

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

1. What exactly has changed?

*G-6.0106 contains two sections on “gifts” and “requirements” of church officers. G-6.0106a on “gifts” is **unchanged**. It 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.

*G-6.0106b, on “requirements” **has been amended**. The old text says,*

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 G-6.0106b will read:

Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.14.0240; G-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.

2. How did the change in ordination standards happen?

A majority of the 173 presbyteries voted to approve a change in language for ordination standards recommended by the 219th General Assembly in 2010. In all, since the General Assembly meeting, 55% of the total number of elder-commissioners and ministers voting in presbyteries have approved the amendment.

3. What does the change in ordination standards mean?

The ordination standards no longer include an explicit requirement that officers live “in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.” Standards include “joyful submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all areas of life,” and are tied to the candidate's “commitment and ability” to fulfill the responsibilities of office contained in the constitutional questions for office. This removes a national standard which categorically prohibited the ordination of persons in sexual relationships outside of marriage between a man and a woman.

4. What does the change in ordination standards represent?

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has shifted the authority for applying its ordination standards from the national level to the local presbytery and session level. This has been the historic practice of the church practiced with rare exception from 1729 to 1975. It represents a de-centralization of the church and puts more discernment in the hands of people at the local level.

5. May presbyteries and sessions now ordain people who are openly gay?

The previous standards were never based on a person's orientation, but on their behavior. The new standards do not list specific behaviors that automatically exclude someone for consideration for ordination. Each examining body is responsible to look at all possible factors to determine if someone is being called into ordained ministry.

6. Specifically, what was changed?

The primary change is the removal of language requiring those ordained "to live either in fidelity in the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness." It also adds language referring to obedience to Christ, and indicates that fidelity to church standards is judged case by case by the examining body.

7. What practical changes will we see?

As previously ordained deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament move to a new location, they shall be examined by that ordaining body before being installed in a new term of service or call to ministry. That body may choose to apply ordination standards differently from the officer's previous body.

8. 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.

9. Will a congregation be required to change anything?

A presbytery or session cannot be forced to ordain or receive pastors or elders or deacons of whom it does not approve. The congregation retains the right to elect its own officers, and the session retains the right to examine officers-elect and to ordain and install those whom they determine meet the standards and responsibilities of office.

10. May a congregation continue to require its officers to practice "fidelity and chastity" if it so chooses?

Sessions may adopt behavioral standards for officers of the church that may include fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness. The standards may inform their examination of candidates for office, but candidates must be provided an opportunity to declare and defend departures from those standards. Judgments must be made on each candidate as an individual, weighing the quality of their defense and the totality of their gifts and calling. The new language calls the ordaining body to be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying ordination standards to individual candidates.

11. May a session or presbytery now ordain or install a sexually active homosexual?

Yes, if after a thorough examination, the examining session or presbytery concurs with the candidate's gifts, calling, preparation and suitability for ordained office, and, guided by scripture and the confessions, finds the candidate has both the commitment and ability to fulfill the responsibilities of ordained office as described in the constitutional questions for office.

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 has a “right” to be ordained. Ordination is based on a sense of God’s call as confirmed by the ordaining body. Nevertheless, a candidate’s manner of life should be judged by the examining body to be an appropriate witness to the gospel in the church and the world.

13. 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, including those honorably retired.

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

All questions necessary to determine a candidate’s suitability for ordained office are allowed during an examination. Upon review, deference will be accorded to the judgment of an examining body provided the examination was conducted reasonably, responsibly, and deliberately, within the Constitution of the church (Rankin v. National Capital Union Presbytery, UPC 1981, p. 113). 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.

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

No.

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