



PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

Office of the General Assembly

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Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approves change in ordination standard

‘Submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ’ replaces ‘fidelity and chastity’

LOUISVILLE—While the Office of the General Assembly awaits official tallies, it appears that a majority of the 173 presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have approved a change in PC(USA) ordination standards.

At its meeting on Tuesday, May 10, 2011, the Presbytery of Twin Cities Area became the 87th presbytery to approve an amendment that will remove the constitutional requirement that all ministers, elders, and deacons live in “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness” (G-6.0106b in the church’s Book of Order).

The new language reads, “*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.*”

The new provision reaffirms the long-held right and responsibility of ordaining bodies (local church sessions for deacons and elders or presbyteries for ministers) to determine the suitability of each candidate for ordination. The effect of the new language also opens up the possibility that persons in same-gender relationships can be considered for ordination.

The 219th General Assembly (2010) of the PC(USA) approved Amendment 10-A last summer, but required a majority of presbyteries to ratify the provision for it to become part of the church’s Constitution.

The change will take effect July 10, 2011, one year after the adjournment of last summer’s assembly.

In response to the vote, denominational leaders issued a letter to all congregations of the PC(USA), calling the debate about ordination standards “a Presbyterian family struggle.” The letter goes on to say that Presbyterians have “sought to find that place where every congregation and every member, deacon, elder, and minister of the Word and Sacrament can share their gifts in ministry while, at the same time, the integrity of every congregation, member, deacon, elder, and minister is respected.”

Additional resources are online at <http://oga.pcusa.org>, which include a “frequently asked questions” document, liturgical resources, a video podcast by Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, and Advisory Opinion #24 about the change to G-6.0106b.

The full text of the churchwide letter:

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

May grace, mercy, and peace be yours in abundance (Jude 1:2).

The debate about ordination standards has been a Presbyterian family struggle for much of the last three decades. We have sought to find that place where every congregation and every member, deacon, elder, and minister of the Word and Sacrament can share their gifts in ministry while, at the same time, the integrity of every congregation, member, deacon, elder, and minister is respected.

This year, the conversation has focused on Amendment 10-A that was passed by the 219th General Assembly (2010) and sent to presbyteries for approval. While we wait for official tallies, it appears that 87 presbyteries have approved 10-A, which is the majority required for approval.

If this becomes official, the new language outlining the gifts and requirements for ordained service will say 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.

This decision begins with an unequivocal affirmation that ordained office will continue to be rooted in each deacon, elder, and minister’s “joyful submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life.”

This action also has important effects on our life together as a church, namely:

- *in keeping with our historic principles of church order, each session and presbytery will continue to determine the suitability of individuals seeking ordination within its bounds.*
- *persons in a same-gender relationship may be considered for ordination and/or installation as deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament within the PC(USA); and*

- *all other churchwide standards for ordination remain unchanged.*

Reactions to this change will span a wide spectrum. Some will rejoice, while others will weep. Those who rejoice will see the change as an action, long in coming, that makes the PC(USA) an inclusive church that recognizes and receives the gifts for ministry of all those who feel called to ordained office. Those who weep will consider this change one that compromises biblical authority and acquiesces to present culture. The feelings on both sides run deep.

However, as Presbyterians, we believe that the only way we will find God's will for the church is by seeking it together – worshiping, praying, thinking, and serving alongside one another. We are neighbors and colleagues, friends and family. Most importantly, we are all children of God, saved and taught by Jesus Christ, and filled with the Holy Spirit.

We hold to the strong affirmation that all of us are bound together as the church through Jesus Christ our Lord. "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all," Paul wrote to the Ephesians (4:5-6).

It is Jesus Christ who calls individuals to ordained ministries, and all those who are called to ordained office continue to acknowledge Jesus as Lord of all and Head of the church. It is this same Jesus Christ who is the foundation of our faith and to whom we cling.

No doubt, there will be several news stories and other reports about this change in the days ahead. A number of resources, including frequently asked questions and liturgical resources, are available for you at <http://oga.pcusa.org>. In addition, for those who wish to comment on or inquire further about 10-A, please contact ga.amendments@pcusa.org or call (888) 728-7228, ext. 8202.

We invite you to join us in prayer:

Almighty God, we give thanks for a rich heritage of faithful witnesses to the gospel throughout the ages. We offer gratitude not only for those who have gone before us, but for General Assembly commissioners and presbyters across the church who have sought diligently to discern the mind of Christ for the church in every time and place, and especially in this present time.

May your Spirit of peace be present with us in difficult decisions, especially where relationships are strained and the future is unclear. Open our ears and our hearts to listen to and hear those with whom we differ. Most of all, we give thanks for Jesus Christ, our risen Savior and Lord, who called the Church into being and who continues to call us to follow his example of loving our neighbor and working for the reconciliation of the world. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

*Gradye Parsons
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly*

*Cynthia Bolbach
Moderator, 219th General Assembly (2010)*

*Linda Valentine
Executive Director, General Assembly Mission Council*

Landon Whitsitt
Vice Moderator, 219th General Assembly (2010)