

A.O. Note - #21 - Ordination Standards and Examinations Essentials, Reformed Faith and Polity

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In 2006, the 217th General Assembly adopted an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) of G-6.0108¹ that clarified the relative powers of the governing bodies within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This AI was affirmed and clarified by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission in February of 2008 in the opinions found in three cases.^{2 3 4} The 218th General Assembly also affirmed the 2006 AI and offered further clarity when it issued an additional AI:

“[T]he requirements of G-6.0108 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.”⁵

The 2006 General Assembly AI provides that *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government of the *Book of Order* set forth the scriptural and constitutional standards for ordination and installation.⁶ Section 5b of the Authoritative Interpretation states that “these standards are determined by the whole church, after the careful study of Scripture and theology, solely by the constitutional process of approval by the General Assembly with the approval of the presbyteries. These standards may be interpreted by the General Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission.”⁷ (See at G-13.0103r.)

The GAPJC, in the three February 2008 cases, found the following:

1. Authoritative Interpretations may not change an ordination standard.

The GAPJC affirmed the General Assembly’s Authoritative Interpretation adopted from the Peace, Unity and Purity Report and Recommendations and found that “the GA Authoritative Interpretation did not (and constitutionally could not) change any ordination standard found in *The Book of Confessions* or the *Book of Order*.”⁸ The 218th General Assembly did modify the 1978/79 Authoritative Interpretations⁹ removing the explicit prohibition of ordaining sexually active homosexual persons and leaving the Scriptural and Constitutional texts as the standard.

2. Governing bodies may not restate, augment, diminish or define ordination standards.

The GAPJC found that attempts by other governing bodies to adopt resolutions, statements or policies that paraphrase or restate provisions of the *Book of Order* and/or declare them as “essentials of Reformed faith and polity” are confusing and unnecessary and are in violation of the constitution. Such declarations are obstructions to the requirement that a governing body must examine candidates for ordination. (See at G-10.0102 l and G-11.0103n.) “... [N]o lower governing body can constitutionally define, diminish, augment or modify standards for ordination and installation of church officers.”¹⁰ “Governing bodies do not have the authority to restate or define these standards.”¹¹ Only the General Assembly itself has the authority to interpret the Constitution which it did when it deleted the 1978/79 Authoritative Interpretations.

3. Governing bodies may not waive the G-6.0106b ordination standard.

Specifically, the GAPJC reiterated that “[t]he examining body is best suited to make decisions about the candidate’s fitness for office and in this determination they may not permit departure from the ‘fidelity and chastity’ requirement found in G-6.0106b.”¹² In determining whether a candidate is in compliance with the constitutional standards, the examining governing body may allow a candidate to exercise their freedom of conscience with respect to interpretation of Scripture under G-6.0108 “to the extent that it is not a serious departure from the essential standards of Reformed faith and polity, does not infringe on the rights and views of others, and does not obstruct the constitutional governance of the church.”¹³ An examining governing body may not allow a candidate to exercise their freedom of conscience if that “ignore[s] or waive[s] a specific standard of behavior that has been adopted by the whole church such as the ‘fidelity and chastity’ portion of G-6.0106b or any other similarly specific provision.”¹⁴

4. A candidate’s actions must conform to the ordination standards.

“...[T]he church has required those who aspire to ordained office to conform their actions, though not necessarily their beliefs or opinions, to certain standards in those contexts in which the church has deemed conformity to be necessary or essential. G-6.0106b contains a provision where conformity is required by church officers....”¹⁵ The responsibility for determination of failure to repent of any “practice which the confessions call sin”¹⁶ is first placed on the candidate and then on the examining governing body to determine whether a departure is a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.

5. “The ordaining body must examine the candidate individually.”¹⁷

The GAPJC also emphasized that each candidate must be examined individually by the examining governing body.” [T]he 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).”¹⁸ Only in this way can the body determine whether any potential departure is a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.

In order to obtain a complete understanding of these decisions, we recommend that readers study all three of the cases, which may be found online at

<http://www.pcusa.org/gapjc/decisions/pjc21809.pdf> (*Buescher et al v. Pby of Olympia*)

<http://www.pcusa.org/gapjc/decisions/pjc21810.pdf> (*Bush et al v. Pby of Pittsburgh*)

<http://www.pcusa.org/gapjc/decisions/pjc21815withconcurrences.pdf> (*First Presbyterian Church session of Washington v. Pby of Washington*)

Endnotes

1. GA Minutes 2006, 28-29, 523, Item 06-01, especially Recommendation 5.
2. GAPJC 2008, 218-09, *Buescher, et al v. Presbytery of Olympia*.
3. GAPJC 2008, 218-10, *Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh*.
4. GAPJC 2008, 218-15, *Session of 1st Presbyterian Church of Washington et al v. Presbytery of Washington*.
5. GA Item 05-12, 2008.

6. The GAPJC noted that since the 2006 AI, some of the standards for ordination and installation have been moved from the Form of Government (in Chapter 14) to the Directory for Worship using the constitutional process.
7. GA *Minutes* 2006, 28-29, 523, Item 06-01, especially Recommendation 5.
8. GAPJC 2008, 218-09, *Buescher, et al v. Presbytery of Olympia*; GAPJC 2008, 218-10, *Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh*.
9. For the church to ordain a self-affirming practicing homosexual person to ministry would be to act in contradiction to its charter and calling in scripture, setting in motion both within the church and in society serious contradictions to the will of Christ (UPC) & Therefore our present understanding of God's will precludes the ordination of persons who do not repent of homosexual practice. (PCUS).
10. Ibid.
11. GAPJC 2008, 218-10, *Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh*.
12. GAPJC 2008, 218-10, *Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh*.
13. GAPJC 2008, 218-09, *Buescher, et al v. Presbytery of Olympia*; GAPJC 2008, 218-10, *Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh*.
14. GAPJC 2008, 218-10, *Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh*.
15. Ibid.
16. G-6.0106b
17. Ibid.
18. GA Item 05-12, 2008, *Minutes*, 42, 43, 379.