

CHURCH POLITY is open-book because we orderly Presbyterians go about our ministries concerned that one evidence of faithfulness to God is an ordered life together rooted in our sense of discipleship.

Polity is a relational expression of the Church's theological commitments (foundation). The Church Polity examination provides an opportunity for the candidate to demonstrate an understanding of polity as a tool for ministry in the context of church life.

The examination assesses how the candidate interprets, communicates and utilizes the Book of Order in his or her practice of ministry.

WHAT THE CANDIDATES OUGHT TO KNOW

- That the purpose of the Section I question is to test the candidate's understanding of constitutional order as founded on basic theological principles that have been passed down to us over the years.
- That the purpose of the Section II and Section III questions is to test the candidate's ability to apply constitutional provisions to life in the church.
- That the Section II question addresses concerns that repeat themselves regularly in the practice of ministry.
- That many essay questions are based on actual contemporary situations in the church, and that they tend to have a preferable direction or resolution or range of responses rather than cut-and-dried correct answers: e.g, there is the general expectation that a satisfactory resolution of a situation is reconciliation rather than victory.
- That one should appreciate what "pastoral" means out in the church – not mushy or permissive, but caringly constructive.
- That one should follow directions, that "list" doesn't mean "evaluate," and that sometimes one is asked to respond to an individual and sometimes one isn't.
- That one should keep track of time.
- That at least two of the three sections must be passed.
- That at least two people will be evaluating the paper – and eventually the candidate's CPM will read it, too; as well as a calling Presbytery Committee.
- That, repeatedly, new readers comment on the fairness and care of this system.

Prepared by Polity Task Group, Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee
Jerry W. Houchens, Executive Secretary
April 1994 (Revised)

Preparing for and Taking the Polity Ordination Exam

1. Make one page outlines of each chapter in the *Book of Order*. If you have to choose among chapters, the following are probably most important: G-1.0000—G-4.0000; W-1.4000—W-3.0000; D-1.0000—D-3.0000, D-6.0000, D-10.0000. (Any chapters you do not have time to outline should be read and underlined carefully. The advantage of the outline is that it forces you to see the general structure of each chapter and the most important components in that structure.)
2. As you work on the outlines (or otherwise study) material following G-1.0000—G-4.0000, make notes about where foundational issues in these first four chapters are reflected throughout the book. Make notes at the bottom of each page-long outline concerning which of the major issues shows up in a particular chapter. (You may want to do some color-coding of themes from the first four chapters as they notice their appearance elsewhere in the book.)
3. Identify major themes like: Diversity and Inclusiveness, Reformed and Being Reformed, Parity between Elders and Ministers, Connectional/Relational Church and others you notice as you do your outlining. Some of these may be part and parcel of the foundational issues in #2, above; others may be in addition to these. Make notes at the bottom of each page-long outline about which of these major themes shows up in a particular chapter. (Alternatively, do color-coding of these as above.)
4. Practice taking as many old polity exams as you can. Before trying to answer a question, analyze it according to at least the following:

The issues raised by the exam question. (Note: sometimes such issues are identical with the pastoral issues a question raises, sometimes they are distinct. Make sure that you are clear about the issues the question asks you to respond to. List them for yourself.)

The references or provisions of the *Book of Order* that respond to the issues raised by the question. Connect each reference to one of the particular issues you have identified. Ask in particular where these rules lead or what they suggest when applied to the circumstances delineated in the question. Write this application out in complete sentences. The index to the book and your own outlines should be helpful here. (Remember that in the actual exam, you can bring your book and any material that you have written into the book with your own hand. You cannot paste in outlines or any other printed or typed material.)

The pastoral issues raised by the question. Use your general pastoral skills of empathic listening, seeking to discern the feelings as well as the thoughts a person may be having. Explicitly describe (if the question asks for pastorally sensitive response) how you would utilize these skills while relating appropriate information and perspective concerning concrete issues as informed by the *Book of Order*. Remember that pastoral sensitivity has to do with the well being of the whole church, as well as of particular individuals.

5. Submit your practice efforts to peer review in a study group. Working independently initially, followed by such peer evaluation and response, will keep you from developing lazy habits. The act of reviewing the work of some of your peers will also sharpen your own insights and analytical skills.
6. In the exam itself, rely on the pattern you have developed in # 4, above, to analyze and respond to the actual question that has been posed. Do not too quickly assume that the question is "just like" something you have witnessed in your presbytery or heard about somewhere else in the life of the church. The temptation in such a case is to answer with what you remember the presbytery having done. The question wants you to analyze the particular case it proposes and answer on the basis of the provisions of the *Book of Order*.
7. Give particular attention to the verbs that are used in the question on the exam. (It may be useful to underscore them.) "List" and/or "cite" are not the same as "discuss" and/or "evaluate." Make sure your answer undertakes the kind of activity the particular verb calls for, rather than some other.
8. Organize your answer with at least a brief outline before trying to write your essay response to the question. You will feel pressed for time, but it is better to write fewer words with purpose and direction than many words that lack coherence. Also, write as legibly as your fine motor skills allow.

Prepared by D. Cameron Murchison, Jr.

With assistance from students who have recently taken the exams (successfully, ☺).

April 20, 1998.

Suggestions for Taking the Polity Ordination Exam

1. Read the questions carefully. I have found that many students answer the wrong question. Sometimes that occurs because they simply do not focus on the intent of the question. If the question asks you to "list" issues, that does not mean you need to "evaluate" them at that time. Some evaluation may be expected later, however.
2. Though this is now entirely an open book exam, *do not let this fact make you complacent*. If you do not know the *Book of Order* thoroughly, you will not even be able to identify the issues posed by the questions. How will you know that they are issues unless you are grounded in both the details of our polity and its foundational principles? In other words, you need to have a sense of the whole and the specifics in order to do your best work.
3. Learn the chapter headings. Though you have a good index in the book, you will not need to look up material nearly as much if you can turn quickly to a specific chapter for a cross reference, etc. (As of this writing, you can still insert tabs in each chapter and write notes in your book; however, double-check me on this later.)
4. *Historic Principles, Conscience, and Church Government* is particularly helpful in explaining foundational principles of Presbyterian order. See pages 6-17. Often an essay question is drawn from the first five chapters of the book; therefore, know these chapters plus their explication in *Historic Principles, Conscience, and Church Government*.
5. Study essay questions from old ordination exams. Specifically, 1) learn to state the polity issues clearly. Cite references whenever possible. 2) State what you could do based on our polity and its principles. 3) Identify the pastoral issues in the case. How would you handle those issues? Pastoral sensitivity does not mean being sugary and permissive but caring and constructive. It must consider the church's well-being as a whole. Think through, then, what you could and would do in a specific situation, bearing in mind what the constitution says and what pastoral sensitivity requires. In your responses, don't beat people over the head with the constitution to win an argument, but remember that there are some things we shall and shall not

do as Presbyterians. Communicating that to individuals and groups requires pastoral skill.

6. Practice writing out some answers and then letting your study group give you feedback. In study sessions work independently on the essays, bringing your answers back so that together you can look at them. Give one another honest feedback in the process.

7. Your open book exam is on the entire *Book of Order*, including the Directory for Worship and the Rules of Discipline.

8. *Write as legibly as you can.* Some of the "scrawls" are so bad that they must try the patience of the readers!

Robert H. Ramey, Jr.

May 1, 1995