

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

During the Meeting

For individuals, ministers, congregations, sessions, presbyteries, or other bodies appearing before a council exercising authority over a matter. The guide offers educational preparation and participation tools; applicable Book of Order provisions and council procedures govern.

1. Begin with clarity

- Confirm who is present, each person's role, the meeting's purpose, and who may make a decision or recommendation.
- Ask how the meeting will proceed, when you may speak or ask questions, and what will be recorded.
- If significant new issues, documents, or participants appear, ask for clarification and, when needed, additional preparation time.
- If representing a church body, stay within your authorization and identify matters requiring consultation with that body.

2. Listen and respond thoughtfully

- Listen to the whole question. Answer truthfully, directly, and respectfully; say when you do not know.
- Distinguish what was actually said from your interpretation. Correct inaccurate premises without assuming bad motives.
- Use your notes and prepared statement. Pause or request a short break when necessary.
- Do not make significant commitments without understanding their implications; request time to consult when appropriate.

3. Ask questions and examine information

- Ask what evidence supports an assertion, where it originated, and whether it comes from firsthand knowledge, documents, or secondhand reports.
- Multiple repetitions of one account are not necessarily independent confirmation. Ask whether information has been verified or important context is missing.
- Request access to relevant documents and an opportunity to respond to disputed or newly introduced information, subject to applicable procedures and confidentiality limits.
- Remain willing to correct your own understanding when reliable new information emerges. Civil-court evidence rules do not automatically govern church proceedings.

4. Explain your understanding clearly

- Present the essential facts and context, distinguishing verified information from interpretations or assumptions.
- Acknowledge relevant evidence that challenges your position. Avoid speculation, personal attacks, and unnecessary detail.
- Identify the action, clarification, or outcome you seek and why; refer to applicable constitutional provisions when relevant.

- Check for understanding in both directions: summarize the council's concern and ask whether your main points are understood. Being heard does not necessarily mean being understood—or agreed with.

5. Clarify decisions, records, and next steps

- Ask who will decide, what information will reach the decision-makers, and whether further response is possible.
- Identify unresolved questions or procedural concerns promptly; request that significant concerns be recorded when permitted.
- Ask when and how the decision and reasons will be communicated, what follow-up is expected, and who is responsible.
- Ask about applicable review or appeal procedures and deadlines; raising a concern does not necessarily preserve every remedy. Seek knowledgeable advice promptly when consequences are serious.
- Close courteously, briefly summarize your key points, and confirm any commitments without implying agreement where none exists.

6. Recognize when more discernment is needed

Before consequential action, consider whether important facts remain disputed, affected perspectives have been heard, alternatives and consequences have been considered, and significant questions remain unanswered.

If significant information is missing, identify what remains unresolved and why it matters. Ask for further information, an opportunity to respond, or postponement when permitted. A council's authority to decide does not itself establish that sufficient discernment has occurred.

If the council proceeds despite unresolved concerns:

- State the specific missing facts, unanswered questions, or unheard perspectives and why they may affect the decision.
- Request a practical remedy—clarification, further consultation, time to respond, or postponement—subject to applicable procedures.
- If the council proceeds, submit your concerns in writing and request their inclusion in the record where permitted; retain a copy.
- Ask how and when the decision and reasons will be communicated, and what reconsideration, review, or appeal options may apply.
- Obtain knowledgeable advice promptly. Some objections or review requests have strict deadlines; raising concerns alone may not preserve a remedy.
- A concern about insufficient discernment does not automatically establish a procedural violation or a right to appeal.

Meeting checklist

- ☐ I understand the purpose, participants, and decision-making authority.
- ☐ I have listened carefully and answered accurately.
- ☐ I have identified the sources of important claims and asked about missing information.
- ☐ I have presented my perspective clearly and checked for understanding.
- ☐ I have raised any concerns about insufficient discernment or procedure.
- ☐ I know the next steps, communication plans, responsibilities, and relevant deadlines.

A trusted sounding board can help you reflect before, during, and after the process. This guide is not a substitute for pastoral care, legal or polity advice, or authorized ecclesiastical procedures.