

**Advisory Opinion #22**  
**Actions of the 218th General Assembly related to G-6.0106b & G-6.0108**

Recent actions by the 218th General Assembly regarding G-6.0106b and G-6.0108 in the *Book of Order* are raising questions in sessions and presbyteries about the effect of those actions on the work of these ordaining bodies. This is a synopsis of some of those actions and their effects.

- I. The 218th General Assembly voted (Item 05-09) to send a proposed constitutional amendment that asks the presbyteries to delete the current text of G-6.0106b<sup>1</sup> and insert new text<sup>2</sup> in its place. Because the presbyteries did not ratify the amendment, the standards contained in the current G-6.0106b remain among the standards to be applied in examinations for ordination and installation.
- II. The 218th General Assembly adopted (Item 05-09) a new Authoritative Interpretation, which is now in effect:

*Interpretive statements concerning ordained service of homosexual church members by the 190th General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the 119<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and all subsequent affirmations thereof, have no further force or effect.*

What this means is that this identical wording from those 1978 and 1979 predecessor bodies is no longer in effect: “For the church to ordain a self-affirming, practicing homosexual person to ministry would be to act in contradiction to its charter and calling in Scripture,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 society serious contradictions to the will of Christ” (Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1979, 201; United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1978, 261).

The subsequent affirmations that are also negated include these words from the 1993 General Assembly *Minutes*, p. 76:

*... we concur with the opinion of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution that ‘the General Assembly statements of 1978, 1979, and subsequent years concerning the ordination of self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons and the related recommendations adopted by the General Assemblies have been*

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Those who are called to ordained service in the church, by their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003), pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions. In so doing, they declare their fidelity to the standards of the Church. Each governing body charged with examination for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240 and G=14.0450) establishes the candidate’s sincere efforts to adhere to these standards.

*considered by the judicial commissions of the church . . . [and] currently carry the weight of authoritative interpretations.'*

Authoritative Interpretations relying on the following General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission cases (GAPJC) are now no longer in effect:

- *Union Presbyterian Church of Blasdell v. Presbytery of Western New York*, (1985, Part I, p. 121)
- *LeTourneau v. Presbytery of Twin Cities* (1993, 163, 11.044)
- *Sallade, et al. v. Presbytery of Genesee Valley* (1993, 166, 11.045)
- *Hope Presbyterian Church v. Central Presbyterian Church* (1994, 142, 11.086)

The GAPJC cases that responded to the current wording in G-6.0106b continue to have effect:

- *Wier v. Second Presbyterian Church* (1999, 831, 12.077)
- *Sheldon, et al. v. Presbytery of West Jersey* (2000, 589, 12.205)
- *Benton, et al. v. Presbytery of Hudson River* (2000, 586, 12.169)
- *Londonderry v. Presbytery of Northern New England* (2001, 577, 12.1028)
- *Wier v. Second Presbyterian Church, Ft. Lauderdale* (2002, 339, #214-5)
- *Hart, Presbytery of San Joaquin et al. v. Presbytery of Redwoods* (2003, 277, #215-8)
- *McKittrick v. West End Presbyterian Church* (2003, 272, #215-5)
- *Stewart v. Mission Presbytery* (2008, #218-04)

III. The 218th General Assembly also adopted (Item 05-12) a new Authoritative Interpretation of G-6.0108:

*...the 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. However, the 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).*

We believe this modifies the 2008 GAPJC decision of *Bush v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh*, in that the scrupling of either belief or practice is now allowed. The effect of this action is to remind ordaining bodies that they bear the responsibility for determining whether any particular standard (including those described in G-6.0106b) will be a bar to that particular candidate's ordination/installation. This Authoritative Interpretation preserves the historic right of sessions and presbyteries to determine their membership; all these decisions, however, continue to be subject to review by a higher governing body.

The 218th General Assembly (2008) left in place the prohibition in *Bush* which told ordaining bodies: “Restatements of the *Book of Order*, in whatever form they are adopted, are themselves an obstruction to the same standard of constitutional governance no less than attempts to depart from mandatory provisions.”

**Other decisions by the 218th General Assembly:**

IV. The assembly declined to propose an amendment to W-4.9001<sup>3</sup>, thus continuing the PC(USA) constitutional provisions reserving marriage for relationships between a man and a woman.

V. The assembly agreed to the appointment of a Special Committee of Fifteen to study the accuracy of the current translation of the Heidelberg Catechism. One of five areas of concern is Question 87<sup>4</sup> dealing with those who will be saved. The special committee will be appointed by the Moderator of the 218th General Assembly to study the recommendation and bring back a proposal to the 219th General Assembly (2010). If that assembly approves the proposal, it will be sent to the presbyteries for approval. If two-thirds of the presbyteries vote to adopt the amendments to the catechism, it will return to the 220th General Assembly (2012). If that assembly approves the changes, then the corrected Heidelberg Catechism will replace the current version in *The Book of Confessions*.

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<sup>3</sup> Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith.

<sup>4</sup> “Can those who do not turn to God from their ungrateful, impenitent life be saved?” The current text of the answer reads: “Certainly not! Scripture says, ‘Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolater, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexual perversion, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or swindlers, will possess the kingdom of God.’ ”