In order for a member or officer of the PCA to be charged and tried there must either be an allegation of a chargeable offense or a charge is filed (BCO 31-2; 32-2). Errors of judgment and relational failures may or may not rise to the level of a chargeable offense. "Chargeable offenses" (BCO 29-1 through 4), are "violations of divine law," or doctrines or practices contrary to the Word of God, or the Constitution of the Church. The Constitution of the Church is The Book of Church Order, The Westminster Confession of Faith, and The Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms. BCO 39-3 states:

While affirming that the Scripture is “the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined” (WCF 1.10), and that the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America is “subordinate to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the inerrant Word of God” (BCO Preface, III), and while affirming also that this Constitution is fallible (WCF 31.3), the Presbyterian Church in America affirms that this subordinate and fallible Constitution has been “adopted by the church” (BCO Preface, III) “as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice” (BCO 29-1) and as setting forth a form of government and discipline “in conformity with the general principles of biblical polity” (BCO 21-5.3).

In the case of a local church member, a chargeable offense could also be a violation of membership vows (BCO 57-5). In the case of a Minister a chargeable offense could also be a violation of his ordination vows (BCO 21-5). In the case of a Ruling Elder or Deacon a chargeable offense could also be a violation of his ordination vows (BCO 24-6).

Ministers are members of Presbytery, not members of a local church. Allegations or charges against a minister should be filed with the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of which he is a member. In the case of a local church member, Ruling Elder, or Deacon, allegations or charges should be filed with the Clerk of Session of the local church.

In either instance, the court of original jurisdiction (Session for local church members and officers, and Presbytery for ministers) shall conduct a preliminary investigation (BCO 31-2) of allegations that are made and determine if there is a “strong presumption of guilt of the party involved.” If there is a “strong presumption of guilt of the party involved” the “court shall institute process, and shall appoint a prosecutor to conduct the case.” If there is no “strong presumption of guilt of the party involved,” the matter is ended, unless there is a complaint.

Another way in which judicial process begins is by a person or persons undertaking to make out a charge and filing it with the court of original jurisdiction (BCO 32-2 [see also BCO 31-5; 31-9]).

Charles Hodge commented on the nature of chargeable offenses:
our church does not pretend to demand perfection of Christian character and conduct of church-fellowship, nor perfect knowledge or entire freedom from error, as a condition of ministerial fellowship, so every shortcoming from the standard of perfection in either case, is not to be regarded as an offence. Nothing is an offence, but what, if persisted in, would justify either suspension from the privileges of the church, or from the office of ministry. The importance of this distinction between a sin and an offence will be at once perceived. No minister or church member would ever be safe from prosecution, and no judicatory could ever know whether they are called upon to prosecute or not, if every sin were an offense, or a just ground of judicial process. Minor evils are to be corrected by admonition, instruction, and the ministry of the word. It is only theses evils in the faith or practice of a church member which would bring disgrace or scandal on the church, as tolerating what the Bible declares to be incompatible with Christian character, which can be the ground of process. Such is not only the theory but the practice of the church. We never hear of any professing Christian being arraigned and put on trial, unless for some immorality, or some such denial of the truth, or such neglect of his duty as a professor of the religion of the Lord Jesus, as affords good ground for calling the sanctity of that profession into question.

Charles Hodge, on Chapter I, paragraph 2 of “The Revised Book of Discipline” (1858), pp. 694-697.

Concerning ministers, BCO 34 says:

34-5. Heresy and schism may be of such a nature as to warrant deposition; but errors ought to be carefully considered, whether they strike at the vitals of religion and are industriously spread, or whether they arise from the weakness of the human understanding and are not likely to do much injury.

34-6. If the Presbytery find on trial that the matter complained of amounts to no more than such acts of infirmity as may be amended, so that little or nothing remains to hinder the minister’s usefulness, it shall take all prudent measures to remove the scandal.