Ordination Vows for PC(USA) and ECO
These are not printed back-to-back so that you may compare them side-to-side.

PC(USA) W-4.4003 Constitutional Questions for Ordination, Installation, and Commissioning

The moderator of the council of those to be ordained, installed, or commissioned shall ask them to stand before the body of membership and to answer the following questions:

a. Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

b. Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you?

c. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?

d. Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?

e. Will you be governed by our church’s polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God’s Word and Spirit?

f. Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?

g. Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?

h. Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?

i. (1) (For ruling elder) Will you be a faithful ruling elder, watching over the people, providing for their worship, nurture, and service? Will you share in government and discipline, serving in councils of the church, and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

(2) (For deacon) Will you be a faithful deacon, teaching charity, urging concern, and directing the people’s help to the friendless and those in need, and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

(3) (For teaching elder) Will you be a faithful teaching elder, proclaiming the good news in Word and Sacrament, teaching faith and caring for people? Will you be active in government and discipline, serving in the councils of the church; and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

(4) (For ruling elder commissioned to particular pastoral service) Will you be a faithful ruling elder in this commission, serving the people by proclaiming the good news, teaching faith and caring for the people, and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

(5) (For certified Christian educator) Will you be a faithful certified Christian educator, teaching faith and caring for people, and will you in your ministry try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ.
**ECO 2.0103 Ordination vows**

a. Do you believe in One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and do you boldly declare Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and acknowledge Him Lord of all and Head of the church?

b. Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the Word of God, and, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the unique witness to Jesus Christ and the authority for Christian faith and life?

c. Will you receive, adopt, and be bound by the Essential Tenets of ECO as a reliable exposition of what Scripture teaches us to do and to believe, and will you be guided by them in your life and ministry?

d. Relying on the Holy Spirit, do you humbly submit to God’s call on your life, committing yourself to God’s mission, and fulfilling your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture and guided by our confessions?

e. Will you be governed by the ECO’s polity and discipline? And will you be accountable to your fellow elders, deacons, and pastors as you lead?

f. Do you promise to be faithful in maintaining the truth of the Gospel and the peace, unity, and purity of the Church?

g. Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?

h. (1) (for elder) Will you be a faithful elder, watching over the people in their worship, nurture, and service to God?
   (2) (for deacon) Will you be a faithful deacon, serving the people, urging concern and directing the people’s help to those in need?
   (3) (for pastor) Will you be a faithful minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the good news, teaching the faith, showing the people God’s mission, and caring for the people?
A Very Limited Selection of PC(USA) Info

PC(USA) - 1001 Worshiping Communities

Based on numerous conversations with PC(USA) seminary leaders and with colleagues in Evangelism and Church Growth, Theology, Worship and Education, and Racial Ethnic & Women’s Ministries, here is what we believe a new worshipping community is. We have also incorporated comments from Presbyterian Mission Agency members and mid council leaders. Our hope is that this working definition will provide both clarity and inspiration for this 1001 New Worshiping Communities movement.

A New Worshiping Community is . . .

New

• Taking on varied forms of church for our changing culture - Living out the gospel demands ministry that engages today’s cultures (John 1:14). New ways of joining Christians together for contextual ministry will use current and historic ways of “being church” as springboards for creative innovation (Matt. 9:17).
• Seeking to make and form new disciples of Jesus Christ - NWCs witness in word and deed (1 John 3:18), continuing Jesus’ own mission of discipling, feeding, teaching, healing, welcoming, crossing boundaries, and proclaiming God’s coming realm. Those with new and renewed faith join the Spirit’s transforming work in the world.

Worshiping

• Gathered by the Spirit to meet Jesus Christ in Word and Sacrament - We seek to hear, come to believe, and are equipped to live the promises of God revealed in the Old and New Testaments. NWCs welcome new members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27) through Baptism and are nourished by Christ’s spiritual presence in the Lord’s Supper.
• Sent by the Spirit to join God’s mission for the transformation of the world - The Spirit impels us outward, so that worshippers participate in the redemption of the world in Christ (Col. 1:20). Therefore, the primary beneficiaries of the NWC are not its own members but rather its community and world.

Community

• Practicing mutual care and accountability - We commit ourselves to love one another (John 13:34) in relationships of mutual care and accountability, as faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Entrusting ourselves and the church to the Holy Spirit, we seek to grow to maturity in faith and life.
• Developing sustainability in leadership and finances - As distinct yet connected expressions of the body of Christ, NWCs have local leadership arising from their own community of faith (Exod. 18:21). Pastoral leadership, facilities, and programs are all appropriately structured in order to demonstrate good and faithful stewardship.

Responding to Christ's gift and call, we do all these things only by God’s grace, seeking—above all else—to glorify God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Rational

This movement will help our denomination make the shift from an inward-focused, membership-maintenance model of church to a more outward, creative, and disciple-making model of church. The question must change from “How do we do church better?” to “How can we be church in a new way?” In order to reconnect with the missional DNA already present in our churches, we must make the “proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind” a priority for each member of our congregations. This proclamation in word and deed must start with disciples who have a vibrant faith going out to share their faith with friends, neighbors, and their communities. In order for us to live into this missional ecclesiology, existing congregations must catch the vision to plant new worshipping communities. As our mid councils work toward this vision of starting 1,001 new worshipping communities, the main thrust must come from local congregations.

Our denomination has often focused on the tensions and conflicts that tear us apart rather than casting a vision that unites us in Christ. 1001 inspires us to recapture a ministry methodology that once was part of the church-planting fabric of the Presbyterian church. We need a vision beyond ourselves that deeply resonates with what God is already doing in the larger church—namely, creating communities of faith outside our standard
models of church planting. This goal is not about institutional survival but brings us back to the core of what the church is called to be and do.

Why should we encourage this movement? First, the health of our congregations will improve as they recover their missional DNA. Second, this new approach will allow our church to be more responsive to Christ’s call to make disciples. Third, neighborhoods and communities will benefit as our people work within them as the hands and feet of Jesus. Fourth, lives will be transformed by the grace of God as we become a vibrant denomination again.

**What are some of the core assumptions?** There is nothing more transformative than the people of God gathered together to worship the risen Christ and sent out to serve the world in Christ’s name. God’s Spirit is moving throughout the church, whispering the same things and inspiring new models, fresh vision, and an awareness that is bringing God’s people to understand and embrace again the truth that “It’s all about congregations.” The most effective evangelism tool is to start new communities of faith. These new worshipping communities are the most strategic way to reach new generations, new residents, and new populations that established churches are not reaching. Worshipping communities are defined by Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

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**Next Church**

http://nextchurch.net/

*This is not officially a PC(USA) program, but it is made of people from the PC(USA).*

The mission of NEXT Church is to foster relationships among God’s people: sparking imaginations; connecting congregations; offering a distinctively Presbyterian witness to Jesus Christ.

