



**PASTORAL LETTER: QUESTIONS ABOUT CHANGES TO ORDINATION STANDARDS
(BOOK OF ORDER G-6.0106B)**

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It now appears that the proposed amendment to the church's ordination standards in G-6.0106b will receive sufficient positive votes to become part of the *Book of Order* effective 10 July 2011. As of 3/30/11, according to the official tally in the Stated Clerk's office, sixty-eight presbyteries have voted in favor of the amendment, and forty-six have voted against it. A minimum of eighty-seven positive votes are needed for the amendment to be adopted.

The likely adoption of the changes to G-6.0106b have raised some important questions. I hope to offer some insight on some of these in the paragraphs below.

WHAT IS BEING CHANGED?

The current text of G-6.0106b reads:

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life of obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

The text proposed to replace this paragraph reads:

Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240; 14.0450) shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

The most obvious change from our current standards is that the proposed language eliminates reference to sexual behavior as an explicit standard for ordained office in the church. That represents a significant change in the church's polity since 1997, when the current language was adopted. 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.

WHAT DOES THE PROPOSED LANGUAGE SAY?

1. It affirms that ordained service in the church reflects a desire to submit one's self joyfully to the authority and Lordship of Jesus Christ. This is a deliberate reference to one of the first things our polity says, in G-1.0100d:

In affirming with the earliest Christians that Jesus is Lord, the Church confesses that he is its hope and that the Church, as Christ's body, is bound to his authority and thus free to live in the lively, joyous reality of the grace of God.

While not a standard for ordination *per se*, this sentence sets the tone for the rest of the paragraph, reminding the church that the heart and soul of ordained ministry is the joyful placement of one's life at the disposal of Jesus Christ in worship and service.

2. It makes clear that responsibility for examining a candidate for ordained ministry rests with the session (for elders and deacons) or presbytery (for ministers of the Word and Sacrament). This, too, is a deliberate reference to provisions of our polity about the conduct of examinations: G-14.0240 for elders and deacons, and G-14.0450 for ministers (one should also include G-14.0482 here). These bodies are charged to assess the candidate's readiness to assume ordained office on the basis of their personal faith, knowledge of the doctrine and government, and discipline contained in the Constitution of the church, and the duties of the office. This requirement is not new; it has been part of our polity since the beginnings of Presbyterianism in this country, and it is currently the case.
3. It mandates that the session or presbytery examination shall include, at a minimum, a determination that the candidate is both able and committed to fulfill all the requirements expressed in the ordination questions every church officer must answer prior to ordination or installation. The questions for ordination are found in the section W-4.4003 of the *Book of Order*, and include
 - trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ and through him believing in One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
 - accepting the Scriptures to be the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and God's Word to us;
 - sincerely receiving and adopting the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do;
 - fulfilling the office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and guided by the confessions; and
 - being governed by our church's polity and abiding by its discipline.

The session or presbytery has a positive obligation under the terms of this paragraph to assess a candidate's commitment to these standards, including whether a candidate's beliefs and/or manner of life are sufficiently in accord with these standards as to make it reasonably likely that he or she will be able to meet them.

4. It mandates that the session or presbytery is itself to be guided by Scripture and the confessions as it applies the standards of the constitutional questions for ordination to

particular candidates. This sentence invokes the language of the Adopting Act of 1729, perhaps the oldest statement of reconciliation in Presbyterian history in this country. Used to reconcile deep and painful differences in the church about standards and expectations of ministers, it enabled Presbyterians to come together beyond their disagreements and find a way forward in common ministry on the burgeoning American frontier.

The implication of this sentence is that the session or presbytery must determine what it understands Scripture and the confessions to say with regard to the commitments being required in the ordination questions. On the basis of that understanding, the session or presbytery can then assess the candidate's ability and intent to live out those commitments, as indicated in #3 above.

WHAT IMPACT WILL THESE CHANGES HAVE ON THE PRACTICE OF SESSIONS AND THE PRESBYTERY?

Greater significance of responsibility to examine candidates: Obviously the new language of G-6.0106b raises the importance of the examination of candidates. The sessions or presbytery will need to pay careful attention to its process of examination to ensure that it is thorough and fair, and that it addresses matters covered in the ordination questions in W-4.4003.

Ordination is not a "right" of membership. It is rather a spiritual calling that is discerned by the individual, but is 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, and 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 election of God's people and the concurrence of a session or presbytery after examination of the candidate remain essential elements of the ordination and/or installation process.

Re-emphasis on importance of G-6.0106a: The paragraph immediately previous to the one presently under consideration, G-6.0106a, contains important language about the personal characteristics of those called to service in the church's ordered ministries of deacon, ruling elder, and teaching elder. The paragraph reads:

To those called to exercise special functions in the church--deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament--God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world. They must have the approval of God's people and the concurring judgment of a governing body of the church.

This paragraph lifts up three characteristics that each deacon, ruling or teaching elder must possess: strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. It further requires that the way in which the candidate lives must demonstrate the gospel both within and outside the church. These qualities and characteristics remain unchanged as qualifications for ordered ministry in the PC(USA).

In recent years, the attention to the more explicit language of G-6.0106b about sexuality and ordination has perhaps led sessions and presbyteries to ignore the importance of G-6.0106a. But the language of G-6.0106a is a helpful guide to the session or presbytery as it assesses a candidate's suitability for ministry and should be attended with much greater care.

