

Presbytery of Los Ranchos: “*Frequently Asked Questions*” about Amendment 10-A, Regarding PC(USA) Ordination Standards

— from the Stated Clerk, the Rev. Dr. W. Keith Geckeler

The text of the proposed amendment to G-6.0106b in the PC(USA) *Book of Order* 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 current text of G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order* 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.

1. How is this change in the process of applying ordination standards happening?

The 2010 General Assembly sent to the presbyteries the proposed amendment (above) to reword G-6.0106b. Approval by a majority (87) of the 173 presbyteries is required to pass the amendment. As of May 10, 2011, 88 presbyteries have approved this change. 66 presbyteries have voted no, 3 have tied. 55% of the total number of individual commissioners in the presbyteries voted to approve the amendment. The changes proposed are consistent with the recommendations of the Peace, Unity, and Purity Report from 2008.

This majority approval means that the amendment will take effect on July 10, 2011, one year after the adjournment of the 2010 General Assembly.

2. What will this change in wording mean for local churches and presbyteries

This new paragraph does not contain the language (introduced in 1997) which categorically prohibits the ordination of any person in a sexual relationships outside of marriage between a man and a woman. Each session and presbytery, in examining candidates for ordination and for membership (presbytery), must discern whether the individual being examined meets the standards for ordination as interpreted by that body.

3. What does the change in language represent?

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is affirming the authority of the local presbytery and session to apply ordination standards to specific candidates.. This represents a restoration of the historical (since 1720) Presbyterian emphasis on standards set by the national church with the application of those standards and the discernment of suitability for ordination/installation by the people who best know the candidates.

4. Specifically, what was changed?

The previous (from 1997) language is removed and replaced by language that, while it does not exclude any previous standards, does remove the only reference in the Form of Government to a specific *behavior* prohibiting ordination. It also adds language referring to obedience to Christ, to the vows of ordination, and indicates that fidelity to church standards as set forth in Scripture and the confessions is judged case by case by the examining body.

5. What practical changes will we see?

Changed is the possibility for a congregation/session or presbytery to ordain a gay or lesbian individual who satisfies the requirements of the ordaining body.

Unchanged is the fact that pastors, elders, and deacons who are ordained in one area of the country/state and then move to another presbytery or congregation, will be examined by the new governing body before being able to take up their office. The new body may choose to apply ordination standards differently from the officer's previous body.

6. Will the ordination of gay and lesbian individuals now be mandated?

No, it is not required, but it is no longer automatically prohibited by specific Form of Government language. Presbyteries and congregations retain the right to determine who will serve as officers.

7. May congregations now ordain people who are openly gay?

Yes. However, note that the previous standards were never based on a person's orientation, but on their behavior. The new wording does not list specific behaviors that *automatically* exclude someone for consideration for ordination/installation. Each examining body is responsible to look at all possible factors to determine if someone is being called into ordained ministry—and meets their understanding of the standards for ordination.

8. May a congregation or presbytery now ordain or install a sexually active homosexual?

Yes, *if* after a thorough examination, the congregation or presbytery believes the person to be called by God to serve as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament, elder or

deacon and not to be living in violation of the church's understanding of the authority of Jesus Christ, the Scriptures, our confessions, or our ordination standards.

9. Is a congregation required to call a pastor who is openly gay or lesbian?

No.

10. May a congregation or presbytery continue to consider sexual activity outside marriage between a man and a woman as impermissible for its officers?

Yes, they may consider it in the context of individual examinations on a case by case basis.

11. Is a presbytery required to receive, by transfer of membership, an ordained sexually active gay or lesbian minister?

No, each presbytery determines which ministers to receive into its membership.

12. Does the new language give candidates who are sexually active outside the covenant of marriage between a woman and a man the "right" to be ordained?

Nobody (straight, lesbian, or gay) has a "right" to be ordained. Ordination is based on a sense of God's call as confirmed by the ordaining body.

13. May a presbytery continue to function with the standard of "fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness" when examining candidates for ordination?

Yes, as long as the application is made on a case by case basis. The new language of G-6.0106b calls the ordaining body to be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying ordination standards to each candidate.

14. May questions about a candidate's sexuality be asked or are such questions forbidden?

No questions are prohibited during an examination for ordination, installation, or, in the case of ministers, reception into presbytery membership. A candidate who acknowledges being sexually active outside the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman will no longer be automatically disqualified by the Form of Government from being ordained, installed, or received into minister membership.

For further discussion of these or any other questions, please call presbytery staff who will be glad to visit with you.

The Rev. Dr. W. Keith Geckeler
Associate Presbytery Pastor and Stated Clerk
kgeckeler@losranchos.org
(714) 956-3691 ext. 130