



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT CHANGES TO ORDINATION STANDARDS (*BOOK OF ORDER, G-6.0106B*)

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[For the specific language of both the current and proposed amended text of G-6.0106b, along with a more careful analysis of the meaning and impact of the changes, please see “Pastoral Letter: Questions about Changes to Ordination Standards,” available on the presbytery’s website, www.staugpres.org.]

WHAT IS BEING CHANGED?

The proposed language eliminates reference to sexual behavior as an explicit standard for ordination and/or installation. The current language has been part of the *Book of Order* since 1997. Prior to 1997, the *Book of Order* contained no explicit language addressing sexuality or sexual practice as part of the standards for ordination or installation.

IF THE “FIDELITY AND CHASTITY” STANDARD IS REMOVED, WILL THERE BE ANY STANDARD FOR ORDINATION AND/OR INSTALLATION?

Yes. The new language of G-6.0106b requires that the session or presbytery assess the candidate’s ability and intent to live out the commitments every deacon, ruling elder, or teaching elder makes in answering the ordination questions in W-4.4003. Those questions ask the candidate to affirm, among other things, faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to him under the authority of Scripture and the guidance of our confessions. In making its assessment of the candidate’s ability and intent, the session or presbytery is guided by its own collective understanding of Scripture and the confessions.

Remember, however, that G-6.0106b is not the only place where the *Book of Order* identifies standards for ordination. In the previous paragraph, G-6.0106a, there is perhaps even more important language about the qualifications of a candidate for ordination. Persons who are ordained are to be “persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.” The same paragraph mandates that “Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world.”

CAN A SESSION OR PRESBYTERY ADOPT ITS OWN “FIDELITY AND CHASTITY” STANDARD?

No. Our polity insists that “no lower governing body can constitutionally define, diminish, augment, or modify standards for ordination and installation of church officers.”¹

A session or presbytery may, if it chooses, adopt ethical guidelines of behavior for those deacons, ruling elders, or teaching elders who, once ordained and installed, serve under its supervision. Those guidelines may include fidelity and chastity, if the body deems it appropriate. However, such guidelines may not be used as additional qualifications for ordination, and they are not a substitute for a thorough individual examination of each candidate. Each candidate must be assessed with respect to his or her ability to live out the commitments required for ordination. Moreover, in adopting such guidelines, the session or presbytery may not bind the judgment of any future assembly of that body. Any future assembly is within its rights to differ from, reinterpret, or set aside those guidelines as it sees fit in the examination of individual candidates.

¹ See *Barlow J. Buescher v. Presbytery of Olympia*, Remedial Case 218-09 and *Bush, et. al. v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh*, Remedial Case 218-10.

DOES THE CHANGE MEAN THAT SESSIONS OR THE PRESBYTERY WILL BE FORCED TO ORDAIN A PERSON WHO IS SEXUALLY ACTIVE OUTSIDE OF A HETEROSEXUAL MARRIAGE?

No. Ordination is not a right of membership. It is rather a spiritual calling discerned by the individual but always subject to the approval of a community of God's people and the concurring judgment of the session or presbytery. No session or presbytery can be "forced" to ordain a person it has not chosen and found qualified for the ministry for which he or she is a candidate.

WILL WE BE REQUIRED TO RECOGNIZE THE ORDINATION OF A PERSON ORDAINED ELSEWHERE? ARE WE REQUIRED TO ACCEPT HIM OR HER AS A DEACON, RULING ELDER OR TEACHING ELDER IN OUR CONGREGATION OR PRESBYTERY?

Ordination by any session or presbytery anywhere in the church is an act of the whole church (see *Book of Order*, G-9.0103). A person ordained as a deacon, ruling elder, or teaching elder by any session or presbytery in the church is recognized by the whole church as a deacon, ruling elder, or teaching elder.

That said, no congregation or presbytery is required to elect a person to serve as deacon, ruling elder, or teaching elder simply because that person has been so ordained at another time or by another session or presbytery. The right of election as a deacon, ruling elder, or teaching elder is always with the body within which that ministry will be exercised (see *Book of Order*, G-1.0306). We can't say to someone previously ordained, "you are not a deacon, ruling elder, or teaching elder," but we can say "you are not elected by this session or presbytery to serve in our midst as a deacon, ruling elder, or teaching elder."

DOES THE NEW LANGUAGE OF G-6.0106B CREATE A DOUBLE STANDARD AMONG OUR CHURCHES AND PRESBYTERIES?

No. The standards for ordination and installation are the same throughout the church. It is now and will continue to be the case that people of good faith will differ in their interpretation and application to individual candidates. What the new language does is to emphasize the importance of a sound constitutional examination process that is guided by Scripture and the confessions. It does not, and cannot, guarantee that we will all agree on the outcomes.

DOES THE NEW LANGUAGE INCREASE THE IMPORTANCE OF A SESSION OR PRESBYTERY EXAMINATION OF CANDIDATES FOR ORDINATION?

Throughout our history as a church, the consistent burden has rested on the shoulders of sessions and presbyteries to ensure that those who are ordained to service in the church are qualified, capable, and ready for the ministry they undertake.

The new language of G-6.0106b draws attention directly to this responsibility. It reminds sessions and presbyteries of their responsibility to ascertain the "calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability" of each candidate. It mandates that each candidate shall be pointedly examined on his or her ability and readiness to live out the commitments made in answering the ordination questions.

WHAT SORT OF QUESTIONS SHOULD A SESSION OR PRESBYTERY ASK OF CANDIDATES WHEN EXAMINING THEM FOR ORDINATION AND/OR INSTALLATION?

Sessions and presbyteries have quite broad latitude in designing questions for examination. A few suggested questions are listed on p. 5 of the "Pastoral Letter: Questions about Changes to Ordination Standards," available on the presbytery's website, www.staugpres.org.