Trusting in God’s sovereignty and grace, NEXT Church will engage the church that is becoming by cultivating vital connections, celebrating emerging leadership and innovation, and working with congregations and leaders to form and reform faith communities.

**What is NEXT Church?** NEXT Church is a network of leaders across the Presbyterian Church (USA) who believe the church of the future will be more relational, more diverse, more collaborative, more hopeful and more agile. We provide hopeful space for robust conversations about the theology, culture, and the practice of ministry, to serve as a catalyst for new mission callings, and to support strong leadership in a time of adaptive change. We are fostering a conversation about how to follow Christ in our particular day and age. We are a movement seeking to change the culture of connection in the PC(USA) so that we continue to share faithfully the good news of the gospel in ways that bear fruit in a fractured world.

**Can I join NEXT Church?** You can! Join NEXT by participating in the conversation, doing innovative ministry in your community, and coming to regional and national gatherings to share what you’ve learned and be inspired by others. Offer your financial support so that we can continue to connect leaders and create space for generative conversation. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter and sign up for our email newsletter to stay in touch with what’s going on.

**What’s a regional gathering?** NEXT Church regional gatherings are popping up around the country, propelled by momentum and hope generated at the NEXT 2012 gathering in Dallas, Texas. They are opportunities to connect locally with other leaders in the PC(USA) to encourage greater partnerships around shared mission actions and creative, exciting ministry opportunities.

What dream do you have for God’s kingdom in your local community? Affordable housing for seniors? An innovative youth leaders network? Robust campus ministry? These are the kinds of ideas the regional gatherings will embrace and explore. The particulars will depend on the passions of the participants. Find a regional gathering near you on our website.

**Is NEXT Church leaving the PC(USA)?** Absolutely not! We believe that God is not done with the PC(USA). Throughout our denomination, creative leaders are engaged in ministries that embody the gospel in
fresh ways, serve Christ, and speak a transforming word to contemporary culture. By connecting with one another and building networks with shared mission callings, we can expand the impact of these ministries beyond anything any one congregation can accomplish alone.

How is NEXT Church structured? NEXT Church is a network of leaders across the PC(USA). The more people who are a generative part of this movement, the better. NEXT Church’s leadership team seeks to give over-arching direction to our collective work. The Advisory Team offers counsel and helps spread the word about the hopeful space NEXT offers. A smaller group from this team serves as the Strategy Team which meets 3-4 times a year, sets the agenda and makes decisions. NEXT Church recently called a Director, the Reverend Jessica Tate, to help keep us on track.

How is NEXT funded? We are funded through generous support of congregations and individuals.
A Selection of Articles & Blog Posts Related to Denominational Discernment

Blood is thicker than gay ordination

Conservative Colombian Presbyterians reject PC(USA)’s ordination standards but reaffirm partnership

OCTOBER 12, 2012  http://www.pcusa.org/news/2012/10/12/blood-thicker-gay-ordination/

Jerry L. Van Marter, Presbyterian New Service

In a strongly worded letter to Presbyterian World Mission Director Hunter Farrell, the moderator of a conservative offshoot of the Presbyterian Church in Colombia has reaffirmed that church’s partnership with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) despite its rejection of the PC(USA)’s current ordination standard allowing for the ordination of sexually active unmarried persons, including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered church members.

“We reject this [homosexual] conduct however it is expressed, but at the same time express the appreciation for people as human beings,” wrote Martha Raquel Niño Duran, moderator of the Reformed Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Colombia.

“...We have different points of view, but as brothers and sisters in Christ, we will continue the commitment of brotherhood to keep working for the benefit of the people of God,” Duran added.

“While the rejection is not ideal, the model of ‘reject the action, but maintain unity’ is a strong message,” Farrell told the Presbyterian News Service. “This determination by our Colombian brothers and sisters is well worth sharing more broadly with the PC(USA) because even a very conservative partner has chosen to maintain relationship despite significant theological difference.”

The full text of Duran’s letter to Farrell, dated Oct. 4:

“Commit your way unto the LORD; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass.” — Psalm 37:5.

In my capacity as Moderator of the Reformed Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Colombia, receive warm greetings and our best wishes for peace and prosperity in all and every one of the activities undertaken for the benefit of the Church of Christ.

The Synod Council, at its meeting held in the month of June of the current year in the city of Barranquilla, made the following agreement in relation to the changes of the PC (USA)’s ordination standards:

“Agreement No. 090: The Reformed Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Colombia has been part of the Presbyterian Church’s conservative wing in the world, which enacts the principles described in the Holy Bible on the integrity of the human being as the Lord Jesus Christ, Who appreciates every human being as a person, but does not share attitudes such as corruption, social injustice, drug trafficking, domestic violence, child abuse, and homosexuality among others. The Reformed Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Colombia rejects the position of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in relation to the ordination of gay ministers. We reject this conduct however it is expressed, but at the same time express the appreciation for people as human beings.”

With reference to this issue, we have different points of view, but as brothers and sisters in Christ, we will continue the commitment of brotherhood to keep working for the benefit of the people of God.
In the scheme of the world’s problems, the goings on of the Presbyterian Church (USA) – no matter how much we would like it not to be true – create few ripples in the cultural seas and religious landscape of the United States or the world. This is not to say that we aren’t doing good work in some places, that communities have stopped being faithful or that we should no longer bother trying, only that the energy that we put towards our own internal struggles must be kept in perspective. No doubt, these are important times in our life as a denomination, but if we get too fixated on our own navels, we will further slide into the abyss of irrelevance with little hope for a healthy future.

So on that cheery note, let me muse a bit on the recent developments concerning The Fellowship of Presbyterians and the newly announced Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO).

As some have noted, I have been hesitant to comment on The Fellowship or other organized movements of change within our denomination. I did offer some ideas about the future in *The Big Sort of the Presbyterian Church* and *I Want My Presbyterian Church Back*, so other than these posts, I have tried to stay out of the fray. But after seeing some of the conversations during and after the recent Florida gathering where the The ECO was launched, I have decided to break my blogging hiatus and jump into the conversation.

