

Guide for a Council Responsible for Discernment

Before the Meeting

Practical preparation guidance for sessions, committees, commissions, presbyteries, and other authorized councils. These are recommended practices, not official PC(USA) policy. Follow the applicable Book of Order provisions and council procedures.

1. Define the purpose and provide appropriate notice

- Identify the questions, concerns, possible consequences, and whether the gathering is exploratory, advisory, or decision-making.
- Explain the purpose and anticipated process to affected persons in advance, as permitted; provide reasonable preparation time and respond to requests for clarification.
- Avoid introducing consequential new issues without considering whether notice, additional information, or time to respond is needed.

2. Confirm authority, procedures, and safeguards

- Identify the applicable Book of Order edition, constitutional interpretations, council policies, and any delegated authority. Distinguish a committee recommendation from a final decision.
- Clarify who may attend, speak, submit information, receive documents, or obtain assistance. Formal judicial safeguards do not automatically apply to nonjudicial meetings.
- Identify notice, submission, review, and other relevant deadlines. Seek knowledgeable polity guidance when rules or authority are uncertain; consider pausing rather than proceeding on an unresolved assumption.

3. Prepare for Whole-Truth Seeking

- **Collect relevant records and a chronology;** identify missing information and people with firsthand knowledge, subject to applicable rules.
- **Separate verified facts, secondhand reports, interpretations, and unanswered questions.** Ask whether multiple accounts trace back to one source.
- **Look actively for evidence that challenges an initial conclusion.** Consider context, alternative explanations, and the possibility of institutional blind spots.
- **Protect privacy and confidentiality;** do not promise document access or witness participation beyond what the procedures allow.
- **Review statements from those subject to discernment.** Ensure that written statements submitted through the applicable procedures are provided to the council members responsible for considering the matter. Members should read these statements carefully before the meeting, identify questions requiring clarification, and consider how the information affects their understanding. Where time or procedures prevent advance review, allow sufficient opportunity for consideration before reaching a decision.
- **Allow sufficient time for meaningful participation.** Before scheduling the meeting, assess the complexity, seriousness, and potential consequences of the matter. Plan enough time for participants to explain their circumstances, present relevant information, respond to concerns, and ask questions. Allow council members time to listen, seek clarification, and consider what they have heard. If sufficient time is unavailable, consider additional meetings or postponing consequential decisions, consistent with applicable procedures.

4. Assess participation, power differences, and support

- Consider the stakes for affected persons or bodies: ministry, membership, livelihood, reputation, relationships, and wider congregational life.

- Examine differences in authority, procedural knowledge, access to information, resources, and ability to be heard. Plan reasonable measures within the council's authority to support meaningful participation.
- Seek an appropriately independent sounding board when useful, checking conflicts of interest and confidentiality. Outside advice informs but does not replace the council's responsibility.

5. Prepare questions and a fair meeting plan

- Prepare open questions: What do we know? What is disputed? Who has not been heard? What evidence would change our understanding?
- Draft an agenda and neutral opening explanation of the council's role. Assign a moderator, note-taker, and someone to track unanswered questions and follow-up.
- Plan when affected persons may explain, ask, respond, and clarify, within the governing procedures. Decide how recommendations, decisions, reasons, and next steps will be communicated.
- Ask before proceeding whether the information, participation, and reflection are sufficient for the gravity, consequences, and reversibility of the possible decision. Be willing to defer when appropriate.

Council Readiness Checklist

- ☐ Purpose, possible consequences, and notice are clear
- ☐ Authority, procedures, participation, and deadlines have been checked
- ☐ Relevant information and contrary evidence have been considered
- ☐ We have read and considered the written statements submitted by those subject to discernment.
- ☐ Facts, reports, assumptions, and uncertainties are distinguished
- ☐ We have assessed the gravity and complexity of the matter and allowed sufficient time for everyone to be meaningfully heard.
- ☐ Power differences, conflicts, confidentiality, and appropriate support have been considered
- ☐ Agenda, roles, questions, and follow-up are prepared
- ☐ We are prepared to seek more information or defer action if discernment is insufficient

Guiding principle: The goal is not merely an efficient meeting or a defensible decision. It is sufficiently informed, fair, prayerful, and responsible discernment that respects the people affected.