



What is the Book of Forms?

Each of the four church courts of the Presbyterian Church in Canada follows rules and responsibilities outlined in the Book of Forms. While all teaching elders (ministers) and ruling elders should have a copy, the Book of Forms impacts all church members as well.

What kind of book is the Book of Forms? Is it a procedures manual? Is it the Presbyterian version of canon law? How does the Book of Forms describe its purpose? Its Preface contains some valuable insight.

1. The Book of Forms is a guide book (not a road map) that is to serve as “a useful guide for the members, office bearers and the courts of the church in the transaction of ecclesiastical business.” The Book of Forms points out common pitfalls and notes important issues of which we should be aware in our leadership and decision-making practices. For example, Rule 56 states that members should not speak more than once to a motion or amendment. This rule emphasizes the equality and right of all members to participate in the debates of the courts. Further, it ensures that one person does not dominate a discussion.
2. The Book of Forms provides “a summary of the approved practice of [Canadian] Presbyterian Churches,” a kind of collection of Presbyterian best practices. It is a statement of our polity, which marks us as Presbyterians. We are a church named after how we govern ourselves. Our primary decision makers are called elders, presbyters from the Greek word *presbyteroi* found in the New Testament (e.g., James 5:14). We are a denomination committed to process and doing things “decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40).
3. The Book of Forms provides many examples of how to put our polity into practice. These examples, found in Appendix A, are intended to serve “not as models to be copied exactly, but as illustrations shedding light on the procedure embodied in the text.” In other words, interpretation is a key factor in determining regional and cultural expressions of our polity.
4. The Book of Forms stipulates the terms of communication and decision-making in our engagement with each other. From defining rules of debate to delineating the roles and responsibilities of teaching and ruling elders in each court of the church, the Book of Forms guides us in treating each other justly as God’s people. The Book of Forms concludes with a prayer that we may “serve for the orderly administration of the business of the church as a member of the body of Christ.”
5. Finally, the Book of Forms should never be viewed as a prescriptive tool to prevent or restrict discussion. It provides the form or process for us to use to discern God's will as we work answers out together in community, either in a committee or a court.

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