I know this is going to sound a little silly coming from a former General Assembly Moderator, but I see myself as an outsider to much of what is currently taking place in the denomination. After serving as moderator, other than attending General Assembly Mission Council meetings and Peacemaking Program Gatherings, I have had very little in-depth interaction with the movers and shakers of the Presbyterian Church (USA). I am not looking to be more involved, but I simply have not been part of any discussions concerning The Fellowship, NEXT Church or any other denominationally affiliated organizations. I have spoken at a few Presbytery gatherings, but since I am no longer serving a congregation and find myself speaking with more and more non-Presbyterian groups, the dog that I have in this hunt is blissfully picking daisies at the back of the pack. Again, please do not hear that I yearn to be more engaged in these recent developments, only that the realities of my current perspective are a little different that some might think.

I share all of this in the hopes that my thoughts and questions will be received as coming from the perspective of someone who was NOT at the Florida gathering, one who is not interested in a long, draw-out adversarial denominational future and one who hopes that all who are genuinely seeking to follow God’s call on his or her life – even if it is out of the Presbyterian Church (USA) - will be given the freedom and encouragement to do so.

Like most folks in the church, most of my information about all of this comes from reporting and reflections by The Presbyterian News Service, The Presbyterian Layman, The Presbyterian Outlook and the #fellowshippres twitter trend. I suspect that this is a little more than the average Presbyterian will explore, so it with this base knowledge, that I offer some thoughts.

**My affirmations** . . . since the beginning of The Fellowship I have affirmed the questions that they have raised about the future of denominations in general and the Presbyterian Church (USA) specifically. Aside from the obvious disagreement about the ordination of called LGBTQ folks, the questions raised about structure, vision, relationally, etc. are not much different from the ones that I have posed myself from time to time. In fact, aside from a few words and phrases, at face value I can totally buy into both the Fellowship Covenant that folks are being asked to sign as well as the nine values of the ECO as presented by John Crosby and reported by Presbyterian News Service.

- **Jesus-shaped Identity** - “the key is making disciples rather than orthodox believers.”
- **Biblical Integrity** - “A faith that is not just taught but shapes the life of your community.”
- **Thoughtful Theology** - “not papers for intellectuals but rearing followers who are able to reflect and apply their faith to their lives.”
- **Accountable Community** - “caring environments that allows integral faith to emerge.”
- **Egalitarian Ministry** – women and minorities in leadership.
- **Missional Centrality** - “the whole of the gospel to the whole of the world; what would you lose if your church went away?”
Center-focused Spirituality – “calling people to the core of Christianity, not fixating on the boundaries — we are NOT truth cops.”
Leadership Velocity - “growing and developing leaders who are culture-changing, risk-taking innovators.”
Kingdom Vitality – “congregational life is not about size, but trajectory.”

Now I still have at least 10 reasons to stay in the PC(USA) so, at this point, I do not plan on hitching my wagon to another group be it an association, denomination or order. That said, I truly appreciate the questions being asked by those driving The Fellowship movement, their commitment to take some concrete actions and, from what I have experienced, who are responding to a genuine yearning to follow God’s calling on their lives.

My questions . . . I do not have any need to see a group fail or go through some painful gauntlet in order to follow where God may be leading. That said, I do have some questions, that if addressed, would help me better understand what the ECO is thinking. I suspect this would also be helpful for those who are exploring a connection with the new reformed body as well as those who are simply interested in knowing some of what lies behind the initial offering. There are many questions rolling around my head, but I’ll just offer three:

- What will prevent ECO from becoming just another Presbyterian denomination burdened by structure and organization? The answer to this is probably coming later as structures are fleshed out, but what will prevent this body from becoming just another denomination mired in structure, organization and legalism?
- Where does relationality end and regulation begin when it comes to polity and standards? This is the rubber/road question for me. There seems to be a good deal of rhetoric around not being “truth cops” and a yearning to move from being regulatory to being relational. I applaud this, but as many of us have been talking about this shift in other parts of the church, from across the theological spectrum, the question always arises, “But what if someone decides to do [insert something the other does not want to happen]?” For instance, if a congregation finds itself in alignment with much of what is being preached in this new body AND it believes that the ordination of LGBTQ folks is what they are called to do, is there room for them? I suspect the answer is no, but some clarity about the bounds of affiliation would be helpful
- Why the use of the word “minority” to describe what I assume are people of color in the US and Globally? For some this is a term that has very much gone out of usage as the reality of who are “minorities” in the US and globally has changed. On one hand, this can be an acknowledgement of the racially homogenous nature of the Presbyterian family or it could a lack of awareness of current sociological realities . . . or it might also be something entirely different.

My hopes . . .
- As churches decide to move away from the Presbyterian Church (USA) and towards a new denominational reality, my hope is that all involved will be gracious during conversation around pension, property and other logistics. For those leaving, I hope you will acknowledge that your community’s relationship goes beyond your current manifestation and that relationship needs to be honored in some way. And for those staying, may we allow our brothers and sisters in Christ to follow God’s calling into whatever new life they feel called to be part of and rejoice in the hope they see.
- As we interact with one another, it’s my hope that we will move away from a punitive and adversarial relationship and move towards one built on the belief that we are each faithfully discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that we lose passion or perseverance, but the in the fight to be “right” or even in response to others unhealthiness, we must not lower our view of the other to enemy, villain or manifestation of evil.
- As we each move through the next few years, I hope that we not lose sight of the realities of our church life in the world, namely, that if we direct too much of our energy toward internal strife, organizational rebuilding and self-preservation, we will all lose our ability to impact and influence in the world and each person who is part of it.

(Links to other documents and websites are available in the online version.)
I am 29 years old. Frequently, I have heard voices on both sides of the current debates in the PC(USA) refer to people of my generation. They say we don’t care about denominationalism. They say that the old institutions of the past don’t matter to those under age 40. They assert that if their ideology or theological view is adopted, we will somehow start caring.

I follow celebrities on Twitter. I am on Facebook constantly. I get my news online and haven’t touched a newspaper since I was 18. I was a member of MySpace but I “got over it.” I am, in many ways, typical of my generation.

Yet, I care about the PC(USA). In fact, I care deeply about the PC(USA).

This isn’t because I am “liberal.” Yes, I worked for a Democrat in the House of Representatives in my mid-20s. But, I also went to Westmont College, grew up in south Orange County and am currently attending Fuller Seminary. I will let my evangelical credentials speak for themselves.

No, my care for the PC(USA) stems from the fact that I believe the Presbyterian form of government is the best way of making collective decisions — even when I disagree with those decisions. And I am not willing to blow up the entire system because I disagree.

It’s not that people under 40 don’t care about denominationalism. No, it’s that we don’t care for the way in which the baby boomers have fought and bickered for decades now. And we really don’t care for baby-boomer definitions and labels.

