

Frequently Asked Questions

The Change in Ordination Standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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

The 2010 General Assembly sent to the presbyteries a Proposed Amendment to reword G-6.0106b. It appears likely that a majority (87) of the 173 presbyteries will approve this change. (As of 4/19, 80 have voted to change, 57 not to change). 55% of the total number of commissioners voting in presbyteries is approving the amendment. The changes proposed are consistent with the recommendations of the Peace, Unity, and Purity Report from 2008.

2. What will this change in wording mean?

The entire 6.0106b paragraph is deleted, including the language “living in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.” It is replaced with wording that includes “joyfully submitting to the Lordship of Jesus Christ...shall examine each candidate’s calling and...suitability for the responsibilities of the office...The examination shall include...a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation...guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.” This new paragraph does not contain the language categorically prohibiting the ordination of persons in sexual relationships outside of marriage between a man and a woman.

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 (1720 forward) Presbyterian emphasis on application of standards and discernment of suitability for ordination/installation by the people who best know the candidates..

4. Specifically, what was changed?

The previous 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?

It would be possible 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 and then move to another presbytery or congregation, will be examined by the new governing body before being able to take up their office. That body may choose to apply ordination standards differently from the officer’s previous body.

6. Will a congregation be required to change anything?

A congregation cannot be forced to ordain officers or receive pastors or elders or deacons of whom they do not approve. The congregation retains 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 the requirements 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, its ordination standards, its Confessions, or Scripture.

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

No.

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

Yes, as long as the application is on a case by case basis. The authority for ordaining elders and deacons is fully vested in the local congregation. The new language calls the ordaining body to be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying ordination standards to individual candidates.

11. Is the ordination of sexually active gays and lesbians mandated?

No, it is not required, but it is no longer prohibited by specific Constitutional language.

12. 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.

13. 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 has a “right” to be ordained. Ordination is based on a sense of God's call as confirmed by the ordaining body.

14. 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 on a case by case basis. The new language calls the ordaining body to be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying ordination standards to each candidate. (see last question)

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

All questions are allowed during an examination. The acknowledgment of being sexually active outside the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman does not automatically disqualify a person from being ordained. [Interestingly, with language of existing 6.0106b, you could not ask the question without a compelling reason since the answer could automatically exclude you from ordination. Now that behaviors must be taken as a whole, questions about sexual practices can be asked.]

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