

Advisory Opinion #24 Ordination Standards and the new Form of Government

The majority of presbyteries approved a new Form of Government for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in the spring of 2011. In addition to the new Form of Government, several amendments were adopted, including an amendment to one provision that delineates the standards for ordination.

When did the new Form of Government take effect?

The new Form of Government became effective on July 10, 2011, one year after the adjournment of the 219th General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

What has changed with the adoption of the new Form of Government?

The same basic polity that has defined the core work of the councils (formerly governing bodies) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues with the new Form of Government. This revision is not so much about “what” councils do – our essential polity – as it is about the “who” and the “how.” Increased flexibility in structures and procedures in a less regulatory environment is the major change that has occurred. The new Form of Government allows councils to increase their focus on God’s work and how the church can most effectively participate in that work in each situation, rather than being focused on an increasingly lengthy and burdensome list of requirements.

What impact did the approval of Amendment 10-A regarding standards for ordained service have on the text of the new Form of Government?

The passage of Amendment 10-A that changed the text of G-6.0106b in the previous Form of Government also changed the text of the same passage in the new Form of Government (G-2.0104b). The same is true for several other amendments adopted in 2011.

What is the text of Amendment 10-A regarding standards for ordained service that has now become G-2.0104b?

Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (F-1.02). The council responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.2.0402; G-2.0607; G-3.0306) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry. 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). Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

When is this standard used and by whom?

Candidates will have to discern during their candidacy whether they are willing and able to fulfill all the requirements found in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation found in the Directory for Worship (W-4.4003).

Ordaining councils will have to discern at the time of examination of the candidate, guided by Scripture and the confessions, whether the candidate is able and willing to fulfill all the

requirements found in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation found in the Directory for Worship (W-4.4003). This is in addition to the discernment by the ordaining council whether the candidate is called, prepared, and has gifts suitable for the responsibilities of ordered ministry.

Persons ordained to ordered ministry (teaching elders, ruling elders, and deacons) will be required to live their life guided by Scripture and the confessions according to the affirmations made during their ordination and installation (W-4.4003).

What are the standards for ordination?

The affirmations made by teaching elders, ruling elders, and deacons during their ordination and installation include, but are not limited to, seeking to follow and be obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ, accepting Scriptures to be the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and God's Word, being guided by the confessions, governed by the polity of the PC(USA), and furthering the peace, unity, and purity of the church. In addition, teaching elders affirm that they will proclaim the good news in Word and Sacrament, teach the faith and care for people, be active in government and discipline, and serve in councils of the church. Ruling elders affirm that they will watch over people; provide for worship, nurture, and service; be active in government and discipline; and serve in councils of the church. Deacons affirm that they will teach charity, urge concern, and direct help to the friendless and those in need. All of them agree to try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ. (W-4.4003).

What are the ultimate changes to the standards for ordination?

There are two main changes to the standards for ordination.

1. The former standard included language mandating that those who are called to ordered ministry were to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and conformity to the historical confessional standards of the church. The current standard requires that those who are called to ordered ministry affirm obedience to Jesus Christ under the authority of Scripture and be continually guided by the confessions.
2. The second change is twofold:
 - a. Former G-6.0106b required a person called to ordered ministry in the church to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.
 - b. Additionally it proscribed a governing body (council) from ordaining or installing any person who refused to repent of any self-acknowledged practice that the confessions call sin.

These two requirements were eliminated in favor of the broader standard delineated above. Since the broader standard still requires that both the ordaining council and the persons called to ordered ministry be guided by Scripture and the confessions, each will be bound by their interpretation of Scripture and the confessions and each will be guided by such in their respective decision making.

How does this affect the candidacy of an individual who is in a same-gender relationship?

The 218th General Assembly (2008) adopted an authoritative interpretation (Item 05-09), which is now in effect:

Interpretive statements concerning ordained service of homosexual church members by the 190th General Assembly (1978) of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the 119th General Assembly (1979) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and all subsequent affirmations thereof, have no further force or effect.

