



Introduction to ECO Polity

Here is a helpful guide to the major ecclesiastical, substantive, and philosophical characteristics of ECO polity:

- 1. Defined core theology and behavioral expectations** – One of the main concerns for many individuals and congregations considering ECO is that the PC(USA) has not defined essential theology and behavior requirements and will not allow congregations and presbyteries to define these requirements either. In the theology section of the ECO constitution the behavioral and theological core is established and all officers must “receive, adopt, and be bound by” these essentials.
- 2. ECO is concerned with ecclesiastical matters and therefore property is not held in trust** – There are a couple of reasons for this. First, as we have seen, when property is held in trust it can be used as leverage against congregations wishing to maintain theological integrity. Secondly, when presbyteries have interests in property an inordinate amount of time can be spent in property management.
- 3. Voting is done in parity at all levels and only when people are connected with a local congregation.** – ECO polity does not see mission and ministry happening primarily as a result of voting. When there is the need for voting at the presbytery and synod councils, within each council there is a requirement for a 1-1 parity between elders and pastors. Only pastors connected to a local congregation are eligible to vote. A pastor in validated service or honorably retired will only vote if they are an “assistant pastor” connected to an ECO congregation. In this instance the “assistant pastor” would be equivalent to what the PC(USA) calls a “parish associate”.
- 4. Church is redefined.** – ECO polity defines “church” wherever believers are gathered in the name of Jesus. Church can be lived out in small groups, accountability groups, ministry teams, house churches, and mission teams to name just a few.
- 5. Elders and deacons can be deployed for greater ministry** – Because “church” is considered to be the gathering of believers in the name of Jesus in a variety of contexts it is appropriate for the sacraments to be administered in these contexts. Elders and deacons who have been properly trained can be authorized to celebrate the sacraments in various settings. Therefore, not only can communion be celebrated in these various expressions of church but, if someone comes to faith through these expressions of church, they can be baptized by the officers who are charged with shepherding these groups. Elders and deacons can also be commissioned by the presbytery to serve as the pastors of congregations and new church developments for the mission and ministry of the presbytery.
- 6. Emphasis on the role of members as covenant partners** – ECO polity now names members as “covenant partners.” Congregations may choose to use different language if they wish, but this designation is designed to emphasize that individuals aren’t joining an organization. When they say yes to membership in ECO, individuals are covenanting with one another in God’s redemptive mission as expressed in, through, and beyond the congregation.

7. **Greater local flexibility** – There is much within the PC(USA) Book of Order that congregations may wish to continue to affirm, but there will be significant flexibility in these areas. Here are a few examples:
 - **Deacons** – Deacons may serve as part of a board or be commissioned on an annual basis. Since deacons do not have oversight within a congregation, a congregation may choose to continue to elect deacons in congregational meetings or can choose to have the session appoint deacons.
 - **Elders** – Elders in the PC(USA) serve three-year terms and can serve no more than two consecutive terms. Many ECO congregations may wish to continue this practice. But a congregation may choose to redesign their elder election and rotation. For example, they may wish to have elders serve only one 4 year term. In some cultures it is shameful for a person to be rotated off of the elders’ board. Congregations may wish to allow elders to serve an unlimited number of terms. The local ECO congregation continues to be governed by elders and the congregation must elect them, but their terms of service can have flexibility.
 - **Pastors** – A few different categories of pastors are defined. For example, ECO polity has reinstated the office of assistant pastor, hired by the session rather than called by the congregation. This again allows for greater flexibility in pastoral leadership.
8. **Presbyteries also have greater freedom** – In ECO polity, the role of the presbytery is to support, encourage, and resource local congregations. ECO presbyteries are required to have three committees; the Committee on Ministry which can include oversight of candidates, a Permanent Judicial Commission, and a governing council which has the same role and responsibilities of most PC(USA) presbytery councils. Other committees and task forces may be formed as they are necessary for the mission of the presbytery. Presbyteries also have flexibility as they guide congregations in the call process. A typical PNC may be established or a congregation may allow the session to serve this function. However they are called, the congregation must ultimately elect installed pastors.
9. **Missional Affinity Network** – Missional Affinity Networks are networks of congregations in similar ministry settings and facing similar challenges and opportunities. These networks are outside the presbyteries. They could be comprised of congregations near universities or colleges, congregations in urban settings, multiethnic congregations, those who are actively planting worshiping communities, congregations of various sizes, etc. These Missional Affinity Networks have no judicial authority but can be beneficial in a variety of important ways.
10. **Accountability, support, and encouragement** – ECO polity affirms that accountability between congregations is vitally important. Pastors should share with one another where they have seen God most visibly at work as well as what they are discerning as their part in God’s future mission. ECO pastors are expected to covenant to be accountable to one another, ensuring they are living balanced lives and being good stewards of the multiple responsibilities God has given them. Accountable relationships, called “peer reviews,” can take place within the presbytery or within the Missional Affinity Networks.
11. **Flatter structure with an emphasis on God’s work within the local congregation** – There are three layers to the ECO polity structure; session, presbytery and synod. Synod is the widest council in ECO. Each council is designed to have a significantly smaller staff with significantly smaller numbers of congregations comprising a presbytery. The primary role of staff will be mission and ministry in local congregations, facilitating the multiplication of worshiping communities and expansion of the gospel.