

“Sanctify Them in the Truth”
Office of Theology and Worship, General Assembly Mission Council
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The passage of amendment 10-A to amend G-6.0106b of the Form of Government has changed the ordination standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The change removes the language of

Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament. (G-6.0106b)

and replaces it with

Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (F-1.2). The council responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240; G-14.0450) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (F-4.4003). Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates. (G-2.010b)

There are many and widespread reactions to this change. Some are rejoicing; others lament. As we work through the many emotional, political, and relational issues raised, we would be well served to consider the theological and ecclesial issues by the passage of this new statement on the gifts and requirements for ordained service.

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In John 17 Jesus prayed for his disciples that God would “sanctify them in the truth.” Just as Jesus was set apart by God for the sake of the world, so Jesus’ followers were to be set apart, made holy, by the truth of the revelation of Jesus Christ. As Christ was set apart for God’s mission in the world, so we are set apart to work for the fulfillment of Christ’s mission in the world. This is the vocation of all Christians and the vocation of the church.

That all Christians are to be set apart in the truth is an important foundation for questions around ordination standards and sets the context for considering what it means for us “to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life,” particularly in the context of ordination to ministry.

In services of ordination, the congregation stands and candidates for ordination and/or installation gather around the baptismal font, and the minister says:

Ordination calls the whole church to renewed commitment,

and reminds us all to bear gladly the yoke of Christ given in the covenant of Baptism.

Let us, therefore, reaffirm our baptismal vows, renouncing all that opposes God and God's rule and affirming the faith of the holy catholic church.¹

These words provide signposts that can guide us in understanding ordination.

God's act in the church. The setting for the liturgy of ordination—at the baptismal font—clearly demonstrates that ordination represents the action of the triune God through the church of Jesus Christ. We are baptized in the name of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God claims us as beloved children and calls us to live faithfully as Christ's disciples. For some, this discipleship will take the form of ordered ministry in the church. As the PC(USA) Form of Government states, "The call to ordered ministry in the Church is the act of the triune God. This call is evidenced by the movement of the Holy Spirit in the individual conscience, the approval of a community of God's people, and the concurring judgment of a council of the Church" (G-2.0103).

A common calling. Ordination is also a *call* to the *whole* church. While particular candidates gather at the font, the *entire congregation* stands to reaffirm the covenant of Baptism. As at Mount Sinai the people of Israel were called to be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6), all baptized Christians are called to be "a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9). This is the source of the Reformed understanding of the "priesthood of all believers." Although there are varieties of gifts, services, and activities (1 Corinthians 12:4–6) given by the Spirit, *all* of the members of Christ's body are called to take part in Christ's mission and ministry.

Therefore, when we affirm God's call to particular forms of ministry for particular persons, we also *reaffirm* our *common calling*, expressed in the baptismal vows that follow:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God,
do you turn from the ways of sin
and renounce evil and its power in the world?

Do you turn to Jesus Christ
and accept him as your Lord and Savior,
trusting in his grace and love?

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple,
obeying his Word and showing his love?²

Although the call to ordained ministry focuses serious attention and reflection on those who have been chosen to lead the church as elders, deacons, or pastors, it by no means excuses the *whole people of God* from the call to a new way of life, "holy and acceptable to God" (Romans 12:1), redeemed by Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit. That is why all who are present—not just the

¹ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Occasional Services* (Geneva Press, 1999), pp. 20 and 54. This statement is found in the liturgy for ordaining and installing deacons and elders as well as the service for ordaining and installing ministers of Word and Sacrament.

² *Ibid.*

candidates for ordination and/or installation—reaffirm these vows. Again, as the *Book of Order* asserts:

The basic form of ministry is the ministry of the whole people of God, from whose midst some are called to ordered ministries, to fulfill particular functions. Members and those in ordered ministries serve together under the mandate of Christ. (G-2.0101)

The yoke of Christ. A metaphor for this mandate of Christ is the symbol of the yoke. A yoke is a wooden beam laid across the necks of a pair of oxen, so that they may work together in bearing a load or pulling a plow. As such, it is a sign of hard work and humble service.

Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take *my yoke upon you* [italics added], and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28–30). Jesus invites those who would follow him to “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely” (Hebrews 12:1). He then drafts us into the service of the gospel, promising that we labor not by our own power, but that his Spirit will sustain and support us in ministry. With this confidence, we may indeed “submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.”

But Jesus also says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). This statement points to the very real cost of Christian discipleship and of the call to ministry in Christ’s name. Taking up the yoke of Christ means taking up the cross of Christ—dying to self and living for Christ, in the service of his gospel. Still, we take up this calling not by our own strength, but by the grace of God alone. As Paul wrote, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20) and “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

Ordination as gift. Note that the “yoke of Christ” is *given* in the covenant of Baptism—poured out in the church for the sake of the world by the power of the Holy Spirit. Ordination is a *gift* from God. Elsewhere, the ordination liturgy says, “Ordination is Christ’s gift to the church, assuring that his ministry continues among us.”³ As the *Book of Order* confirms, “The Church’s ministry is a gift from Jesus Christ to the whole Church” (G-2.0101).

Ordination to ministry (as a deacon, elder, or pastor) is not a *right* to which each person is entitled—except insofar as all the baptized are called to ministry in Christ’s name. Candidates for ordination are called through the voice of the church, as the people of God discover a particular person’s spiritual gifts and seek to discern how God might be calling that person to Christian service. In seeking the will of God and the mind of Christ, councils of the church must sometimes conclude that a person is not well suited to the requirements and responsibilities of ordained service.

Neither is ordination to ministry a *reward* for righteous living. Ordination is not something we merit by an exemplary character or earn by good works. We are all sinners, utterly dependent on God’s mercy, worked in our lives through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Those who are called to ordained ministry should seek to demonstrate a life that is marked by ongoing repentance, conversion, and reliance on the grace of God.

³ Ibid., p. 19.

Renunciation of evil. The liturgy of ordination and/or installation includes the call to *renounce* “all that opposes God and God’s rule.” Saying “yes” to God and “yes” to Christ’s call to serve also means saying “no” to anything that is contrary to God’s will and Christ’s way. (See Matthew 5:37 and James 5:12.) As the church prepares to ordain or install candidates for ministry, we renew our commitment to “turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world.”⁴

Those who take up the charge “to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life” are called to a new allegiance, a new way of life. In Christ, we are “no longer strangers and aliens, but . . . citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19–20). This new allegiance to God’s rule inevitably brings us into conflict with the powers and principalities of the world. Thus Paul wrote, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

At times our allegiance to the Lordship of Jesus Christ may even lead us to oppose or resist evil, injustice, and oppression within the structures of the institutional church. Our common calling is to help the church be faithful to the kingdom that Christ brings. As the Westminster Confession states, “All synods or councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both” (6.175; see also F-3.0102). Above all, those who are called to bear the yoke of Christ must remember that “God alone is Lord of the conscience” (F-3.0101) and Christ alone is head of the church (F-1.02).

Affirmation of faith. Having turned from evil, we turn to Christ, “affirming the faith of the holy catholic church.”⁵ In the liturgy for Baptism—and in associated rites such as ordination and installation—the “faith of the holy catholic church” is represented by the use of the Apostles’ Creed, an ancient baptismal statement of faith.

In its creeds, confessions, and catechisms, “the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, [and] what it resolves to do” (F-2.01). The church’s confessional statements are to serve to forge our convictions, shape our actions, and guide us in the understanding of Scripture. They are standards of faith and life, “subordinate to the Scriptures, [but] nonetheless, standards” (F-2.02).

In the context of the liturgy for ordination and/or installation, the reaffirmation of the “faith of the holy catholic church” underscores the fact that those who are called to ministry are “subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him” (F-2.02). Accordingly, as councils of the church seek to discern and assess the gifts of particular persons for ministry, they “shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates” (G-2.010b).

Let us all strive to recover the original purpose of the church’s councils as settings of mutual responsibility and accountability in which faithful discourse deepens the church’s beliefs and focuses the church’s mission.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 20 and 54.

⁵ Ibid.