“Conservative” means less to my generation than “connected.” “Liberal” means nothing compared to “unified.” “Progressive” is a meaningless term when compared to “missional,” and “tradition” is only appealing when associated with our church traditions — not our American political traditions. If “denominationalism” is simply a smaller stage for the same dramas acted out in the American political scene, then no, we don’t like “denominationalism.”

But, the PC(USA) is more than that. The PC(USA) represents a tradition of hospitals, of colleges, of cross-cultural dialogue and disaster relief work. It represents a tradition that values minds. And, it represents a tradition that has consistently and passionately debated how best to spread the love of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. After the more reactive of the baby boomers have finished doing their best to tear the PC(USA) to the ground, it is this tradition that we, by the grace of God, will pick up and carry forward.

If you view “denomination” as a bureaucracy, then I can understand why you would assume that people under 40 don’t care about denominations. But, some of us view the denomination as the parent of the congregations that raised us, the congregations where we first heard the words of Jesus and learned that we were a part of God’s work.

The PC(USA) organized my local congregation. For that, I will always be indebted to the denomination. I want other communities to experience congregations like the one in which I was raised, with the same connectedness that our congregation experiences. I left a promising career in politics to pursue ordination in the PC(USA) and devote my life to spreading the news of Jesus’ resurrection. I care deeply about my denomination. And I am under 40.

For those who want to leave the PC(USA), you are obviously free to do so. But, please, stop acting like you are doing so for my generation. If you leave, you are doing so for yourselves. We don’t want you to leave. We don’t want this to fall apart. When my generation comes into its own, we want to be handed a diverse denomination that can have healthy disagreements over real issues. So, please, stay and work it out. We grew up with our parents divorcing. The last thing we want is our denomination divorcing.
24 PC(USA) leaders issue ‘Letter of Reconciliation’

URGE GA LEADERS TO BE ‘BRIDGE-BUILDERS,’ SEPARATISTS TO SLOW DOWN

JANUARY 24, 2012


JERRY L. VAN MARTER

LOUISVILLE

Twenty-four leaders of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) — many of whom met in Orlando during a gathering which launched a new Reformed body — have written a letter urging reconciliation between the denomination and the dissident group.

According to the Rev. Paul Watermulder, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Burlingame, Calif., who originated the letter, its intent is to urge “our General Assembly leadership to immediately become bridge-builders with those churches and leaders who out of conscience have become disaffected from our denomination.”

The second intent, Watermulder added, is “to urge all those who are talking about leaving or distancing themselves from the PCUSA to slow down and recognize that there are several viable signs of unity coming to the GA in Pittsburgh which are supported by a wide range of centrist leaders.”

Those signing the letter include presbytery and synod execs, seminary presidents, directors of mission organizations, members of boards of directors of several institutions, and other Presbyterian leaders involved in our national church presence.

The letter comes after the Fellowship of Presbyterians announced the creation of a new denomination — the Evangelical Covenant Order — which will be comprised of dissident PC(USA) congregations. At its Jan. 18-20 gathering in Orlando, the group unveiled its theology and polity documents and announced it had applied for membership in the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

The full text of the letter:

Greetings in the Lord!

A significant number of PC(USA) congregations have entered into a period of discernment, prayerfully considering how they can remain part of the PC(USA) while also maintaining theological integrity. Their sense of increasing estrangement from the trajectory of the PC(USA) reached a breaking point with the recent changes in ordination standards and has been further fueled by some of the overtures now being sent to the upcoming General Assembly. They are feeling betrayed by and alienated from this branch of the Church, believing that these recent legislative changes are symptomatic signals of other, deeper changes that have set the PC(USA) on a course of unfaithfulness to the heart and will of God. While they accept the reality of these changes, they see them as hindering the effectiveness of their witness and they sincerely believe the changes to be undermining God’s mission in the world. In light of that, some are exploring their ecclesial options — from reconfiguring some of our polity structures to developing joint affiliations with another Reformed body, to transferring to another denomination altogether.

A new organization, the Fellowship of Presbyterians has emerged as a voice for many of these sisters and brothers. Originally, it was conceived around missional concerns. With the change in ordination standards, leaders of The Fellowship were transparent about the range of their concerns. They initiated and have continued to meet repeatedly with denominational officials and other influential leaders over the past 15 months. Taking the initiative to propose and explore ways of maintaining a working relationship within the PC(USA), their goal has been to preserve ministry partnership while providing venues of service that would not feel like mere accommodation to policy decisions they believed to be in error.

They have suggested the possibility of developing non-geographical presbyteries (organized not around ethnic origin but around missional and theological conviction), of allowing congregations to transfer from one existing presbytery to another, or forming dual Committees on Ministry and Committees on Preparation for Ministry in the same presbytery (differing by theological conviction).
To be honest, we are inclined to support and defend the existing structures, maintaining familiar patterns of operating. We fear that some proposals could unleash unintended consequences, not the least of which is the possibility of weakening the structures that tenuously hold us together even now.

However, we also know that the existing structures and patterns are already creating unintended consequences of their own – including a lack of respect for conscience based on Scripture, and a sense of violation, grief and/or despair among our sisters and brothers. And we believe that all ecclesial structures, existing or new, are in reality the means to an end: our witness to Jesus Christ. Our unity in Christ, our common fellowship in the Spirit, our partnership in fulfilling Christ’s Great Commission and Great Commandment, and our shared pursuit of the Great Ends of the Church are far more important than any polity structures or processes designed to fulfill those ends.

Accordingly, we want to state for the record that we are committed to continuing theological and missional conversations with all of our sisters and brothers in Christ, our colleagues in ministry, exploring and supporting any and all reasonable pathways that could help us continue in fellowship, mutual accountability, and partnership in Christ’s mission – in good conscience. In acknowledgement that none of us is entitled to throw any first stones, we will resist the tendency to react against any constructive ideas proposed. We will refuse to punish anyone for judgments expressed about our church – even when we disagree with those judgments. Rather than arguing in ways that are “unworthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” we will seek to sow seeds of grace, kindness, respect and cooperation in every possible way – all toward the end of us all serving as agents of reconciliation before the watching world, as Scripture requires of us.

We call upon all our fellow Presbyterians in ecclesial leadership positions – including members of the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly, the General Assembly Mission Council, the other four denominational agencies, the staff members serving each, and all middle governing body/Council leaders – to redouble efforts to respect, listen to, dialogue and pray with those who are struggling to keep in fellowship with our body. Examples of fruitful discussions we seek include porous presbyteries formed around missional goals and convictions, union presbytery relationships, and parallel COM’s and CPM’s in presbyteries. Indeed, in upcoming days we plan to offer some other possibilities (including the formulation of overtures to the General Assembly) that may help facilitate the realization of this hope. We believe that God’s wisdom is best discerned together.

