

Ordination Standards in the PC(USA) Timeline

1975 - In *Maxwell v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh* (1975), in declining to permit the ordination of Walter Kenyon (who opposed the ordination of women), the GA PJC found:

"The challenged decision of Presbytery was not unique or of but minimal significance. The issue of equal treatment and leadership opportunity for all (particularly without regard to considerations of race and sex) is a paramount concern of our Church. Neither a synod nor the General Assembly has any power to allow a presbytery to grant an exception to an explicit constitutional provision." (p. 257)

Sexual conduct standards for men and women seeking ordination, a divisive issue in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for more than 25 years, is on the General Assembly docket again this year.

1978 and 1979, - the PC(USA)'s predecessor denominations adopted policies — now called "authoritative interpretations" of the constitution — that bar the ordination to church office of "self-affirming, practicing homosexuals."

1996 and 1997 - that prohibition was codified when a majority of the church's 173 presbyteries ratified a constitutional amendment — provision G-6.0106b of the *Book of Order* — requiring church officers "to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness."

1997 to 2006 - Repeated attempts to repeal G-6.0106b failed. Proposals to repeal or modify the provision were deferred to the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church, which made its final report, including recommendations on ordination standards, to the 2006 Assembly (*Recommendation 5 cryptically suggested that "local option" be allowed at the Presbytery level... though this was denied by proponents of the Recommendation who proclaimed that the PUP report should be approved because "It would not change anything."*)

The General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission, the denomination's highest church court, ruled that both G-6.0106b and the "authoritative interpretations" would have to be repealed before the way would be cleared to ordination of non-celibate gays and lesbians.

SAN JOSE, June 27, 2008 — The 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted today (June 27) 380-325 to send a proposed amendment to the denomination's 173 presbyteries that would delete the current paragraph G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order* — which requires church officers to live in "fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness" — and replace it with a new G-6.0106b.

The proposed new G-6.0106b ties ordination decisions more closely to assent to the ordination vows currently in the church's *Book of Order* without singling out a sexual conduct standard.

The proposed new G-6.0106b reads:

"Those who are called to ordained service in the church, by their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003), pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions. In so doing, they declare their fidelity to the standards of the Church. Each governing body charged with examination for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240 and G-14.0450) establishes the candidate's sincere efforts to adhere to these standards."

The debate now moves to the denomination's presbyteries, which in 1997 and 2000 rejected proposals to delete G-6.0106b. At a press conference following the vote, the Rev. Dan Holloway of Providence Presbytery, who moderated the Assembly Committee on Church Orders and Ministries that brought the recommendation to the Assembly, said, "It is important to say that at this point our Constitution has not been changed. As we move forward it is essential that we have conversations that are gracious and loving and welcoming, since we are not all of one mind."

SAN JOSE, June 27, 2008 — In the same action, the Assembly issued a new authoritative interpretation of the *Book of Order* declaring that interpretive statements related to sexual standards for ordination that predate the adoption of G-6.0106b in 1996 "have no further force or effect."

The Advisory Committee on the Constitution has repeatedly said that clearing the way for ordination of sexually active gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Presbyterians requires the deletion of G-6.0106b and the removal of the authoritative interpretations that undergirded Assembly policy statements of 1978 and 1979 prohibiting the ordination of practicing homosexuals.

SAN JOSE, June 27, 2008 — In another ordination standards-related action, the Assembly adopted a supplementary authoritative Interpretation of the PC(USA) constitution that applies the historical practice of “scrupling” — the declaration of conscientious objection by candidates for ordination, coupled with discernment by the ordaining body whether the declared objection is disqualifying — equally to all ordination standards of the denomination.

The authoritative interpretation reaffirms the scrupling practice affirmed by the 217th General Assembly (2006) when it approved the report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church and effectively overturns a recent General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) ruling — *Bush vs. Presbytery of Pittsburgh* — that G-6.0106b, the commonly called “fidelity and chastity” ordination standard, cannot be scrupled.

The GAPJC ruling also stated that scrupling on any provision of the church’s Constitution does not give the conscientious objector license to disobey it.

SAN JOSE, June 24, 2008 — The General Assembly Committee on Church Orders and Ministry has voted to recommend that the 218th General Assembly adopt a supplementary authoritative interpretation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) constitution that applies the historical practice of “scrupling” — the declaration of conscientious objection by candidates for ordination coupled with discernment by the ordaining body whether the declared objection is disqualifying — equally to all ordination standards of the denomination.

The authoritative interpretation, brought to the assembly by John Knox Presbytery, reaffirms the scrupling practice affirmed by the 217th General Assembly when it approved the report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church (PUP) and effectively overturns a recent General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission ruling — *Bush vs. Presbytery of Pittsburgh* — that G-6.0106b, the commonly called “fidelity and chastity” ordination standard, cannot be scrupled. The committee vote was 43-15.

“We cannot be cherry-picking the constitutional provisions,” said the Rev. Mark Achtemeier, the overture advocate for John Knox Presbytery and a member of PUP. “Room for allowing scrupling must be equally applied or it makes no theological sense.” The committee adopted slightly different wording suggested by the Advisory Committee on the Constitution that makes the new

authoritative interpretation supplementary to that included in the PUP report rather than a replacement of it. The full text of the proposal:

"The 218th General Assembly (2008) affirms the authoritative interpretation of G-6.0108 approved by the 217th General Assembly (2006). Further, the 218th General Assembly (2008), pursuant to G-13.0112, interprets the requirements of G-6.0108 to apply equally to all ordination standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Section G-6.0108 requires examining bodies to give prayerful and careful consideration, on an individual, case-by-case basis, to any departure from an ordination standard in matters of belief or practice that a candidate may declare during examination. However, the examining body is not required to accept a departure from standards, and cannot excuse a candidate's inability to perform the constitutional functions unique to his or her office (such as administration of the sacraments)."

The committee then cemented its support for the PUP report by voting 42-12 to answer five overtures that would have rescinded or amended the report with the action taken on the new authoritative interpretation. Opponents of the committee's decisions said they would split the church and vowed to file a minority report. "The vision has become a nightmare," said the Rev. Donald Baird, Sacramento Presbytery's overture advocate for a proposal that the entire PUP report be rescinded. "If *Bush* is overturned and an amendment to delete G-6.0106b is sent to the presbyteries, a lot of churches will be leaving. All I ask is that you let them take their property without a fight."

Sylvia Dooling, an elder commissioner and committee member from Plains and Peaks Presbytery, said issuing an authoritative interpretation that allows G-6.0106b to be included in scrupling is "an end run around presbyteries that would in effect give us 'local option' rather than be held to constitutional standards for ordination." Dooling said "I'd rather we just send out a proposed amendment to delete G-6.0106b than to do this."

The committee recommendation was passed (54% to 46% like all the other sexuality related issues) considered by the full Assembly.