

MODERATOR'S LETTER  
TO BEAVER BUTLER PRESBYTERY  
May 11, 2011

At its meeting last summer, the General Assembly proposed a change to the PC(USA)'s ordination standards stipulated in G-6.0106b of our constitution's Form of Government. This proposal required approval by a majority of our denomination's 173 presbyteries. Unlike previous proposals to amend this clause, the change has been approved as of May 10, with the 87<sup>th</sup> presbytery voting in favor of it. These new standards for ordination will take effect in July. While the change will affect other issues, the primary concern surrounding this debate has been the ordination of self-acknowledged, practicing, unrepentant homosexuals. This issue has deeply divided our denomination for decades, and the change will encourage some and will trouble others. It's good for us to know exactly what the new policy is, and what the change will mean for us.

First, the previous clause stated:

*"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."*

and it will be replaced with the following clause:

*"Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body 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 (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates."*

The effect of this change is to do away with a denominationally uniform standard for ordination and installation, and to empower each ordaining body (sessions for elders and deacons, presbyteries for ministers) to evaluate each candidate and determine their suitability. Because each session and presbytery is likely to have its own particular perspective on this matter, we are likely to have a wide variety of standards in place. It is important to emphasize that no new standards for ordination are being imposed upon sessions and presbyteries. More specifically, if a session or presbytery believes that unrepentant homosexual conduct or sexual activity outside of marriage disqualifies a candidate for ordination, then that body will be free to act upon its conviction and refuse ordination for such persons, or installation for service if they have previously been ordained by another session or presbytery.

What does this change mean for Beaver-Butler Presbytery? Although this change is a major shift for the denomination, our Presbytery's standards for ordination will remain the same.

While each candidate for ordination is considered individually, our Presbytery has established policies related to this matter. In 2002 we adopted an Affirmation of Faith which states, in part:

*“We affirm that anarchy in sexual relationships is a symptom of our alienation from God, neighbor, and self and that the church is called to lead people out of this alienation and into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ. We believe that God has provided for sexual intimacy only within the marriage relationship between one man and one woman.”*

In 2009 the Presbytery adopted an Open Theological Declaration which states, in part:

*“We will continue to uphold biblical standards for ordination, particularly in areas of sexuality.... We will not recognize ordinations that are constitutionally or biblically unsustainable. We will closely examine each candidate seeking admission to our Presbytery. We will not ordain candidates whose behavior violates the clear meaning of G6.0106b of the Book of Order [the clause which will be removed].”*

Practices in Beaver-Butler Presbytery have affirmed and confirmed these policies. Unless an unexpected and dramatic change occurs in the policies and practices of our Presbytery, we will continue to follow the old standards of “fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness,” in full compliance with the new constitutional criteria.

According to the new clause in the constitution, each session will conduct an examination of candidates for ordination as elders and deacons according to its understanding of Scriptural and confessional standards. Our stated clerk has ruled that the policy of our Presbytery applies to its churches’ sessions and to its minister members as well. Candidates for ordination and installation as elders and deacons in our churches must also comply with the “fidelity and chastity” criteria. Please join me in prayer that this change in our constitution will not cause undue consternation or divisiveness in our fellowship and, more importantly, that we serve and glorify our Lord and Savior in all we believe, say, and do.

In Christ,  
Rev. Peter C. de Vries, PhD  
Moderator, Beaver-Butler Presbytery