Finally, we call upon those seeking to be faithful to Christ and Scripture and feeling disaffected to prayerfully engage these matters not only within congregations or subgroups, but also with leadership and various voices in presbyteries and elsewhere. We ask that we and others be included in discussions and discernment processes, demonstrating the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to one another in such a way that the world will know that we indeed are Christ’s disciples.
Irony Abounds with the Formation of the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians

Two 19th century scholars, Ernst Troeltsch (Social Teachings of the Churches) and Philip Schaff (History of the Christian Church) impressed me when I was in seminary. I can’t remember which one of them noted that Catholicism tended to draw critics within and make places for them (think of the different monastic orders), and Protestant church bodies tended towards division and schism. Two opposing worldviews are involved: One says we can live together even with great differences, and the other says no we can’t. It’s the Edwin Markham poem:

"He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout
But love and I had the wit to win;
We drew a circle that took him in."

Within Presbyterianism during the 20th century, there was a great movement towards unity. In 1958 the Presbyterian Church of North America merged with the Presbyterian Church in the USA to form the United Presbyterian Church USA. In 1983 the UPCUSA merged with the mostly southern Presbyterian Church in the United States to make the current Presbyterian Church (USA).

It is now clear to most people that the latter merger did not end the civil war. Beliefs and practices which had been southern-regional were adopted nation-wide. Ultra conservative groups in the south now had a national audience and broader base, and united with conservatives in the UPCUSA to make mischief everywhere for decades. Whether this mostly reflected broadly national political and social divisions or was the expression of the lower spirits of our Presbyterian natures is still at question.

Every year or two in my career there has been a new issue which has rallied the conservatives to accuse the rest of us of apostasy. Every year or two there is a new organization of conservatives (and then of liberals) to do battle. The Layman, organized in the ‘60’s to combat the adoption of the Confession of 1967 and a Book of Confessions (as opposed to the Westminster standard), is a constant gadfly and worse. They have been urging congregations to leave the denomination over each conflict. And so we have seen the creation of the Presbyterian Church in America (they won’t ordain women and use the Westminster Confession) and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (they assert that each congregation owns its property). Both disliked the denomination’s involvement in civil rights, opposition to the Viet Nam War, and official adoption of a woman’s right to choose an abortion.

Now we have the creation of a new denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians. “ECO” is cleverly modern. Proponents aren’t sure whether they will be a separate denomination or whether they will try to exist somehow within the PCUSA. How many would join is a question. Few are willing to take the big step of cutting ties with the PCUSA. For clergy it is often a question of pensions and insurance. An insurance plan has been worked out (Each will pay his or her full cost at a flat rate, rather than as the current percentage of income). An abbreviated Form of Government has been written. The piece de resistance is the written “Essential Tenets” of the new group.

Since the 18th century some Presbyterians wanted all clergy to “subscribe” to particular expressions of the faith. Others emphasized freedom of conscience to interpret scripture and express faith in newer ways. Peace has been bought with the formula that all must answer this question:

Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?

However, no formal definition of the “essential tenets” was given. The perceptive reader will understand that “essential tenets” are the “fundamentals” of fundamentalism fame.
I see great problems ahead for ECO. You can’t write an essential that everyone will accept. At least not everyone will understand it the same way. Grace will not abound. Irony already does. ECO values the unity of the body of Christ and predictably quotes I Cor. 12. (Everything is better when supported by scripture.) The covenant to be signed includes this: “I will hold my personal preferences lightly and guard the good of the whole. (Philippians 2:1-4).” These are the same people who are breaking with the body to which they have belonged.

Another covenant statement is “I will honor the sanctity of life above the claims of human freedom. (Psalm 8:4-5)” Is this about abortion? What about the great many whom we regard as heroes and saints died for greater human freedom. And what does this Psalm have to do with it? It is a puzzlement.

Many clergy have felt tied to the denomination by the Board of Pensions. No. They were and are tied by their own need for financial security. If you leave, you keep your pension. You just don’t add to it. Even if you stay in the denomination and leave your “call,” you need to buy your own medical insurance. If you want to live by faith, the church won’t stop you.

Some people just want their own institution. They want control and power. They don’t want to be only part of a larger institution in decline. The reality is that some evangelical churches grow, and so do some progressive churches. If they want to start fresh, without all of the stick in the mud traditionalists who won’t change (this is most of the churches and members of the PCUSA), that may be the best thing about leaving. What happens when the conflict begins again, and aging members of the new body don’t want the new music of 2050? What happens when someone sniffs new freedom from the restrictions of this new church?

One of the leaders of ECO is John Ortberg, a former Baptist minister from the Willow Creek church, now pastor in Menlo Park CA. [This demonstrates the dark side of liberalism: You allow everyone in and then they tell you that you aren’t pure enough for them.] Somehow many people are attracted to this kind of preaching: “The problem is not denominational ambiguity or ecclesiastical dividedness or even ineffectiveness. The problem is that people are going to hell.... Our problem is hell; our job is to put hell out of business.”

Few speak of the deeper problem at the core of the churches: It is found in this statement of what ECO is about: Presbyterians they say, affirm “education and the life of the mind.” Even John Calvin didn’t see the seed of destruction in valuing education. First, someone will notice that the gospel of John is not like the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which have similarities. From there, Biblical studies are deconstruction incarnate. I am now reading 381 A.D. by Charles Freeman. How can we continue to do theology in the old ways when we know the political machinations behind the Nicene Creed?

Of course the new church folks are not institutional or theological in the old ways. They are “missional,” which means that the church will serve others and not itself. To complete the quote from Ortberg: “I have zero desire to be part of a church that is OK with doing OK while hell is winning.” The image of hell aside, I can applaud those who want to be part of a church that is about more than being OK.

I came into the church as an idealistic young man for whom the teachings of Jesus were all important and pretty much all consuming. My question was “How do I live in the world as a witness to Jesus and the peace and justice he stood for?” That question never was answered because I became an official church leader (!) Now things have moved so far that I have adopted the question Bob Funk asked me: “What happens if people stop being interested in Jesus?”

