

# FPC Polity and Policy FAQs

As we move forward together, we realize that there are a lot of questions about the present FPC Policies and the Polity that undergirds them. We realize that this can be very confusing.

The foundation for FPC Governance is The **PCUSA Book of Order**

Available for download as a PDF at:

<http://oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/constitutional-services/constitution/>

The Book of Order is part of the PCUSA Constitution that also includes the **PCUSA Book of Confessions**. Available as a PDF at:

[https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/boc2014.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/boc2014.pdf)

As well, FPC must live in accordance with the **Congregation By-Laws**. Available as a PDF at the FPC website:

<http://www.fpcbellingham.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Bylaws-approved-by-members-8-26-12.pdf>

## **Here is a short Primer on PCUSA Governance**

The Elders of the church (Presbyters, called the Session) lead the church,

The congregation elects all their Elders, teaching and ruling:

- The congregation elects their Ruling Elders every year in February, or at other times

- The congregation elects their Teaching Elders, Pastor and Associate Pastor upon leadership change.

- The congregation votes on any changes to the terms of call of the pastors (salary/benefits)

The pastor moderates the Session where they have a vote.

The pastors moderate the Congregational meetings, where they have no vote as they are members of Presbytery and not of the congregation.

The pastor has full authority on a scripture preached on Sunday, songs sung by the congregation, and weddings performed off campus.

EVERY decision other than those three is a Session decision.

The FPC Session empowers committees to do the work of ministry around the church

FPC Elders are listed on the website - [www.fpcbellingham.org](http://www.fpcbellingham.org)

FPC Deacons are elected by the congregation, ordained by Session, and supervised by Session.

## **Current Session Policy regarding our church and LBGQTQ+**

The present policy of the FPC Session was created by the 2014 FPC Session when we ended the discernment process. It basically borrowed the wording of the previous Book of Order standards that had been removed from the present book of order.

*We will continue to uphold the long-standing stance of Session not to ordain individuals unwilling to live in fidelity in traditional marriage between a man and a woman, and chastity in singleness nor to officiate same sex weddings within the church building.*

**Q- Wait - I thought that the congregation got to elect their own Elders. How can Session make a policy around who can become an Elder?**

The congregation elects their officers, but after the congregation has elected them, the Session (the present elected Elders) then has a chance to examine them. This Policy is saying that the Session will not approve any Elder that will not live in fidelity and chastity, and therefore will not ordain them. *\*Reminder: anyone who proclaims Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior can be a member. And anyone who is a member can be nominated and possibly elected by the congregation to be an Elder or Deacon.*

**Q- Could the Session just examine them before they are elected?**

No. Our Book of Order is clear on the order in which things must be done. That order would take away the congregation's right to elect their own leaders.

**Q. So how would this work?**

The Session policy is saying that the Session will overrule the congregational vote and not approve elected candidates who are not willing to live in fidelity and chastity. Session cannot elect, but they have the power to approve and to ordain.

**Q. Can the Session change their mind?**

Yes. Any subsequent Session can always change their policies. As well, no present Session is ever able to tie the hands of future Sessions. They may set policies, but policies can be changed by a future Session.

**Q. What can't be changed?**

Session cannot change the Polity of the PCUSA Church (The Book of Order) nor can they change Congregational By-Laws. Only the congregation can change those.

**PCUSA Polity**

**Q. How does our congregation elect our Elders and Deacons?**

Every Fall our Nominating Committee gathers together. The Nominating Committee includes four elected FPC Members, two Elders, one deacon, and a pastor with a voice but no vote. The Nominating Committee looks at every member of the church, prays for God's leading, listens to the Spirit, takes congregational suggestions, interviews people, and puts forth a slate of Elders, Deacons, and Nominating Committee Members for our February Meeting. The congregation then votes on the individuals of that slate. The process always allows for nominations from the floor at the congregational meeting.

**Q. Is this true for Pastors as well?**

Pastors are sometimes called Teaching Elders but most commonly are referred to as Ministers of Word and Sacrament. Pastors are elected by the congregation in the same process. There is a nominating committee and a congregational election. As well, whenever a Pastor's terms of call (salary and benefits) are changed, the whole congregation votes on it.

**Q. Could a congregation ever be forced to take a pastor?**

Never.

**Q. Who gets to decide what weddings the Pastors perform?**

PCUSA Pastors have freedom to perform or not perform any wedding they feel called to perform. It is one of the few freedoms that Pastors have.

**Q. What role does the Session have in a wedding?**

The Session holds authority over what weddings take place on the church property.

**Q. Can Pastors be forced to perform a wedding?**

Never. The Book of Order is very clear about this.

**Q. Can a Session be forced to authorize a wedding on the Church Property?**

Never. The Book of Order is very clear about this, Session has full authority over services that take place on the property.

**Q. Does the congregation get a vote on this?**

Like almost all things Presbyterian, the Session votes on Session Policies. The congregational vote will always be about the individuals we elect as Elders and Deacons. Congregation members can make their concerns known to Elders, but this is a Session decision. As well, the Session members were in attendance through the Gracious Family Dialogues. The dialogues were intended to be a time to listen to each other and the Session is taking that call very seriously.

**Q. Does Session have an agenda?**

All the individual Elders on Session have their own hopes and dreams for our beloved church. As individuals, it is impossible to not have some sort of agenda. As a body though, the Session does not have an agenda other than to Glorify God.

**The Recommendation of the 2018-2019 Session to the Present Session**

As the 2018-2019 session ended their year, they came to an agreement (a small miracle for a body in disagreement about whether the Bible teaches that a same sex marriage is sexual immorality). However, at that time the Session was one elder below the By-Law minimum of eight Elders. That Session was no longer compliant with By-Laws and no longer a functioning Session. They had spent many hours in prayers and dialogue about this topic though, so they made a recommendation to the new Session which contains five new Elders out of ten (12 in all when you include Doug and Becca).

*Session will only ordain individuals willing to live in fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness. Out of respect for the disagreement in our church and session regarding biblical standards and same-sex marriage, weddings will no longer be allowed on the church property.*

**What is still present in the recommended policy?**

The Session is still affirming that leaders at FPC must live in fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness.

**What is missing?**

The Session is recommending removing *traditional marriage between a man and a woman* from the policy. This means that Session would not automatically reject an officer in a same-sex marriage. It does not mean that Session would automatically approve them either. It means that Session would take each candidate on an individual basis after they were elected by the Congregation. This makes the decision to install an officer in a same-sex marriage primarily a congregational decision.

**What is changed?**

The Session is recommending that we no longer allow weddings on the church campus because there is no way to proceed without some percentage of the community feeling like we are committing a sin. All members of session enjoy weddings. This feels like a loss across the board, but one that we are willing to undertake out of love and respect for our brothers and sisters.

**Will FPC no longer perform weddings?**

Of course, but not on the property. The church is a body, not a building. FPC will continue to celebrate weddings, just not at the building where we regularly gather.

**Will the Pastors perform same-sex weddings off campus?**

As mentioned above, Pastors have full freedom in the weddings they perform off campus. All those with authority to perform weddings at FPC do not plan to use their freedom at the risk of harming the body. If they are asked to do a same-sex wedding our pastors will begin a full and open dialogue with the Session. None of the pastors at FPC are interested in using our freedom as an excuse for doing wrong or harming the church. (1 Peter 2:16, Contemporary English Version)

**How many weddings will this impact?**

FPC has had very few requests to host weddings in the past five years.