a pastor, the session shall request the presbytery to appoint a minister, normally of the same presbytery, to meet with them, or shall itself invite such a minister; he shall have the right to vote, and to be elected to moderate the meeting.

When it is impractical without great inconvenience for a minister to attend, those present may conduct business, but the grounds for the call of such a meeting shall be reviewed at the next meeting at which a minister is present.

7. The session is charged with maintaining the government of the congregation. It shall oversee all matters concerning the conduct of public worship; it shall concert the best measures for promoting the spiritual growth and evangelistic witness of the congregation. It shall receive, dismiss, and exercise discipline over the members of the church, supervise the activities of the diaconate, the board of trustees and all other organizations of the congregation, and have final authority over the use of the church property. The session also shall appoint ruling elder commissioners to higher assemblies.

8. The session shall keep the following records: (1) minutes of its meetings, including a record of the administration of the sacraments and changes in the membership of the congregation; (2) minutes of the meetings of the congregation; and (3) rolls of the members of the congregation, both of communicant members and of their baptized children, with the dates of their reception. Such rolls shall designate those members worshipping with a mission work. Births, baptisms, censures, restorations, deaths, and removals shall be noted on these rolls. The session shall submit its minutes and the minutes of the congregation to the presbytery for review at least once every year.

9. The names of members shall be placed upon or removed from the rolls of the church only by order of the session, and according to the provisions of the Book of Discipline.

When upon the request of a member the session dismisses him to another congregation the clerk shall send a letter commending him to its care, and the clerk of the receiving church shall notify the dismissing church of the date of his reception. When notification is received the clerk shall remove his name from the roll and record the fact in the minutes.

Whenever a member desires dismissal to a church of which the session cannot approve, and he cannot be dissuaded, it shall grant him a certificate of standing, unless the session institutes disciplinary action against him; upon being informed that he has joined such a church the clerk shall erase his name from the roll.

10. If a session shall cease to exist or become so small as to prevent it from working effectively, the presbytery shall provide for an election and ordination of elders from within the congregation; or the presbytery, with the consent of the congregation, may appoint ruling elders or ministers, or both, normally from within the same presbytery, to be an acting session or to augment the existing session temporarily.

From the Presbytery of the Southwest Bylaws and Instruments - January 15, 2010:

Bylaws:

Section 9 The Committee on Leave of Absence and Sessional records shall consist of four members, two ministers and two ruling elders.

- a. The committee shall be responsible for maintaining an examination process by which approximately one third of the sessions must submit their sessional records at each stated meeting. The Committee shall present a written report of notations and exceptions to the next stated meeting.
- b. The committee shall be authorized to assign sessional records to subcommittees appointed by it such that each record shall be examined by at least one minister and one ruling elder.
- c. The committee shall send a letter at least 45 days prior to each stated meeting to those sessions designated to report in (a.) above, instructing them to submit two copies of their session records to the Leave of Absence/Session Records Committee at the next stated meeting.
- d. The committee shall make a written report to presbytery of recommendations as to each record examined. Before recommending that an exception be taken to the minutes of a session, the committee shall normally confer with the moderator of the session or the ruling elder delegate of the church. Upon approval of the report by presbytery, the minute book of each session shall be signed by the moderator indicating whether or not exceptions were taken. The report of the subcommittee as edited by the committee shall be provided to the session.

Findings of the committee with respect to the minutes of each session shall be assigned to the following categories as appropriate:

Notations: Notations are any of the following which in the judgment of the committee do appear to conform in substance to church standards and therefore do not warrant the specific attention of presbytery: errors of form or fact or violations of regulative standards to which sessions are subject. These might include typographical errors, misspellings, improper punctuation, non-prejudicial misstatements of fact, failure to provide proper or sufficient information or identification, or prejudicial misstatements of fact. General suggestions or advice for improving some aspect of the minutes would also be appropriately included here.

Exceptions: Exceptions are any of the following which in the judgment of presbytery appear not to conform in substance to church standards, and therefore warrant presbytery's specific response: actions of sessions or errors of form or fact or violations of regulative standards to which sessions are subject."

PSW Instruments – Sections B and C:

B. RULES FOR SESSIONAL RECORDS

1. The records of the session shall conform to the ordinate and subordinate standards of the Church (e.g. Form of Government XIII:7-8).
2. The records of the session shall be legibly written or typed on numbered pages, with a margin of at least one inch on the left side. They shall state the time and place of meeting and the names of the members present and absent, the time of adjournment, and the minutes shall be appropriately signed.
3. All votes and proceedings which are necessary to give a complete history of the church (a full picture of the life of the congregation) shall be recorded, including statistical reports, elections of elders and deacons, reception and dismissal of members, time of the celebration of the Lord's Supper, baptisms of infants and adults, and marriages. Separate records should also be kept of baptisms, marriages, and deaths.
4. All records of the reception of members by letter shall state from what church the member came; and records of dismissal shall state to what church the member is recommended.
5. Church sessions shall order the incorporation of proceedings of congregational meetings with their own record so as to exhibit the actions taken and shall indicate the commitment made by the congregation each year for the support of its pastor, and any changes in the terms of the call.
6. The records of sessions shall be read and approved by the session, and the fact of such approval shall be entered in the minutes.
7. Two copies of sessional records shall be annually submitted for examination and approval to presbytery at the stated meeting designated for each session by the Leave of Absence & Sessional Records Committee. The sessional records book shall be presented to the subsequent presbytery meeting, at which the Leave of Absence & Sessional Records Committee presents its report on the reviewed minutes. The expense of the committee is to be covered by that church which fails to comply with number six (6) of the "Rules for Sessional Records".
8. The session shall take note in its minutes of exceptions taken by the presbytery to its minutes, together with the corrections or explanations adopted by the session to rectify them.
9. All meetings should be opened and closed with prayer and that fact should be noted in the minutes.
10. The minutes of a meeting of session should inform the reader as to who was moderating the meeting.

C. DUTIES OF SESSIONS

1. The presbytery recommends that each session hold at least four regular meetings each year.
2. The session in granting letters of dismissal must address them to some particular evangelical church.
3. Each session shall review its roll of members annually.
4. A request to be excused from ruling elder representation at a stated meeting of presbytery shall include in the request the statement that this was an official action of the session and the date of the meeting at which it was taken.
5. The session shall communicate to the stated clerk the name and address of the clerk of session.