Adoption of current G-6.0106b as additional requirement: Some have asked whether a session or presbytery may adopt the current language of G-6.0106b as an additional standard for ordained service within that congregation or presbytery. The answer is no. Our polity has maintained that “no lower governing body can constitutionally define, diminish, augment, or modify standards for ordination and installation of church officers.”¹ This means that no session or presbytery may adopt additional requirements other than those stated in the Book of Order that apply to all candidates, or to all candidates in a particular category or class.

Interpretation of Scripture and the Confessions: We have already noted that the new language will require the session or presbytery to evaluate a candidate's suitability for office on an individual basis. In doing so, sessions and presbyteries typically will examine a candidate and determine if the candidate's manner of life is consistent with the session or presbytery's understanding of the gospel. As it defines that understanding, a session is to be guided by its interpretation of Scripture and the confessions of the church. It is therefore appropriate that a particular session or the presbytery might (or might not) find that Scripture and the confessions require that persons to be ordained or installed must lead lives of fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness, and then apply that finding as it examines each particular candidate. There is an important limitation here, however: Neither a particular session nor the presbytery is permitted to adopt a policy that binds future assemblies of that session or presbytery to their interpretation, or one that disqualifies a category of persons from office without individual examination.

For example, a session has determined, after careful study and prayer, that it interprets Scripture and the Confessions to require either sexual fidelity within heterosexual marriage or chastity in singleness. A session is within its rights so to determine, since the final sentence of the proposed language specifically requires that the session “shall be guided by Scripture and the Confessions” as it applies the constitutional standards in examining candidates. The session may not, however, decide in advance and without individual examination, that any particular candidate for ordination or installation does not meet these standards, nor may it declare as a general principle that a class or category of persons (such as all homosexual persons) are ineligible for ordination or installation.

If a candidate is presented to the session for examination, and that candidate acknowledges that he or she is sexually active outside marriage, the session must (1) examine the candidate and hear the answers he or she makes to specific questions about faith, discipleship, and manner of life, (2) hear any objections of conscience to provision of the Constitution the candidate may offer, and (3) determine if those objections constitute in its view a violation of an essential element of Reformed faith or polity. Only then can the session determine whether or not it believes that the candidate, in light of his or her statements, has “the ability and commitment to fulfill all the requirements as expressed in the Constitution.”

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.

Suggested areas of examination: This list is not intended to be exhaustive but suggestive of the areas a session or the presbytery might find helpful in examining candidates. The session and presbytery are encouraged to develop their own lists of questions, bearing in mind always that each candidate's answers must be heard and evaluated individually.

- *Personal faith* – What has been your experience of God's grace in your life? What has it meant to you to follow Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord?
- *Sense of call* – How have you discerned God's call to this ordered ministry? What has led you to be willing to accept this call if this examination is sustained?
- *Knowledge of doctrine* – The third question for ordination asks if a deacon or ruling or teaching elder "receives and adopts the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do." What do you regard as the essential tenets of the Reformed faith, and how do they guide your life and ministry?
- *Duties of ministry* – As you understand them, what responsibilities rest on the individual deacon/ruling elder/teaching elder? Are you ready to accept these responsibilities? What do you understand the responsibilities of the session to be? What are the responsibilities of the presbytery, and how are the two related? Are you willing to accept responsibilities in service to the larger church if elected by the session or presbytery?
- *Readiness for ministry* – Do you affirm that you are ready to answer in the affirmative to all the questions for ordination in W-4.4003? What do you understand these questions to mean (perhaps exploring specific questions individually)? Are there any questions about which you have concerns, or to which you wish to express objections of conscience?

WHAT DO OTHER ECCLESIASTICAL POLITIES SAY ABOUT THIS ISSUE?

The language of the proposed amendment to G-6.0106b is in some ways similar to ordination standards language of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, both of which are silent on the issues of marital status, marital fidelity, sexual orientation, and other specific acts.

Cumberland Presbyterian Church

The office of minister of word and sacrament is unique in the life of the church as to responsibility and usefulness. God calls persons and sets them apart for this ministry. The persons who fill this office should be sound in the faith, exemplary in conduct, and competent to perform the duties of the ministry. Persons who become ministers of the word and sacrament are due such respect as belongs to their office, but are not by virtue of their office more holy or righteous than other Christians. They share in the same vocation that belongs to all Christians to be witnesses to the gospel in word and deed. They differ from other Christians only with regard to the office to which they are called, which is their station in life.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

An ordained minister of this church shall be a person whose commitment to Christ, soundness of faith, aptness to preach, teach and witness, and whose educational qualifications have been examined and approved in the manner prescribed in the documents of this church; who has been properly called and ordained; who accepts and adheres to the Confession of Faith of this church; who is diligent and faithful in the exercise of the ministry; and whose life and conduct are above reproach. A minister shall comply with the constitution of this church.

SUMMARY

The proposed new language of G-6.0106b places squarely on the shoulders of the session or presbytery the burden of conducting thorough and insightful examinations of those elected to the church's ordered ministries. If it is adopted, the session or presbytery must take seriously its responsibility to ensure that those who serve in these ministries are "persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord," and whose lives are "a demonstration of the gospel in the church and in the world." The session or presbytery must assure itself through its examination that a candidate for ordination or installation is both able and ready to live out the commitments made in affirmative answers to the ordination questions. And in making this determination, the session or presbytery has both the right and the responsibility to decide for itself what guidance Scripture and the Confessions provide in evaluating a candidate's readiness for ordination and/or installation.

As always, I am ready and eager to support the work of our sessions as they assess their examination practices. Please feel free to call (800-440-9477 or 733-8277, ext 25) or email me (pkhooker@staugpres.org) and let me know how I may best be of help to you.