

Appendix I -- Toward Better Understanding the Recent Constitutional Changes

Now that the new Form of Government has taken effect, many questions are arising. How will we live together in Mission Presbytery in the changing environment?

WHAT IS BEING CHANGED?

The **previous** text of G-6.0106b read:

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 which replaced 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 NEW 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 ruling elders and deacons) or presbytery (for teaching elders or ministers of the Word and Sacrament)**. This, too, is a deliberate reference to provisions of our polity about the conduct of examinations. 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*.

4. 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.

5. 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-2.0104b 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-2.0104a: The paragraph immediately previous to the one presently under consideration, G-2.0104a, 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 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

In recent years, the attention to the more explicit language of the former G-6.0106b about sexuality and ordination has perhaps led sessions and presbyteries to ignore the importance of G-2.0104a. But the language of G-2.0104a 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 previous G-6.0106b as additional requirement: Some have asked whether a session or presbytery may adopt the recent 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**. However, sessions may inquire about matters of “lifestyle” which may be of importance **to their congregation**. (See below)

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.”

Suggested areas of examination: See Appendix III in General Council Proposal.

SUMMARY The new language of G-2.0104b 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. As 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.

Together, we can move forward as Mission Presbytery, seeking God’s guidance as we work together to send forth disciples.