The action of the 218th General Assembly (2008) to delete the 1978 and 1979 authoritative interpretations, coupled with the presbyteries' approval of a new standard for ordination, means there is currently no specific prohibition against a session or presbytery ordaining or installing a person involved in a same-gender relationship.

In keeping with our historic principles of church order, each ordaining council (session or presbytery) will continue to determine the suitability of individuals called to ordered ministry within its bounds. The change in standards for ordination will not require an examining body to ordain a person whom it determines does not fulfill the requirements expressed in the constitutional questions, Scripture, or the confessions.

Does this change the process of examination for ordaining councils?

Neither the General Assembly nor the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission has issued opinions or decisions that interpret the new Form of Government language, nor has it issued opinions or decisions that modify its interpretation of the processes of councils doing the examination. The Stated Clerk of the General Assembly believes that the entities responsible for examination and the examination process itself have not been amended.

The following processes for examination are found in the Form of Government.

- A. The ordaining/installing session must provide a period of study and preparation for each individual elected as ruling elder or deacon, after which the session shall examine each individual as to their personal faith; knowledge of doctrine, government, and discipline; and the duties of ministry. (G-2.0402)
- B. The ordaining/installing presbytery must still examine a candidate for teaching elder after certification by the presbytery of care that the candidate has been prepared and fills the requirements necessary prior to examination for ordination. (G-2.0607)
- C. "The council responsible for ordination and/or installation shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office." (G-2.0104b)
- D. "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." (G-2.0104b)

May an ordaining council adopt the former G-6.0106b as their standard for ordination in a policy, handbook, or bylaw?

There are no authoritative interpretations regarding the New Form of Government. The General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) has two lines of cases that interpret the previous Form of Government that may be relevant to this question and may be found to apply to the new Form of Government. If they are contradictory, the most recent interpretations are authoritative.

First, in the most recent set of cases, the GAPJC has held that governing body (council) resolutions that attempt to restate the Constitution are an obstruction to the ongoing interpretation and implementation of the Constitution. Similarly, no lower council can constitutionally define, diminish, augment, or modify standards for ordination and installation of church officers <[PJC \(Bush v. Pby of Pittsburgh, 2008\)](#)>. In a further detailing of that concept, the GAPJC held that a council may not define in advance “essentials” and declare failure to adhere to these mandated “essentials” an absolute bar to ordination and installation <[PJC \(Buescher v. Pby of Olympia, 2008\)](#)>.

In a second set of cases, the GAPJC has held that an expression of an opinion, without action, does not constitute adoption of a policy contrary to the PC(USA) [PJC (Pby of W. Jersey v. Synod of NE, 1993)]. Under the facts of the case, the GAPJC found that the resolutions passed by the synod did not compel or direct any action (or inaction) and did not extend any rights (including the right to be ordained) that contravened any stated positions of this church. The GAPJC distinguished an expression of opinion from a policy of defiance: A lower council may not, under the guise of “opinion,” adopt a course of action in defiance of an established position of this church on a matter that has properly been submitted to, reviewed by, and determined by the General Assembly.

Under the new constitutional provision regarding examination for ordination, the ordaining council must be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates (G-2.0104b). This implies that an ordaining council must make all examinations and decisions regarding suitability for ordination on a case-by-case basis using Scripture and the confessions as its guide.

May an ordaining council change the constitutional questions found in the Directory for Worship?

Under the new constitutional provision regarding examination for ordination, the council must examine each candidate according to his or her ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (G-2.0104b and W-4.4003).

In addition, there are multiple authoritative interpretations that state that a lower council may not change the Constitution <[PJC \(Bush v. Pby of Pittsburgh, 2008\)](#)>, etc.

If an ordaining council attempted to change the constitutional questions for ordination and installation in W-4.4003, they would be in violation of G-2.0104b and the authoritative interpretations of the previous Form of Government.

An ordaining council examination is not 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 (G-2.0104b). At each individual examination, an ordaining council could make a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill additional requirements, as long as the ordaining council does not make failure to fulfill additional requirements an absolute bar to ordination in advance of the examination.