

Minutes of Session Meetings

The *Book of Order* requires that a session keep “full and accurate record of its proceedings”. (BoO G-3.0107) No guidelines are given regarding the details for doing this. In the absence of parliamentary procedures in the *Book of Order*, the instructions from *Robert’s Rules of Order* are to be followed. (BoO G-3.0105) The following is a summary of what has become the norm for session minutes. This is rooted both in the *Book of Order* and in *Robert’s Rules of Order* and is to ensure that the important information is included and that the proper procedures have been followed.

A. Essential Parts

Every set of minutes should contain the following information.

- The name of the church
- The date, time, and place of the meeting
- Whether the meeting is called or stated
- The names of the moderator, elders, and others who are present
- The opening with prayer
- Attesting that a quorum is present
- Adoption of an agenda
- Approval of minutes of previous meetings
- All main motions, except those withdrawn, and whether the motions pass or fail Significant portions of reports
- The time of the meeting’s closing
- Closing with prayer
- Attesting by the moderator and the clerk by their signatures

The name of the church should be specific and include the city and state. Why? For example, within a presbytery, there are probably lots of "First Presbyterian Church" congregations.

The place of the meeting should be specific such as “The sanctuary” or “Room A of the church”.

When motions are passed unanimously, it is not necessary to state the unanimity. When motions have dissenting votes, the vote could be recorded by terms such as “by majority” or “with 1 exception”. Persons casting dissenting votes may request that their vote be recorded by name or that the fact of dissenting votes be recorded. It is neither necessary nor advisable to record the whole discussion prior to a vote; the record should be a very brief summary of any important aspects of the issues brought forward. The record should make sense to someone reading it at sometime in the future. For example: At one of the first congregational meetings of my own previous church, there was a motion passed of no confidence in the session. There was no indication of the reason for this. More than fifty years later (now), it might be interesting to know the

reason (or maybe we are better off not knowing).

The reports presented can be recorded as “received” which indicates the report has been read or heard but does not necessarily indicate agreement with all aspects of the report. The minutes should contain, in addition to any actions taken, only those aspects that might be important to future readers of the minutes. For example: The membership committee reports it is planning a New Member Luncheon. Then, later, they report back on the results. In the future (5 years or so) it could be of some help to a committee to know this was done and whether or not it was successful.

After the minutes have been approved by the session, they should be placed in the official *Minute Book* and signed by the moderator and the clerk. In this electronic age it is not necessary that minutes actually be typed into the *Minute Book*. Previously printed pages can be photocopied onto the *Minute Book* pages. Electronic storage, in place of paper storage, might not be acceptable because there is no way to attest by signature to the accuracy and correctness of the documents and due to long term storage problems (See Section VIII of my Handbook for Clerks of Session). The *Minute Book* needs to be kept in a secure fireproof environment.

Motions from a committee do not require a second. The minutes should record who makes a motion (when made by an individual) but not necessarily who seconds the motion.

B. As Needed

There are some session actions and reports that should be included in the minutes that may or may not occur every month. Those actions or reports that normally occur every month that are to be recorded in the minutes include the following.

- The celebration of the Lord’s Supper. (BoO W-3.6204) The dates and occurrences should be recorded in the minutes subsequent to the celebration.
- Attendance at worship. The number of persons attending each worship service should be recorded. This will permit calculation of average attendance per week for the Session Annual Statistical Report. The attendance at Sunday School could also be included.
- Financial report. Session should receive the financial report. A summary of the report could be included, if desired. Normally financial reports are received, not approved, because the session has no way of knowing for certain that the report is correct. That aspect is up to the auditors.

Those actions or reports that normally occur less frequently than every month that are to be recorded in the minutes include the following.

- Authorization to celebrate the Lord’s Supper at times other than normal. (BoO 3.6204) Session normally has a continuing approval for authorization at regular times such as the first Sunday of every month. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper at other times, such as at a church retreat, needs special approval.
- Session action in receiving and dismissing members.⁸ The record should include the full name of the persons and family relationships where appropriate. For those transferring, the name, city, and state of the transferring church should be

included. The method of reception (transfer, affirmation of faith, or reaffirmation of faith) should be recorded.

- Session action in removing members from the active roll. Active members should not be removed from the roll until inactivity has been for a period of at least two years. (BoO G-3.0204a) Note that there is no longer the category of inactive members. Some churches unofficially retain such a roll as a means of tracking people who have been removed from the active roll.
- Approval of guest ministers or others to conduct the worship service. At times when the pastor is not present for a worship service, such as during vacation time, the person to conduct the worship service and to preach the Word should be approved by session.
- Authorization and recording of baptisms. (BoO W-2.3011) The authorization of session is needed for all baptisms. After the baptism, the occurrence should be recorded. The full name, birthdate, and place of birth of the person being baptized and the full name(s) of parents(s) for infant baptisms should be recorded.
- Deaths. (BoO G-3.0204) The death of any member should be recorded including date of death and participation of pastor in either funeral or memorial service.
- Weddings. Any wedding taking place in the church and weddings performed by the pastor either at the church or elsewhere should be recorded. Full names and date should be included for historical and legal purposes. A separate register is provided in the Roll Book.
- Commissioners to presbytery. (BoO G-3.0301) The election of commissioners to presbytery and the receiving of the commissioners' report to the session after the presbytery meeting should be in the minutes.

