

To the Congregation:

Several individuals in the congregation have asked what the Session plans to do in response to the recent actions of the General Assembly with regard to the Peace, Unity and Purity Report that was presented to the General Assembly. Only one small portion of the report, Recommendation 5, was in controversy. It dealt with proposed ordination standards for officers and ministers of Word and Sacrament. The PCUSA's web site explains the General Assembly's vote on this recommendation, and the effect of that recommendation, as follows:

In June of this year the 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), by a vote of 298-221 (57% to 43%), approved an "authoritative interpretation" of the church's Constitution that maintains current ordination standards for church officers but gives ordaining bodies greater leeway in applying those standards to individual candidates for ordination.

<http://www.pcusa.org/ga217/>.

Even though the decisions of the General Assembly do not require any action on our part, the Session takes this opportunity to share our thinking with you. In summary, we disagree with the General Assembly's approval of the authoritative interpretation in relation to the requirements for ordination found in the Book of Order at G-6.0106 a and b. However, we do not see any change in the way our congregation will operate, nor do we anticipate any crisis in the denomination.

Of course the issue which always gets the newspaper headlines, and the one which has led to the inquiries we have received, is the question of whether practicing homosexuals should be banned from ordination. This is an issue which our denomination and others have debated for a number of years. At some General Assemblies, the majority has favored such a ban. At others, the majority has opposed it. After each vote, there were hard feelings and a minority determined to become the majority at the next General Assembly.

In 1996, the General Assembly voted, and the required number of Presbyteries concurred, to add the "fidelity and chastity" requirement to the Book of Order, found in section G-6.0106b. This provision states that in order to be ordained, a person must live in fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman or in chastity in singleness.¹ Despite this addition to the Book of Order, there remained a large number of Presbyterians who disagreed. Many leaders of

¹ Sections G.60106a and G.0106b state in full:

- a. To those called to exercise special functions in the church--deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament--God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world. They must have the approval of God's people and the concurring judgment of a governing body of the church.

the church, on both sides of the issue, feared that the denomination could not hold together unless some further dialogue could be had.

Against that background, the 2001 General Assembly appointed the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. (All ministers and officers ordained in our denomination are pledged to work for the “peace, unity, and purity” of the church, even though there may often be some tension between the three goals.) The members were recognized leaders with various positions on the issues, from very conservative to very liberal. All sides waited for the committee to do its work and prepared for battle again if the committee failed.

The committee met for five years. They prayed together, studied Scripture together, and discussed why they each believed that his or her position was consistent with the will of God as shown through Christ and in Scripture. During the process, they did not convince each other to be unanimous on all theological issues, but they did become unanimous in the belief that all were serious Christians, seriously seeking to do the will of God, as they understood it. Once they came to this conclusion, they were able to give each other the respect and the benefit of the doubt which they felt to be appropriate between Christians.

All members of the PUP committee agreed that a split in the denomination would not be the best way to serve God. A split would cripple our missions, theological education, and other work, not to mention the terrible divisions and lawsuits which would arise within congregations and presbyteries. With this in mind, the PUP committee unanimously recommended a seven-part report, which the General Assembly adopted with one amendment.

Six sections of the report, which were overwhelmingly adopted by the General Assembly, were related to maintaining the unity of the church, and how we should deal respectfully with each other.

The only close vote was on section 5. Before it was passed, it was amended to make it more conservative than the original draft. As passed, this section provides that if a candidate for ordination disagrees with any doctrines, practices, or rules of the church, he or she should state the area of disagreement and the reasons for it. The ordaining body (presbytery for ministers, session for officers) will then be required to determine whether this disagreement goes to “an essential” or not. If not, the ordination will proceed. If the disagreement is an essential, the

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- b. Those who are 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 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.

person will not be ordained. The decision can be appealed through all of the appropriate levels of our church courts.

While some candidates may state disagreement on the fidelity and chastity rule of G-6.0106b, section 5 does not apply only to that issue. There are many scriptural prohibitions for a variety of sins, and not just those dealing with sex. In addition, our ministers and officers have long been required to express our agreement with the various reformed confessions of faith “in their essentials”, but there has not been a procedure for determining what is “an essential”. Whether matters such as predestination, tithing, keeping the Sabbath, or various other beliefs and practices were “essentials” has been a matter of individual conscience by those seeking ordination. Now there is a procedure by which the church can work through this multitude of questions, if necessary.

One result may be that some church or some presbytery may ordain unrepentant, practicing homosexuals, adulterers, or those living unchastely. That is a result with which our Session disagrees. If such ordinations do take place, we will have to wait and see if they will be appealed, and the result of those appeals. We believe that active, unrepentant homosexual behavior, living an unchaste life out of wedlock, or an unfaithful life within marriage would render that candidate unqualified for ordination as leaders/officers of the church (deacons, elders, and ministers of word and sacrament).

On the other hand, no officer is elected and no pastor is installed in our congregation without the vote of our congregation. No pastor can be ordained by or accepted into our presbytery without the vote of the presbytery. We cannot foresee either body voting that the “fidelity and chastity” requirement of the Book of Order is not an essential. Indeed, a great majority of the General Assembly voted to reaffirm the “fidelity and chastity” requirement this summer. We the Session reaffirm our intention to follow the requirements for ordination found in the Book of Order at G-6.0106 a and b that generally state that the candidate for ordination is to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness.

Our conclusion is that we should pray for our church, pray for our denomination, do the best we can on those matters within our control, and trust that God will use us for good, despite all our human frailties and errors.

Respectfully submitted,

The Session of First Presbyterian Church of Greer, SC