

## Ordination Standards Questions and Answers

### What did the General Assembly do? What has changed?

The 219th General Assembly (2010) proposed a change to the PC(USA) Constitution regarding ordination standards by a vote of 373-323-4. A majority of the 173 presbyteries have voted in the affirmative resulting in changes in the Book of Order.

Specifically, G-6.0106b, a provision in the PC(USA) Book of Order (Constitution) that provided the following standards for persons ordained as church leaders (deacon, elder or minister):

- *“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,”* has been deleted and replaced with the following language:
- *“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.”*

This change focuses ordination examinations on the individual’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability as a candidate for the responsibilities of the office, in joyful submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life.

### What hasn’t changed?

The section of the Book of Order that has changed, G-6.0106b, is preceded by a section that has not changed—G-6.0106a—which reads: *“To those called to exercise special functions in the church—deacons, elders, and ministers of 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.”*

Likewise, the questions for ordination that every deacon, elder, and minister must answer in the affirmative when ordained or installed have not changed.

### What do these changes mean?

A number of things:

- ***The ordaining/installing body determines the suitability of candidates for the responsibilities of the office, “in joyful submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life.”*** At the congregational level, sessions through their examinations of elders and deacons and congregations through their election of elders and deacons, determine the suitability of each candidate. At the presbytery level, presbyteries determine the suitability of each candidate for ordination and each minister for installation. What has changed is that the suitability of a candidate will be considered on a case by case basis and the examining body may not automatically exclude from consideration a candidate who does not “*live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.*” On the other hand, a session or presbytery, after considering an individual’s suitability, may choose not to ordain or install the individual candidate based upon failure to “*live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.*”
- **There is the potential for a more diverse interpretation of ordination standards by sessions and presbyteries.** Sessions and presbyteries may determine, for example, that a particular candidate who lives in a same gender covenant relationship is suitable for ordination and/or installation. Other sessions and presbyteries may consistently determine that a candidate who lives in a same gender covenant relationship is not suitable for ordination and/or installation.
- **Due to the potential for greater diversity in the interpretation of ordination standards, examination of candidates by sessions and presbyteries will likely take on greater importance.** Someone who has been ordained in one presbytery as a minister of Word and Sacrament may not be found suitable for installation in another presbytery. A deacon or elder who serves in one congregation may not be found suitable to be installed in an ordained office in another congregation.
- **It is highly likely that some presbyteries and some congregations will find individual candidates who live in same gender covenant relationships as suitable for ordination and installation.** This will please some and anger others. It may result in efforts to restore previous language to the Constitution in future General Assemblies.
- **Sessions and presbyteries will not be forced or coerced to ordain or install individual candidates who they deem unsuitable for ordination and installation because they live in same gender covenant relationships.** Two foundational values of the Presbyterian Church are prohibition against binding the conscience and the right/responsibility of members to elect and ordain persons who lead them. These values will continue to be honored.