The PCUSA will have a better chance at the future without those who want to leave. Good-bye. Then the PCUSA needs to hire someone like Bain Capital to come in and write down all the crap that keeps the church in the 17th century (even in the 20th!). There are plenty of would-be church consultants, but I know of none who are honest enough to be up to the task: We need to build a church for a world where science is the predominant myth, where mystery and wonder can still be found in life itself, and people still need to belong to communities of caring. The question is always about which symbols and which traditions to keep, and how.
INTRODUCTION

The path to ordained leadership begins when a person feels an inner sense of call, which we believe comes through the movement of the Holy Spirit. This is essential. However, because we know we are prone to err, that inner sense alone is not enough – rather, the person moves toward ordained leadership only when a congregation affirms his or her sense of call by electing that person to serve. In some cases (e.g. of seminary professors or leaders of special ministries) a call to validated ministry stands in place of election by a congregation. After this, the final step in the process is examination of that person’s fitness by a council of the church (that is, by the session in the case of ruling elders and deacons, and by the presbytery in the case of teaching elders).

Examination is a good and faithful practice that contributes to the health and vitality of the church. It helps to ensure that our officers are well prepared for leadership. At the same time, it is a wonderful opportunity to affirm the importance of our calling and service; to share the faith and build up the church as we celebrate each other’s journey in it; to acknowledge with gratitude the gifts of those who were elected, and those who are completing periods of service; and to affirm our vital connection as part of the PC(USA).

This paper reviews some of the basic principles that guide our examination of persons who have been elected to office – both when examination is easy and joyful and, on occasion, when it raises more difficult questions that we struggle within the church.

I. THE EXAMINATION PROCESS

Churchwide standards establish the framework

The PCUSA has adopted constitutional standards for ordained service that reflect our desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. Ordained leaders must be “persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord” and their “manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world” (G-2.0104a). Sessions and presbyteries must be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying these standards (G-2.0104b). The examining council also must ensure that the candidate is able and committed to fulfill the requirements expressed in the questions that are asked at ordinations and installations (W-4.4003).

Our ordination standards were established, and may be amended, only by approval of General Assembly and a majority of the presbyteries (G-6.03 and G-6.04). General Assembly also may issue authoritative interpretations of standards, where those are unclear (G-6.02). Sessions and presbyteries are always governed by these actions of the whole church – lower councils can neither ignore, nor add to, these churchwide standards. Thus, the GAPJC has admonished that “no lower governing body can constitutionally define, diminish, augment or modify standards for ordination and installation of church officers.”

1. Several years ago, when a session declared that it would not apply the “fidelity and chastity” standard of former G-6.0106b, the GAPJC held that that declaration was unconstitutional.\(^2\)

2. Likewise, local efforts to add requirements that are stricter than those which have been adopted by the whole church are unconstitutional. For example, it has been held unlawful for a presbytery to adopt its own, so-called “Biblical Standards for Christian Leaders,” and for a session to

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require that officers-elect make certain affirmations regarding Jesus Christ, the infallibility of Scripture, and forbearance from sexual relations outside heterosexual marriage. Local policies which purport to establish “essentials” in advance of particular examinations, or which undermine our constitutional guarantee that candidates may declare conscientious departures from standards, also have been struck down. In recent months, following the church’s elimination of G-6.0106b, some sessions and presbyteries have considered adopting policies that would re-establish “fidelity-and-chastity” as a local requirement. Numerous decisions of the synod PJCs and GAPJC make clear that these policies, if challenged judicially, will be struck down as unconstitutional. In short, although church leaders are elected and ordained locally, ordination is an act of the whole church, and persons who are ordained must meet the standards of the whole church. Sessions and presbyteries must apply churchwide standards in deciding, on a case-by-case basis, whether particular officers-elect are fit for ordered ministry. They may not adopt general policies that either relax the standards of the whole church or that exclude persons who qualify for service under those standards.

The candidate’s conscience is important

Presbyterianism was born in the Reformation (1517-1648), when Christians in Western Europe began protesting against what they saw as abuses in the Roman Catholic Church. At issue were matters of both belief (like the primacy of Scripture) and personal conduct (like a requirement that all clergy must be celibate). The Reformers protested against such things as matters of conscience, asserting the right to read Scripture and to follow their convictions even if these did not agree with official church positions. In light of this history and the theological conviction in which it is grounded, the Westminster Confession (6.109) declares that “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.” This same principle is stated in our Constitution as the first of our Historic Principles of Church Order (F-3.0101). We emphasize this so much because we believe that biblically formed conscience is a sacred forum in which God holds each person accountable. In fact, our confessions (7.215) warn that “making men the lords of our faith and conscience” is idolatrous, and prohibited by the First Commandment (Exodus 20:3): “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Each of us doubtless believes that others would be better off if they adopted our own understanding of Scripture on most things. Certainly there are some things that are so central – like belief in the saving power of Jesus Christ – that we must all believe them. In other areas, though, we recognize that true discernment in a community of diverse people may come over time, through dialogue from different perspectives under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Christians in our Reformed tradition long have insisted that although conscience may be instructed by the church, it must not be coerced. Our Historic Principles of Church Order remind us that “there are truths and forms, with respect to which men [and women] of good characters and principles may differ” and that each of us has “the duty . . . to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other” (F-1.0305). This rule has been carried forward in our present Constitution, which requires that persons who are being ordained or installed need not subscribe to a detailed set of views, but simply affirm that they “sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith” (W-4.4003c) (emphasis added).  

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4 First Presbyterian Church v. Blessing (SPJC-South Atlantic 2002).
6 The was made a founding principle of American presbyterianism with the “Adopting Act” of 1729. That required ministers to declare their general acceptance of the Westminster Standards but also allowed them to declare disagreements (sometimes called “scruples”), and provided that a presbytery could not exclude someone unless it believed that the point of departure was so fundamental (that is, “essential”) that it rendered the church and candidate “incapable of communion” with each other. See Guy Klett, ed., Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America 1706-1788, pp. 103-04 (Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976).
Presbyterians have always resisted defining “essentials” in the abstract. In order to ensure that we honor the individual’s biblically-formed conscience, we have a conversation, not a checklist. What a person believes, and how he or she lives out those beliefs, may differ significantly from one person to the next. When a session or presbytery is considering a candidate’s fitness for office, it must consider each particular candidate in light of its experience with that candidate – including his or her statement of faith, answers to questions during examination, demonstrated manner of life, fit for the office of call, and the like. Our Constitution guarantees each candidate the opportunity to express his or her conscience, and to engage in meaningful discernment with the examining body about what points of difference might mean.

