

## Polity Listening Session

*Understanding authority, accountability, and discernment together*

**Goal for today**

- Provide a simple framework for understanding church polity
- Compare several common approaches to authority and accountability
- Illustrate our current polity framework
- Gather congregational input on where key decisions should reside
- Explore healthy guardrails for a governance board structure under congregational authority

**Three Words For Today**

- Authority
- Accountability
- Trust

**Listening session posture:**  
clarity • humility • shared discernment

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## What Do We Mean By Polity?

fundamental questions

**Polity is the church's way of answering two basic questions:**

**Where does final authority reside?**  
Who has the final say in matters of governance, doctrine, leadership call, and major decisions?

**How is leadership held accountable?**  
How do we ensure spiritual oversight, faithful stewardship, and meaningful checks and balances?

**A healthy polity should make three things clearer**

- Who decides
- Who leads day to day
- Who answers when something goes wrong

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**What Do We Mean By Polity?** simple definition

**This is how the Transition Team understands polity:**

**Church polity answers the question:**

- Who has authority, who is responsible, and how are leaders held accountable?
- A healthy polity protects the church by ensuring that leadership and direction are guided by Scripture, shared convictions, and clear processes—regardless of whoever is leading at the time.

**Transition Team’s Definition :**

Church polity is the governing structure that clarifies authority, responsibility, and accountability so the church’s leadership and direction are guided by biblical conviction and agreed-upon process, rather than by personality or personnel.

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**Three Common Polity Models** where final authority and accountability reside

<p><b>Congregational</b></p> <p><i>Final authority in the local congregation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members gathered in congregational meeting make the highest-level decisions</li> <li>• Elders, pastors, or boards lead and recommend, but remain accountable to the congregation</li> <li>• Strength: strong local ownership and accountability</li> <li>• Risk: if unclear, the congregation may be asked to decide too much</li> </ul>	<p><b>Presbyterian</b></p> <p><i>Final authority with elders under a broader presbytery</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local elders govern the church</li> <li>• A regional body of elders provides oversight and appeal</li> <li>• Strength: shared accountability beyond the local church</li> <li>• Risk: less final authority rests with the congregation itself</li> </ul>	<p><b>Episcopal</b></p> <p><i>Authority located in the wider denomination/bishop</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clergy and local leaders serve under denominational authority</li> <li>• Key decisions and accountability sit outside the local body</li> <li>• Strength: strong external order and continuity</li> <li>• Risk: less local control over final decisions</li> </ul>
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### How Congregational Polity Works With Governing Board, Staff authority and accountability in one picture

**Congregation** Highest earthly authority for a congregational church: receives reports, approves reserved decisions, and holds elders accountable.

**Board** Spiritual oversight, governance, policy direction, and accountability for doctrine, mission, and pastoral leadership.

**Pastors + Staff** Day-to-day ministry leadership, execution, operations, shepherding, and ministry outcomes within approved boundaries.

*In this approach, board members (i.e. elders) are not the final authority over the church; they are the delegated governing body under the authority of the congregation and under the headship of Christ.*

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### What Kinds Of Decisions Belong To The Congregation? illustrative examples for discussion

A congregational meeting may be the right place for decisions that define the church's identity, leadership trust, or major commitments.

- Calling or dismissing pastors
- Approving annual budget framework or major debt
- Electing or affirming elders, deacons, board members
- Changes to constitution or bylaws

- Property purchase or sale
- Merger, closure, or campus launch decisions
- Doctrinal confession or statement-of-faith changes
- Any issue the bylaws explicitly reserve to the members

**Key question: Which decisions are weighty enough that the congregation should retain final vote?**

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### What Kinds Of Decisions Belong To Board Members (Elders)? illustrative examples for discussion

Board Members (elders) serve best when they are free to govern, guard doctrine, and hold ministry leadership accountable—without repeatedly asking the congregation to manage day-to-day decisions.

<b>Setting policy and governance boundaries</b>	<b>Approving ministry plans and staffing structure within budget</b>
<b>Overseeing doctrine, membership care, and discipline processes</b>	<b>Evaluating and supporting the lead pastor</b>
<b>Responding to urgent matters between congregational meetings</b>	<b>Monitoring finances, risks, and ministry health</b>

**Key question: What responsibilities should elders carry so they can lead well, yet remain meaningfully accountable?**

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### A Few Discernment Principles guidance for the conversation

<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; margin-bottom: 10px;"><b>Clarity Serves Trust</b></p> <p>People can support a model more readily when they know who decides what and how leaders answer for their decisions.</p>	<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; margin-bottom: 10px;"><b>Authority Needs Accountability</b></p> <p>Healthy governance always pairs delegated authority with visible guardrails, reporting, and review.</p>
<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; margin-bottom: 10px;"><b>Not Every Issue Needs The Same Process</b></p> <p>Some decisions belong to the whole body; others belong to those entrusted to govern or lead day to day.</p>	<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; margin-bottom: 10px;"><b>The Goal Is Faithfulness, Not Control</b></p> <p>Polity should help the church follow Christ with peace, integrity, and shared mission.</p>

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**Listening Session Questions** feedback we hope to gather today

1. Which decisions do you feel are essential for the congregation to make?
2. Which decisions should the governing board be trusted to make on behalf of the church?
3. What guardrails would help you trust a governing board structure?
4. Where have you experienced confusion, frustration, or duplication in our current approach?
5. What reporting rhythms would help the congregation stay informed and engaged?

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**Thank You For Helping Us Listen Well** next step

**Our aim is not simply to choose a model, but to clarify how we will walk together with trust, accountability, and mission.**

- Share your input during the session
- Transition Team will review themes and questions raised
- Synthesized feedback can then return to the congregation for further dialogue

*“Let all things be done decently and in order.” — 1 Corinthians 14:40*

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