C. Annually

Once each year the following items should be approved by session and included in the minutes.

- Annual Statistical Report. (BoO G-3.0302e) This report must be approved by session and included in the minutes. See Section VI of my Handbook for Clerks of Session.
- Annual budget. (BoO G-3.0204) Session is responsible for the budget and expenditures of the church. The budget requires approval by session and should be included, at least in summary form, in the minutes.
- Election of the church treasurer. (BoO G-3.0205) The treasurer's term is limited as set by the Session.
- Church Nominating Committee. (BoO G-2.0401) Session needs to appoint its representatives to this committee, one of whom is designated as moderator, and to set the date for the congregational meeting for the election. In many churches this election is held at the annual congregational meeting but some churches operate the session on a July through June calendar.
- Annual congregational meeting. (BoO G-1.0501) Session needs to set the date and time for an annual congregational meeting. If the church is incorporated, this meeting is required by law. Annual reports should be presented at this meeting of the corporation.
- Newly elected elders. (BoO G-2.0402 – 2.0403) Session needs to arrange for the instruction, examination, ordination (where required), and installation of newly

elected elders. This also applies to deacons for churches not under the unicameral system.

- Composition of session and congregation with respect to racial ethnic members, women, men, and age groups. (BoO G-2.0401) These data are to be in the minutes. Since this information is in the Annual Statistical report, including that report in the minutes will fulfill this requirement.
- Pastor's Call. Session needs to call a congregational meeting or include in the agenda of another meeting a review by the congregation of the pastor's call. The pastor's call includes salary, other financial benefits, vacation and study leave. (BoO G-2.0804) Even if there is no change in the terms of call, the congregation needs to approve this. Presbytery sets minimums.

D. Other

Each person needs to work out the best ways for handling the preparation of the minutes. One suggestion is to prepare a template for use in taking the minutes during the meeting. This template would include the list of elders' names (to aid in taking the roll) and major category headings with blank spaces for writing in the information. If the meetings do not follow a regular format, the use of a template is limited. Using a template to take minutes may cause some difficulties since it may be difficult to predict how much space to leave. An alternative is to use a checklist. Some people use a template file and a laptop computer and take notes on the computer during the meeting. A good, rather complete agenda makes this approach more feasible.

Either a template or a checklist has an additional benefit in that it will help you and the moderator to remember what needs to be done. This can be carried further by the clerk and the pastor meeting in advance of the session meeting with the purpose of including more details in the template or check list.

When typing the minutes using a computer word processor, it is suggested, again, that a template be established and the information be typed into the appropriate places. This avoids retyping some information such as the list of elders present, and helps ensure that items are not missed.

Minutes of Congregational Meetings

The minutes of congregational meetings follow some of the same format as minutes of session meetings but with some essential differences because of the differences of the groups. The congregation has limited power. (BoO G-1.0503)The power it does have is of utmost importance and it is essential that all of its responsibilities be carried out effectively and responsibly.

The minutes of congregational meetings should contain the following elements.

- The name of the church
- The date, time, and place of the meeting
- Whether the meeting is the Annual Meeting or a Called Meeting
- The name of the moderator and the secretary

The secretary is the Clerk of Session unless the clerk is absent.

- Call to order and opening with prayer
- Attesting that a quorum is present

If it is the Annual Meeting and the congregation is incorporated, then there needs to be a statement that this is also the Annual Meeting of the Corporation.

- Adoption of an agenda. The Session should have recommended an agenda. If this is the Annual Meeting, the congregation can add to the agenda. If this is a Called Meeting, the agenda is as set by the Session and specified in the call and there can be no deviation from it.
- Conduct of the business

The Annual Meeting must include an annual report. If the congregation is incorporated this is extremely important and the report must include a financial report. The presentation of an annual report including a financial report must be noted in the minutes.

At the meeting where the Call of the Pastor is acted on, the *full details* of the call should be in the minutes even if there is no change or if only some aspects are changed. At the meeting where elders and/or deacons are elected, the Chair of the Nominating Committee makes its report and the Moderator conducts the election (see my Handbook for Congregational Nominating Committees).

The minutes of the meeting may be presented to and approved by the Session or the Secretary may read the minutes at the close of the business (before adjournment) and approved by the congregation.

- Motion to adjourn. If it is a called meeting, the Moderator may declare the meeting adjourned after business is complete.
- Closing with prayer
- Signatures of Moderator and Secretary

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