II. INTERPRETING OUR ORDINATION STANDARDS

The Constitution (G-2.0104b) says that councils “shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.” This is a critically important requirement, and one which must govern our lives together in years to come. However, in requiring that we be “instructed” and “guided” by the confessions, the Constitution makes clear that we may bring to our process of discernment the recognition that times and understandings change. Indeed, strict adherence to various provisions in the confessions may raise issues about many, relatively common practices. For example, it could disqualify persons who work or fail to attend church on Sunday, are employed in the financial services industry, voluntarily serve in armed conflict, enjoy recreational gambling, waste environmental resources, remarry after divorce, or generate controversy in their zeal to judge others. Whether or not such practices might disqualify someone under G-2.0104b, in any given case, requires deliberate and prayerful interpretation by candidates and examining councils. 114 (1985); Rankin v. National Capital Union Presbytery, UPCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 113 (1981); Anderson v. Synod of New Jersey, UPC Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 316 (1962).

When questions arise during examination, the first step is for the candidate to enter into discernment with the council about what Scripture and the confessions require. After such conversation, councils typically do not vote on whether a particular interpretation of Scripture or the confessions is correct or not – rather, the council votes on the fitness of the candidate, in light of all that its members have heard and discerned together. In so doing, each member of the council must consider whether the candidate’s positions are faithfully held and within the bounds of interpretive freedom guaranteed by our Constitution.

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7 For a classic summary of these points, see the unanimous declaration of General Assembly in resolving the “fundamentalist controversy” of the 1920s. UPC Minutes (1927), Pt. 1 at pp. 78-79. After the more recent period of controversy about same-sex relationships, General Assembly affirmed the renewed emphasis given these principles by its Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity. PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, pp. 515-18 (2006). These principles have been affirmed in a number of judicial cases. See, e.g., Naegeli v. Presbytery of San Francisco, PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 390 (2008); Buescher, Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 316 (2008); Bush, Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 319 (2008); Simmons v. Presbytery of Suwannee, PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, p.

8 For general principles that are meant to guide our interpretation and usage of Scripture, see PC(USA) Office of Theology & Worship, ed., Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture, Position Statement Adopted by the 123rd General Assembly (1983) of the PCUS, and Biblical Authority and Interpretation, Resource Document Received by the 194th General Assembly (1982) of the UPCUSA (1999) (available online at http://oga.pcusa.org/publications/ scripture-use.pdf). Book of Order § F-2.01 describes the place of the Confessions in the life of the church, and W-4.4003 carries that over in the affirmations that must be made upon ordination and installation.

9 Provisions that may be relevant include §§ 4.092, 5.223-224, 6.119, 7.060-062, 7.226-231, and 7.246.

10 Provisions that may be relevant include §§ 4.110, 5.115 and 7.251-252.

11 Provisions that may be relevant include §§ 3.14, 4.105, 5.256, 6.128, 7.069, 7.245-246 and 9.45.

12 Provisions that may be relevant include § 7.252.

13 Provisions that may be relevant include §§ 4.110, 7.246, 7.251-252, 9.46 and 10.3.

14 Provisions that may be relevant include §§ 6.131-139.7

15 Provisions that may be relevant include §§ 4.112, 7.078, 7.215, 7.246 and 7.254-7.255.

16 At one time, the Book of Order contained a provision – the “fidelity and chastity” clause of G-6.0106b – which any felt was so explicit any candidate who could not comply with it must declare a “scruple” (stating that he or she dissented as a matter
Same-sex relationships

While the church has removed the old “fidelity-and-chastity” provision (G-6.0106b) from the Constitution, examination in some cases clearly may involve debate about whether Scripture and the confessions permit conjugal, same-sex relationships. There is significant disagreement about what the Bible and confessions teach in this regard.

Same-sex relationships at one time were simply assumed to be wrong – just as women at one time were assumed to be unequal to men. However, a growing number of scholars have thought more carefully about this in recent years and concluded that such views reflect cultural and time-bound assumptions, rather than the true teaching of the Bible. Reputable scholars have shown that each of the six, isolated texts which might address same-sex relationships may address other concerns entirely. For example, stories about same-sex rape (Genesis 19:1-26) do not really address consensual same-sex partnerships. Old Testament rules (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13) may have constituted prohibitions against cultic prostitution or part of ancient “purity” laws that are not authoritative for the church of Jesus Christ. Likewise, the few apostolic mentions of same-sex relations may be interpreted as condemnations of heterosexual licentiousness (Romans 1:24-32) and of sexual slavery and child abuse (1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10). In 2001, over half of the Bible faculty in our Presbyterian seminaries signed a statement expressing their belief that Scripture does not condemn all of conscience and would not comply with it. In such cases, the examining body was required to discern whether that scruple constituted such a fundamental disagreement with Reformed faith and polity that it must be regarded as disqualifying (that is, “essential”) as to that candidate. This process appears unlikely to arise under the current Constitution. Because we have a collection of different confessions by which collective discernment must be guided (rather than a single confession to which strict adherence might be required), the Constitution no longer contains a standard so explicit that declaration of a “scruple” appears necessary. There doubtless will continue to be cases where a candidate expresses views or intentions that some members of an examining body may consider to be wrong – and in some cases, the majority may discern that that disagreement is so fundamental (even given our constitutional guarantees of freedom of conscience) that the candidate should not be ordained or installed. However, because governing bodies typically vote on the candidate – not separately on individual questions that might arise during examination – and because the Constitution does not clearly mandate a single position on most issues that might be debated today, the examination process now appears most likely to be structured as a conversation about different interpretations of Scripture, guided by the mutual forbearance we owe each other in matters of conscience, rather than the formal declaration of departure from a specific mandate.


18 While some claim that Genesis 1-2 makes heterosexuality the only permissible form of relationship, the Creation accounts may talk in terms of heterosexuality (as the condition to which most people would relate) without necessarily excluding same-sex relationships. In fact, the only word spoken by God here relates equally to heterosexual and homosexual persons: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). “Celibacy” – what proponents of exclusionary standards seek to impose on gay and lesbian persons – comes from the Latin word caelebs, meaning “alone.”


same-sex relationships. This therefore is clearly an area in which freedom of conscience in interpreting Scripture plays a critical role.

Similarly, there are only two passages in the confessions that might speak directly to same-sex relationships and, again, there is significant debate about how they should be interpreted. The Westminster Confession, which condemns “sodomy” and “unnatural lust” (7.249), might well be concerned with violence/rape (as existed in the story of Sodom) or with obsessive sexual interest—not with loving, covenental partnerships. Scholars have shown that the only other potentially relevant passage, which refers to “homosexual perversion” (4.087), is a mis-translation that General Assembly has initiated a process to correct. In any case, one might conclude that even this passage, as it is mis-translated now, no more condemns all same-sex relations than a warning against “heterosexual perversion” condemns all heterosexual relations.

