

Presbyterian Ordination Standards with Respect to LGBT Persons

A Brief History

- 1976** Two presbyteries in the United Presbyterian Church (USA) overture GA for “definitive guidance” whether persons who acknowledge a homosexual orientation and practice may be ordained. GA appoints a task force to study this, while stating that such actions would be “injudicious” but acknowledging that the presbyteries have the final authority to decide whether such candidates are fit for office.
- 1977** The GA of the Presbyterian Church in the United States sends out a study document recognizing that faithful Presbyterians disagree about whether homosexuality is a sin, a psychological disorder, or a natural variant of human sexuality; and that in light of such differences, it would be unwise to propose a single position for the whole church.
- 1978** Wrestling with different approaches to the questions raised in 1976, the 197GA-UPC issues a “Policy Statement and Recommendations” that unrepentant homosexual practice is inconsistent with the requirements for ordination. The statement also calls on committees to conduct all examinations with discretion and sensitivity, encourages seminaries to apply the same standards to homosexual and heterosexual students applying for admission, and declares that it shall not negatively affect the ordination rights of persons who have already been ordained. GA votes to adopt this statement after having been informed that it would guide, but not bind, sessions and presbyteries.
- 1979** The GA-PCUS approves a statement similar to one adopted by the GA-UPC in 1978.
- 1983** The PCUS and UPC unite as a single denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
- 1985** The GAPJC rules 10-5 – despite the clear legislative history to the contrary – that the 1978/79 statements were intended to be binding on governing bodies. It therefore rules that it is “unconstitutional for the Church to ordain any self-affirming, practicing, and unrepentant homosexual.”
- 1987** GA declares that a prohibition on ordained service by persons engaged in “unrepentant homosexual practice” is the only part of the 1978 “Policy Statement and Recommendations” that binds lower governing bodies, and that the remainder of that statement “provides strong guidance for the church but not law.”
- 1988** The Church adds G-13.0103r to the *Book of Order* – ten years after the 1978 policy statement – making clear that GA and the GAPJC may issue “authoritative interpretations” of the *Book of Order* that bind the Church without ratification by the presbyteries.
- 1993** The GAPJC issues two key decisions. In one case, it rules that the 1978 statement precludes not only ordination, but also installation of previously ordained persons – even though the 1978 statement declared it would not affect the ordination rights of previously ordained persons. In a second case, the GAPJC rules that the 1978 statement applies to candidacy, as well as ordination/installation.
- 1993** GA issues a new AI affirming the *status quo*, and calls for a three-year dialogue period.
- 1994** GA approved intended to seal the prohibition in the *Book of Order*, but it was not adopted by the presbyteries
- 1996** The GAPJC questions the *status quo*, with a 13-3 majority upholding a Presbytery’s refusal to investigate allegations of wrongful ordination during a period of denominational dialogue. Seven members of the GAPJC opine in a concurrence that the 1978/79 statements and their progeny were adopted in violation of the Constitution.
- 1996** GA approves “Amendment B” (fidelity and chastity”) and sends it to the presbyteries for ratification. Amendment B is approved by a majority of the presbyteries (97 Yes – 75 No), and is added to the *Book of Order* the following year as G-6.0106b: “*Those called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman, 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 Word and Sacrament.”

- 1997** GA approves “Amendment A” (“fidelity & integrity”), but it is defeated in the presbyteries in 1998 (59 Yes – 113 No).
- 1998** GA issues an AI “not to exclude anyone categorically in considering those called to ordained office, but to consider the lives and behaviors of candidates as individuals.”
- 1999** GA defeated proposal to delete G-6.0106b, requesting a two-year church-wide study of “the nature of the unity we seek in our diversity.”
- 2000** The GAPJC holds that a Session must interpret G-6.0106b so that it honors both G-6.0106b and other parts of the Constitution with which G-6.0106b appears to be in tension. The GAPJC does not even mention the pre-B statements.
- 2000** GA referred all overtures relating to G-6.0106b to 2001GA (following guidance of prior year’s GA). However, it approved Amendment 00-O, banning holy unions; this measure was *defeated* in presbyteries in 2001 (73 Yes – 100 No).
- 2001** GA received 35 overtures to delete or amend G-6.0106b, and approved Amendment 01-A, the local discernment or Middle Ground amendment; it was *defeated* in the presbyteries in 2002 (46 Yes – 127 No). GA also established the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, & Purity of the Church, to study issues of Christology, Biblical authority, ordination, and power.
- 2003** The GAPJC dismisses arguments based on a pre-B “authoritative interpretation” (the *LeTourneau* case) because “LeTourneau was determined prior to the adoption of G-6.0106b.”
- 2003** GA answered an overture to delete “B” by noting that question is before Task Force.
- 2004** GA received 16 overtures to issue a new Authoritative Interpretation (superseding earlier ones), delete G-6.0106b, or both; answered all these overtures by noting that question is before the Task Force.
- 2006** GA received 22 overtures to delete G-6.0106b and associated Authoritative Interpretations and defeated all of them, perhaps in deference to the Report of the Theological Task Force; and adopted an Authoritative Interpretation of G-6.0108 (as recommended by the Theological Task Force), emphasizing authority and discretion of presbyteries and sessions to discern candidates’ adherence to “essential tenets of Reformed faith and polity.”
- 2008** GA PJC, in hearing 3 cases regarding presbytery policies adopted in reaction to the 2006 AI of G-6.0108, upheld most of the AI but ruled that the second sentence of G-6.0106b is not subject to departures. GA adopted an AI reaffirming the 2006 AI of G-6.0108, and overruling the PJC’s exception for ‘fidelity and chastity’; issued another AI that the 1978/9 statements and all subsequent affirmations of them have “no further force or effect”; and sent to the presbyteries an amendment of G-6.0106b that maintains high standards but takes the emphasis off sexuality and refocuses on the ordination vows. The amendment, 08-B, was *defeated* in the presbyteries, with 78 in favor, 91 opposed, 3 ties, and 1 not voting.
- 2010** GA strongly defeated overtures seeking to reverse the AIs from 2008, and sent another amendment (10-A) to the presbyteries. Two presbyteries continued to defend themselves against complaints about their actions to approve out LGBT persons for ordination.
- 2011** Amendment 10-A approved by a majority of the presbyteries, 97 yes, 4 ties, 70 no, 2 not reporting: *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.* With the “new” Form of Government also approved, this paragraph becomes G-2.0104b.