

A Practical Preparation Guide for a Person or Body Subject to Discernment

Before the Meeting

Presbyterian Discernment | Before • During • After

For individuals, ministers, congregations, sessions, presbyteries, or other church bodies whose circumstances, requests, actions, or ministries are being considered by a council exercising authority over the matter.

Purpose. Prepare thoughtfully, participate meaningfully, and contribute to a fuller understanding of the truth.

Applicable Book of Order provisions and council procedures govern each situation; this educational guide does not establish additional procedural rights.

1. Understand the meeting

- Ask in writing why the meeting is being held, what issues will be considered, what decisions may follow, and what consequences are possible.
- Ask who will attend, who will lead, and whether this is an informal conversation, administrative matter, examination, or formal judicial proceeding.
- If the purpose remains unclear, request clarification and, if needed, more time to prepare. Keep copies of requests and responses.

2. Learn the rules and decision-making authority

- Ask which current Book of Order provisions, council policies, and meeting procedures apply. Verify the edition and any deadlines.
- Clarify whether a committee may decide the matter or only recommend action to another council. Ask how decisions and reasons will be communicated and what review procedures, if any, apply.
- Ask whether you may submit information, speak, bring an advisor, or receive relevant records. Safeguards differ among proceedings; do not assume that judicial procedures apply to nonjudicial matters.
- If representing a church body, confirm who is authorized to speak, what position the body has approved, and when further consultation is required.

3. Gather and organize relevant information

- Collect relevant correspondence, minutes, reports, evaluations, and other records. Make a short chronology of key events and dates.
- Identify people with firsthand knowledge and ask whether written statements are appropriate under the council's procedures. Do not pressure witnesses.
- Note what evidence supports your understanding, what challenges it, and what information is still missing. Ask how and when materials may be submitted.

4. Separate facts from assumptions

Make four short lists: (1) what I/we can verify; (2) what I/we believe or infer; (3) what others have reported and how they know; and (4) what remains unanswered. Be willing to revise your understanding as new information emerges.

5. Consult a trusted sounding board

Choose someone who listens carefully, challenges assumptions, respects confidentiality, and helps you see the wider context—not simply someone who agrees with you. If possible, include someone familiar with Presbyterian

polity. Consult before the meeting and, as appropriate, during and after the process. Do not disclose protected information without authorization; informal advice is not automatically privileged.

6. Prepare your most important questions

- What is the precise issue, and what evidence or standards are being considered?
- What authority and procedures apply, and what decisions or consequences are possible?
- How may I/we explain our understanding, correct errors, and respond to concerns?
- What happens next, when will reasons be given, and what options exist for further action?

Add questions specific to your circumstances. Prioritize them, bring them in writing, and note any unanswered questions.

7. Decide whether additional assistance is needed

Consider the seriousness, complexity, possible consequences, and differences in authority or procedural knowledge. Specialized assistance may include an experienced elder, polity specialist, mediator, attorney, or an applicable Book of Order counsel or advocate. Ask about qualifications, conflicts, confidentiality, costs, and what role an assistant may play at the meeting. A trusted sounding board and specialized advisor serve different purposes.

8. Prepare a clear statement

- State the purpose of your participation and the outcome or clarification you seek.
- Present key facts and context briefly; distinguish evidence from interpretation and acknowledge significant contrary information.
- Identify relevant rules if appropriate, explain unresolved questions, and conclude with two or three points you most want understood.
- Practice with a trusted reader. Ask in advance whether and how a written statement can be submitted or included in the record.

Meeting Readiness Checklist

Use this as a final review before the meeting. Check only what applies to your situation.

- ☐ I/we understand the purpose, possible decisions, and potential consequences.
- ☐ I/we know which council or committee has authority and what rules apply.
- ☐ I/we have checked deadlines, meeting procedures, and opportunities to participate.
- ☐ If representing a body, I/we have confirmed authority to speak and act.
- ☐ I/we have gathered relevant documents and prepared a short chronology.
- ☐ I/we have distinguished verified facts, assumptions, reports, and unanswered questions.
- ☐ I/we have consulted a trusted sounding board and considered specialized assistance.
- ☐ I/we have prioritized questions and prepared a concise statement.
- ☐ I/we know how to submit materials and how to request reasons or follow-up information.

Questions I/we still need answered:

A final reminder: The aim is not simply to win agreement. It is to help everyone involved reach a fuller, truthful understanding and practice faithful, responsible discernment.

Educational resource only. Not a substitute for pastoral care, professional counseling, legal advice, or authoritative interpretation of Presbyterian polity.