

ORDINATION STANDARDS

According to reports, the Presbytery of Twin Cities cast the deciding 87th affirmative vote for Amendment 10-A (see below) on Tuesday, May 10, which changes the ordination standards of the Presbyterian Church at G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order*. Supporters of this change contend it will allow for the possibility for the ordination as a minister, elder, or deacon of persons who are sexually active outside of the marriage of one man and one woman. The change takes effect on July 10, 2011.

This issue has had a long history within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), dating back into the 1970's, before the reunion of our antecedent denominations.

In the mid 1970's, the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA) was asked whether homosexual practice was in accord with the standards for ordination of that day, expressed in the Form of Government, Chapter VII, Section 3 (37.03): "It is indispensable that, besides possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired, everyone undertaking a particular ministry should have a sense of inner persuasion, be sound in the faith, live according to godliness, have the approval of God's people and the concurring judgment of a lawful judicatory of the Church."

In answering an overture from the presbyteries of New York City and Palisades (New Jersey), the UPCUSA General Assembly adopted the following Definitive Guidance in 1978: "That unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination set forth in the Form of Government." (*Policy Statement and Recommendations on the Church and Homosexuality*) Elsewhere, the same report stated:

To be an ordained officer is to be a human instrument, touched by divine powers but still an earthen vessel. As portrayed in Scripture, the officers set before the church and community an example of piety, love, service, and moral integrity. Officers are not free from repeated expressions of sin. Neither are members and officers free to adopt a lifestyle of conscious, continuing, and unresisted sin in any area of their lives. ***For the church to ordain a self-affirming, practicing homosexual person to ministry would be to act in contradiction to its charter and calling in Scripture, setting in motion both within the church and society serious contradictions to the will of Christ ...*** We believe that Jesus Christ intends the ordination of officers to be a sign of hope to the church and the world. Therefore our present understanding of God's will precludes the ordination of persons who do not repent of homosexual practice." (*emphasis added*)

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) adopted essentially the same definitive guidance in 1979. Later, the General Assembly changed the terminology from "definitive guidance" to "authoritative interpretation" (AI).

Over the years, this AI was challenged on an almost yearly basis at the GA level, and was reaffirmed on numerous occasions. Those opposed to the standard established by the AI complained that such a standard should be part of the Constitution, and not merely an interpretation of it, so in 1996, the current language of G-6.0106b was added to the Form of Government:

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in 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.

This standard received overtures seeking to eliminate or change it repeatedly since its adoption. The current vote being taken by the presbyteries is the fifth time since 1996 that the PC(USA) has voted on this issue. The proposed Amendment 10-A states the following:

Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.14.0240; G-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."

After the 218th GA (2008), the presbyteries voted on a similar amendment, which failed by a vote of 78-95. Hoping to encourage at least nine presbyteries to switch their votes, the above amendment was proposed to the 219th GA (2010), and was approved and referred to the presbyteries for their votes.

One problem I have had with Amendment 10-A is that it fails to specifically ask for what its supporters want it to deliver: the ability to ordain as ministers, elders, and deacons whomever they see fit, regardless of sexual practice. In essence, the amendment is a time machine back to the mid-1970's, and places us in essentially the same position the denomination was then. For instance, does sexual practice outside the bonds of marriage between one man and one woman accord with “the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life”? Do “Scripture and the confessions” support a standard that will permit an ordaining body (a session or a presbytery) to approve a candidate for ordination regardless of their sexual practice, should that become known?

In my opinion, the answer to the above questions still should be ‘no,’ but there are probably sessions and presbyteries that will look at it the other way. For me, no persuasive argument has been presented that counters what the Bible teaches in texts like Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:9-10, Genesis 19, and Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. There is no confessional statement in our *Book of Confessions* that supports sexual behavior outside of the bonds of marriage between one man and one woman. To the contrary, the Confession of 1967 states:

The relationship between man and woman exemplifies in a basic way God’s ordering of the interpersonal life for which he created mankind. Anarchy in sexual relationships is a symptom of man’s alienation from God, his neighbor, and himself. Man’s perennial confusion about the meaning of sex has been aggravated in our day by the availability of new means of birth control and the treatment of infection, by the pressures of urbanization, by the exploitation of sexual symbols in mass communication, and by world overpopulation. The church, as the household of God, is called to lead men out of this alienation into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ. Reconciled to God, each person has joy in and respect for his own humanity and that of other persons; a man and woman are enabled to marry, to commit themselves to a mutually shared life, and to respond to each other in sensitive and lifelong concern; parents receive the grace to care for children in love and to nurture their individuality. ***The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by man when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time.*** (9.47; *emphasis added*)

What does all of this mean for the PC(USA)? I wish I had a crystal ball, but I don’t. Will we see a dramatic increase in churches withholding per capita and mission support? That call is already being sounded from some quarters. I believe that to be a premature and improper response. It would be far better to use the system to seek to clarify, change, or reverse the pending change in standards by seeking an authoritative interpretation of the new language and/or submitting overtures seeking to reverse or otherwise change whatever changes 10-A will introduce. Withholding per capita becomes a *de facto* boycott, which will harm many people who had no say in this potential change, and may even oppose it, long before it would force a future GA to change its mind – if it ever would.

Will we see an increase in the churches seeking to leave the PC(USA) for another denomination, or even a division of the PC(USA) into separate denominations? Such steps are fraught with the peril of court proceedings over the ownership of property, both real and financial, which “is held in trust ... for the use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)” (G-8.0201). (Actually, we are subject to the 1982-1983 PCUS Book of Church Order §6-3, “All property held by or for a particular church ... is held in trust nevertheless for the use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church in the United States,” which now exists within the PC(USA).) Again, I think such actions would be premature, and should not be considered until after the 221st GA (2014), if at all. Nevertheless, I have heard that some in Shenandoah Presbytery are pushing for the development of a “gracious separation policy.” For me, I was born into and raised within this denomination, and have served faithfully as a pastor for thirty years now. It is difficult for me to see myself ever serving in some other context.

Shenandoah Presbytery has never voted to support attempts to change the current ordination standards, and voted ‘no’ on Amendment 10-A back in November 2010. That does not mean that some sessions will not try to exercise what they see is the opportunity to ordain candidates regardless of their sexual practice. We are in a “wait and see” mode, but I am concerned that the next year until the 220th GA in Pittsburgh may be a bumpy ride. Now more than ever, our prayers and faithfulness to Jesus Christ and the Scriptures are needed.

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