

CONCERNING THE ORDINATION OF CHURCH OFFICERS

By Rev. Mark Lenneville

The recent General Assembly sent Amendment B to the presbyteries asking each to consider new language concerning requirements in the *Book of Order* for ordained officers in the church. The Presbytery of Arkansas voted 116 to 64 to change the language of the *Book of Order*. One half of the 173 Presbyteries MUST vote to approve the changes in order for the change to occur.

Here is a comparison of the language under discussion:

Current *Book of Order* G-6.0106b

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-4.9002), 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.

Proposed Amendment B that would replace G-6.0106b

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 Youth Advisory Delegates at the Presbytery meeting voted to advise the Presbytery Commissioners to change the wording. There were 10 Commissioners who spoke in favor of the changed wording and 5 who spoke against it.

Here are some summary comments made by both sides on the floor of the Presbytery meeting.

Those individuals in favor of the changes said:

- 1. “Good theological language and in line with the precepts of the Reformed Theological Tradition.”**
- 2. “New language supports the historical stance that governing bodies have responsibilities to ordain leaders in the church.”**
- 3. “Denying any group of people is prejudicial and not in line with our understanding of inclusiveness and diversity in the Body of Christ.”**
- 4. Romans 8 was cited.**

Those individuals opposed to the changed wording said:

- 1. “Changing the wording will splinter the church.”**
- 2. “Changing the language will ‘Shoot ourselves in the foot’.”**
- 3. “Sets aside clarity of behavior regarding sexual and behavioral practices.”**
- 4. 1 Timothy 5:22 was cited.**

The Presbytery voted against “Taking No Action”.

Because the Presbytery of Arkansas voted for the wording change it does NOT mean that it will take effect unless 87 Presbyteries of the 173 also want the new wording.

The secular media’s lack of understanding about Reformed Theology, Presbyterian polity and the issues at stake has misrepresented the discussion and the decision. Even some church leaders have made this issue about homosexuality and the ordination of homosexuals. Although this is certainly an aspect of the discussion, it is not the totality of what is at stake.

The Presbytery Commissioners, in my personal opinion, saw this language change as necessary to:

- 1. Lift up the primacy of Jesus Christ in the ordination of church officers**
- 2. Move away from ranking sins and to,**
- 3. Affirm the role of the congregation and Presbytery to judge the call to leadership.**

I believe it is incorrect to assume that a person’s voting for or against this change in wording means that the person is necessarily for or against homosexual ordination despite the fact that there are those inside and outside the church that insist on making that connection. Each Elder Commissioner, Minister, Certified Educator, and Commission Lay Pastor was called to vote his or her conscience related to the wording change and not bow to the pressures of a particular constituency or public opinion.

It will be important for Presbyterians to interpret the action of the Presbytery of Arkansas and the Presbyterian Church (USA) to help our Presbyterian and non-Presbyterian friends to understand what took place and how God continues to work in and through the local, regional and the national church.

Before the vote was reported, Rev. Jim Freeman reminded the Commissioners that regardless of the outcome, there will be people who will have “lost” the vote. He reminded us that it is inappropriate to cheer, clap or boo the decision of the body and that we all need to respect and honor each other and our varying perspectives about this issue and these decisions. So be it with us in our church.