

Examination Policy

The Presbytery of Plains and Peaks will be guided by the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in the examination of candidates. Based upon a thorough analysis of the relevant provisions in the *Book of Order*, and the history of Constitutional interpretation through decisions of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission and the authoritative interpretations adopted by the General Assembly itself, we hereby adopt the following policy:

1. Persons being examined for ordination to the office of minister of Word and Sacrament and/or membership in the Presbytery shall be examined by the Presbytery.¹
 - a. Persons being examined for ordination shall be examined by the Presbytery in plenary assembly.²
 - b. Persons previously ordained as a minister of Word and Sacrament who seek presbytery membership may be examined by the Committee on Ministry (or a COM task force consisting of at least three persons) on behalf of the Presbytery.³
2. Persons being examined shall submit a brief statement of faith (ordinarily not to exceed one page) which shall be reviewed as part of the examination.⁴ Honorably retired persons may present an account of their faith journey in lieu of a statement of faith.⁵ The Presbytery reserves the right, however, to conduct a theological examination of honorably retired persons and may require a statement of faith from honorably retired persons seeking membership.⁶
3. Governing bodies do not possess a “right of conscience” that would permit them to violate mandatory provisions of the Constitution.⁷ For example, the Presbytery is bound by the third sentence of G-6.0106b which states, “Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as a ... minister of Word and Sacrament.”⁸
4. Individuals being examined for ordination or presbytery membership who disagree with the faith or polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as expressed in the Scriptures, the *Book of Confessions*, or the *Book of Order* shall submit a statement of exception (“scruple”) expressing their disagreement to the Presbytery in writing prior to their examination.⁹

¹ For ordinands, G-14.0402a; for membership, G-11.0402.

² G-14.0402a.

³ G-11.0402; G-11.0502h; Presbytery standing rule 1.1.3.(2)

⁴ Presbytery policy adopted February 2000.

⁵ Presbytery policy adopted February 2000.

⁶ The policy adopted in February 2000 does not prohibit the presbytery from exercising its Constitutional responsibility to examine under G-11.0402, as policies may not override the Constitution.

⁷ Reaffirmed most recently in *Londonderry v. Presbytery of Northern New England* (Remedial Case 213-2, 2001).

⁸ While the first two sentences of G-6.0106b articulate “standards,” the force of which may be subject to local application under the authoritative interpretation issued by the 217th General Assembly (2006), the third sentence specifically limits the authority of governing bodies to exercise their powers to ordain or install persons refusing to repent of any practices governed by those standards which the Confessions call sin.

⁹ On the limits of personal conscience, see G-6.0108; while G-6.0108 specifically identifies only the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order, the COM has added “the Scriptures.” The provision requiring a written statement is included to aid the Presbytery in conducting its assessment of whether the departure constitutes an essential of Reformed faith and polity. Should a “scruple” be announced during the examination, the Presbytery would be in order to suspend the examination to provide opportunity for the candidate to provide the written statement. The Presbytery could choose to resume the examination at such a place and time as would provide sufficient opportunity to consider the request carefully and conduct a reasonable and responsible examination. COM will be responsible for notifying persons to be examined of the Presbytery policy sufficiently in advance so as to allow them time to prepare written statements prior to the meeting.

- a. Each person submitting a statement of exception shall be examined by the Presbytery in plenary assembly.¹⁰ Each exception requested shall be considered by the Presbytery as to whether it constitutes a rejection of an essential tenet of Reformed faith or polity. The person being examined shall be granted opportunity to defend the objection before the assembly. The assembly may take into account the depth and quality of theological reasoning in determining whether the position taken constitutes a rejection of an essential tenet.¹¹
- b. Persons who are judged by this presbytery to reject an essential tenet of Reformed faith or polity shall not be ordained as a minister of Word and Sacrament, or be granted membership in this Presbytery, regardless of prior ordination or retirement status.
- c. “So far as may be possible without serious departure from *the standards of the church*, 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).
- d. The Presbytery may not take any action which binds the judgment of future assemblies in the examination of candidates, nor may it reject a candidate’s statement of exception without providing the candidate an opportunity to defend the position or the presbyters the opportunity to weigh the position or its defense.¹²
- e. Persons whose statements of exception are deemed by the Presbytery not to constitute rejection of an essential tenet are nevertheless required to act in conformity with the faith and polity of the church.¹³ Persons willfully violating mandatory provisions of the Constitution shall be subject to disciplinary action.

¹⁰ Under G-6.0108, the determination of departure from essentials is the responsibility of the governing body. The COM believes this decision may not and should not be delegated to any committee, task force, council, or commission.

¹¹ “It was clearly the intention that this decision as to essential and necessary articles was to be made after the candidate had been presented and had declared his beliefs and stated his motives personally, and after the examining body, whether Presbytery or (General) Synod, had had full opportunity to judge the man himself, as well as abstract questions of doctrine.” (Report of the Special Commission of 1925 [“Swearingen”], PCUSA, 1927, pp. 56-86).

¹² “One fact often overlooked is that by the Act of 1729, the decision as to essential and necessary articles was to be in specific cases. It was no general authority that might be stated in exact language and applied rigidly to every case without distinction. It was an authority somewhat undefined, to be invoked in each particular instance.” (Report of the Special Commission of 1925 [“Swearingen”], PCUSA, 1927, pp. 56-86.)

¹³ “The Commission recognizes the right of individuals to hold views contrary to the Constitution of the PCUS but, for the sake of order, actions contrary to the Constitution are not sanctioned” (PCUS, 1983, *Hambrick v. PJC, Synod of North Carolina*, No. 1-1983). See also *Londonderry et al. v. Presbytery of Northern New England* (RC 213-2, 2001). An examination concerns fitness for office. A decision to grant a “scruple” in examination for ordination does not abridge the authority of the Constitution to govern conduct of ministry or limit the grounds for remedial or disciplinary actions.