

How Does the Passage of Amendment 10-A Affect Ordination Standards?

What has changed?

In 1997 the General Assembly added the following language to the section “Offices of Ministry” in the *Book of Order*. Prior to 1997, the *Book of Order* contained no explicit language addressing sexuality or sexual practice as part of the standards for ordination of installation:

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.

The new section, which will take effect on July 10, 2011, reads as follows:

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.

What does this mean?

- It removes language of sexual practice for ordination that had not been part of our ordination standards prior to 1997.
- It retains the historic approach to ordination. The session ordains and installs elders and deacons. The presbytery ordains and installs Ministers of the Word and Sacrament and commissions Commissioned Lay Pastors to serve congregations without a pastor.
- 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 for office, and a congregation votes to call its pastor(s).

May a person in a same-gender relationship be considered for ordination as a deacon, elder, or Minister of the Word and Sacrament? Yes, but only with the approval of the governing body that examines them and ordains or installs them.

How was this decision made?

The same way that any decision that seeks to change our constitutional documents is made. Congregations elect elders to serve on the session. The session elects commissioners to presbyteries. Presbyteries elect commissioners to General Assemblies (that now meet every two years). If the General Assembly, comprised equally of ministers and elders, passes a proposed change to the *Book of Order*, then a majority of the denominations 173 presbyteries must also approve the change before it can take effect. Over the past decade this issue has come up for a vote on four separate occasions and has been defeated in the presbytery vote until now. Currently, more than a simple majority of presbyteries has voted in favor of Amendment 10-A.

How did our presbytery vote?

On December 4, 2010, the John Calvin Presbytery voted 41 to 30 against Amendment 10-A.

Does the passage of Amendment 10-A mean a requirement now exists that a church must ordain gay or lesbian people?

There is no requirement that First & Calvary Presbyterian Church (F&CPC), or any other Presbyterian congregation, or John Calvin Presbytery, or any other presbytery, ordain a gay or lesbian candidate. In fact, Melana Scruggs, Stated Clerk of John Calvin Presbytery, stated in an email to me, dated May 18, 2011: "It is my expectation that this Presbytery will not be changing any of its requirements for pastors, so no immediate ramifications in that regard will be felt here."

Why has this amendment passed now when it failed earlier?

Many reasons can be given. Our society as a whole has become more accepting of gays and lesbians, particularly among younger adults. Many conservatives have dropped out of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Membership both at the presbytery level and the General Assembly constantly changes. Some, from the beginning, objected to the 1997 language, feeling that injecting sexual practices for ordination standards violates the historical stance of the Presbyterian Church. Why specify certain sexual practices and not other immoral behavior? Some commissioners, therefore, have voted against the 1997 language even though they do not favor the ordination of homosexuals.

How should the F&C session react to these changes?

The session may choose to study and pray about the issue in greater depth, perhaps even leading the congregation in such a study. At the very least, the session should give renewed attention to its responsibility in preparing candidates for office: "The session shall provide for a period of study and preparation, after which the session shall

examine the officers-elect as to their personal faith; knowledge of the doctrine, government and discipline contained in the Constitution of the church; and the duties of the office.” (G-14.0240)

What ordination standards remain in the *Book of Order*?

In addition to the new language for G-60106b, the preceding paragraph – G-6.0106a – is significant: “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.**” (Emphasis mine) In addition, the newly adopted paragraph 6b concludes with the instruction, “Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.”

What if a member of F&CPC disagrees with the adoption of Amendment 10-A and wishes to register his or her protest?

Just as in our civil government, we live under a representative democracy where the majority opinion rules. There is nothing that an individual member or the F&C session can do at this point to stop the adoption of the amendment. A member who disagrees, however, does have several options:

- Write a letter stating their views to the Moderator of Session or Clerk of Session;
- Write a letter stating their views to the Stated Clerk of John Calvin Presbytery or to the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly.
- Volunteer to serve on the Nominating Committee at F&CPC.
- Agree to having one’s name considered to serve on the session where these issues are discussed and often voted on.
- Pray for F&CPC and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
- As a member of session, volunteer to attend presbytery meetings regularly where these issues are debated and voted on.
- As a last resort, there is always the option of transferring one’s membership to a church other than Presbyterian. Remaining a member but withholding pledges or funds to the church, however, merely hurts legitimate ministries and mission of F&CPC and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that remain unaffected by the change in language.
- Understand that we can disagree over theological matters and interpretation of Scripture and still remain loyal to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, serving side-by-side as devoted Presbyterians and disciples in the faith.

With the passage of Amendment 10-A, am I, as a Presbyterian and a member of a Presbyterian church, required to believe in the validity of ordaining openly gay men and women?

No. The Historic Principles of Church Order, dating back to 1788, state that “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.” (G-1.0301(1a) This particular quotation may also be found in The Westminster Confession of Faith in *The Book of Confessions*.

With the passage of Amendment 10-A, am I, as an ordained deacon or elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), required to believe in the validity of ordaining openly gay men and women?

No. While it is necessary to the integrity and health of the church that persons who serve as officers shall adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity as expressed in *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government, nevertheless, “so far as may be possible without serious departure from these standards, without infringing on the rights and views of others, and without obstructing the constitutional governance of the church, freedom of conscience with respect to the interpretation of Scripture is to be maintained.” (G-6.0108a)