

## AUTHORITATIVE INTERPRETATIONS Constitutional Musing #15

### 1. What is an authoritative interpretation?

An authoritative interpretation is an interpretation of a section of the *Book of Order*. Such an interpretation may be approved by a meeting of the General Assembly when that body has received the advice of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution on a question. It may also come from the General Assembly's Permanent Judicial Commission when that body interprets a *Book of Order* provision while deciding a case before it.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. What authority do authoritative interpretations have?

Authoritative interpretations are constitutionally binding on all Presbyterians and Presbyterian governing bodies and their subgroups, just as the *Book of Order* itself is binding upon all Presbyterians and Presbyterian governing bodies and their subgroups.

### 3. Where did the idea of authoritative interpretations come from?

Our modern day practice of the use of authoritative interpretations first came into use by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission in 1985 when it recognized the “definitive guidance” provided by previous General Assemblies as authoritative interpretations.<sup>2</sup> The General Assembly itself subsequently concurred with this understanding, finding that definitive guidance adopted by previous General Assemblies carried “the weight of ‘authoritative interpretations.’”<sup>3</sup>

In 1987 the General Assembly and the presbyteries codified the practice when they adopted the current wording in the *Book of Order* at G-13.0103r.<sup>4</sup>

Authoritative Interpretations are in effect until modified or revoked by a subsequent General Assembly or its Judicial Commission.

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<sup>1</sup> G-13.0103r

<sup>2</sup> *Blasdell, et al. v. Pby of Western NY*, Remedial Case No. 197-9, 11.071

<sup>3</sup> 1993 General Assembly *Minutes*, 318ff, 21.040-.049A

<sup>4</sup> The General Assembly “has the responsibility and power to provide authoritative interpretation of the *Book of Order* which shall be binding on the governing bodies of the church when rendered in accord with G-13.0112 or through a decision of the Permanent Judicial Commission in a remedial or disciplinary case. The most recent interpretation of a provision of the *Book of Order* shall be binding;”