Such interpretive issues are not unique—the church, throughout its history, has had significant disagreements about sexual ethics. We no longer believe (as the church did through much of its history) that sex is solely for the production of children and that “chastity” requires a total renunciation of sexual pleasure. Leaders of the Reformation rejected the Roman Catholic rule that all clergy must be celibate.

We have come to new understandings of divorce and remarriage, and the use of birth control.

In 1978-79, General Assemblies erroneously singled out a single, contested sexual ethic and made conscience irrelevant to it, stating that “unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination.” After thirty years of debate, the 218th General Assembly (2008) finally corrected this, declaring that the 1978-79 statements and “all subsequent affirmations thereof” are of “no further force or effect.” In so doing, General Assembly made clear that faithful Presbyterians may hold a range of different views about what Scripture and the confessions teach about same-sex relationships. In short, an examining council might well conclude that neither Scripture nor the confessions condemn the kind of relationship in which a particular candidate is engaged.

Some have taken the view that Scripture or the confessions require all persons to be celibate outside heterosexual marriage, and have asked GLBT candidates (or others) to promise that they will be celibate as a condition to ordination or installation. This is clearly unconstitutional. Our Constitution declares that “there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty” (F-3.0104), and that the decisions of church councils “are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both” (6.175). General Assembly has affirmed that the Constitution “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.” In short, what a person believes and how he or she lives are inseparable—and our Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience in both.

Certainly there is still room for discussion with a candidate about his or her sexual ethics. For example, two gay men might declare that they cannot comply with an interpretation of Scripture that would prohibit all sexual activity outside heterosexual marriage. However, if one candidate is living in a

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23 PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, pp. 18-19, 1260-1262 (2008). General Assembly in 2010 directed that this work continue as a cooperative project with other Reformed denominations who have undertaken their own efforts to produce a fresh translation.
27 Requests for “vows of chastity” are problematic for other reasons as well. The confessions clearly condemn “entangling vows of single life” (7.249), and warn that “vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience, are so far from being degrees of higher perfection, that they are superstitious and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself” (6.126). Moreover, examining councils may not augment or modify churchwide standards. Requiring a vow of chastity, which is not part of the affirmations required upon ordination and installation (W-4.4003), would do precisely that.
monogamous lifetime partnership, and the other candidate espouses an “open” sexual ethic with casual partners, a session or presbytery might well assess the two candidates differently.

**Essential Presbyterian polity**

The Constitution requires that candidates for ordered ministry “shall adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity” (G-2.0105). Thus, two different kinds of “essentials” may become important in an examination. An essential of Reformed faith – the most serious kind of question that might arise – would be at issue if a candidate could not affirm the saving grace of Jesus Christ. An essential of Reformed polity might involve something less serious, which doesn’t go to the core of Christian belief but relates in a fundamental way to what makes us Presbyterians (rather than, say, Roman Catholics).

There are at least two features of Reformed polity that are important in maintaining our Presbyterian commitments.

First, ordained leaders in the PC(USA) have the duty to show each other mutual forbearance in non-essential matters of conscientious disagreement (F-3.0105). One aspect of the promise “to be governed by our church’s polity” is “to be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God’s Word and Spirit” (W-4.4003e), and this includes colleagues who may have different convictions about many matters. A candidate is not required to affirm that he or she will accept someone else’s convictions, but he or she must be committed to the mutual forbearance that enables us to remain a community in diversity, seeking the truth together in collective discernment under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Advocacy of simple exclusion or schism could be considered to be “infringing on the rights and views of others” and “obstructing the constitutional governance of the church” (G-2.0105).

Second, a person who wishes to engage in ordered ministry must be prepared to carry out the functions of office. General Assembly has affirmed that an examining body “cannot excuse a candidate’s inability to perform the constitutional functions unique to his or her office (such as administration of the sacraments).”

Consistent with this, a series of judicial cases has made clear that a presbytery may not ordain or install someone who declares that he will not participate in the ordination of women.

Indeed, it is fundamental to our polity that the responsibility for assessing the fitness of officers-elect is vested in councils (sessions and presbyteries), not in individuals. Accordingly, the pastor who officiates at an ordination thereby performs a ministerial act that is required by the Constitution (not a discretionary one), and the act of officiating indicates neither approval nor disapproval of the congregation’s choice of leaders and council’s approval of them.

This point pertains primarily to pastors, who must officiate at child baptisms, ordination and installation of church leaders, and the like, and are not permitted to substitute their own judgment for that of the council.

**III. AFTER THE EXAMINATION**

Sessions and presbyteries do not act in a vacuum – they are subject to the oversight of higher governing bodies, through administrative or judicial review. These can ensure that sessions and presbyteries apply our standards with integrity (that is, “reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately”). An examining body can neither ignore, nor add to, church standards. In addition, if an

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30 This was recognized in at least one high-profile case brought under former G-6.0106b. PC(USA) v. Van Kuiken (Presbytery-Cincinnati slip op. Apr. 21, 2003) (pastor could not be disciplined for ordaining gay/lesbian officers, because the Constitution vests responsibility for assessing their fitness in the session).
examination was done hastily, or carelessly, it may be returned to the examining body for more careful and deliberate attention.

That said, it must be remembered that when a candidate is being examined for office, the session or presbytery is the only body whose members actually see and hear that person. Often they have insight into the character and qualifications of the candidate from years of preparation for ministry, or from life together in a congregation. Given such considerations, and the discretion historically vested in sessions and presbyteries, a higher governing body cannot substitute its judgment for that of the examining body unless there are “the most extraordinary reasons” for doing so. Some have suggested that if a candidate adopts a controversial interpretation of Scripture or the confessions and is then ordained, he or she may be subject to immediate accusations in a disciplinary proceeding for whatever conduct was at issue. That is not correct. A disciplinary case cannot be brought against a newly-installed officer on the basis of facts that the ordaining body knew about when it found that person fit for service.

CONCLUSION

Our polity “presupposes the fellowship of women, men, and children united in covenant relationship with one another and with God through Jesus Christ. The organization rests on the fellowship and is not designed to work without trust and love” (G-1.0102). Our sense of community has been sorely tried at various times in our history, as Presbyterians of good faith lost sight of the principles of biblically-formed conscience and mutual forbearance that make us a Reformed community of faith. Nonetheless, we have always returned to these principles, placing our trust in the grace that calls us together as a reconciling and witnessing community. Examination for ordered ministry, at its best, preserves and reminds the church of these important principles that make us Presbyterians.

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