

A Pastoral Letter to our Congregation:

At the request of the Session, we are writing to communicate to you a pastoral message regarding a change in the Presbyterian *Book of Order* that is controversial and has already become lifted up in the secular press.

The 219th General Assembly (2010) of the PC(USA) approved, and sent for vote to the 173 presbyteries in our nation, a proposed amendment to the *Book of Order* that relates to the ordination standards for deacons, elders and ministers. The amendment (known as 10-A) reads:

Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation 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. Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

This amendment was proposed as a replacement to a clause in the *Book of Order*, (G-6.0106b) added in 1997, which reads:

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.

For the proposed amendment to be approved it required the ratification of a simple majority of the 173 presbyteries. On Tuesday, May 10, the Presbytery of the Twin Cities in Minnesota became the 87th presbytery to vote in the affirmative. Therefore, Amendment 10-A will replace G-6.0106b on July 10, 2011.

What does this mean? It means that:

- Ordaining bodies (sessions and presbyteries) retain the right and responsibility to determine their own memberships. A congregation continues to elect their deacons and elders and the session examines them for suitability of office. Likewise, presbyteries examine individuals for suitability to be ordained as ministers of the Word and Sacrament.
- With the elimination of mandates on who may/may not be considered for ordination, a person in a same-gender relationship *can now be considered* for ordination as deacon, elder, or Minister of the Word and Sacrament. All other church-wide standards for ordination remain unchanged. (There was never a prohibition against a person being ordained based on sexual orientation, as long as that person was celibate.)

How did our Presbytery vote?

Cherokee Presbytery (elders and ministers from our 41 churches in Northwest Georgia) voted to disapprove the proposed amendment by a vote of 62 to 49.

How will this change affect First Presbyterian Church of Cartersville?

Our congregation will see NO change in the manner of identifying, preparing, calling and ordaining persons to leadership.

The language of the new amendment means that *sessions and presbyteries may come to different decisions* regarding a particular candidate for ordination/installation or on a particular issue, based on their own sense of fidelity to the scripture and our confessions. Depending on the discernment of individual presbyteries/sessions/congregations, this would allow *the possibility* that they could ordain and install persons as leaders in the church whom other presbyteries/sessions/congregations would not. In practice, there have been variations in ordination standards from one congregation or presbytery to another since 1758 when the Old Side and New Side reunion established the right of each presbytery to examine for ordination.

For more than 30 years, we Presbyterians, just like other Mainline Protestant churches, have wrestled with the matter of ordination standards. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has not been, and continues to not be, of one mind on this matter. However, we believe the unity of the church is not dependent on the unanimity of its members of this matter, either in the denomination or our own congregation.

The PC (USA) has always been a “big tent” where people of varying understandings on how to interpret Holy Scripture have been able to gather, united in the one commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This diversity in our family of faith makes it possible for the Presbyterian Church (USA) to have a unique and vital witness to the grace of God in our world.

We are available to discuss this matter with any of you who wish to speak with us. We are your pastors, who love our congregation and its members. If you have concerns, we truly want to be a spiritual resource to you.

Let us keep our congregation, our presbytery, and the 10,700 other congregations that make up the Presbyterian Church (USA) in our prayers as we strive to “submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life.”

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