

# *Guidelines for Examination of Church Officers*

Covenant Network of Presbyterians

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The path to ordained leadership begins when a person feels an inner sense of call, which we believe comes through the movement of the Holy Spirit. This is essential. However, because we know we are prone to err, that inner sense alone is not enough – rather, the person moves toward ordained leadership only when a congregation affirms his or her sense of call by electing that person to serve. In some cases (e.g. of seminary professors or leaders of special ministries) a call to validated ministry stands in place of election by a congregation. After this, the final step in the process is examination of that person’s fitness by a council of the church (that is, by the session in the case of ruling elders and deacons, and by the presbytery in the case of teaching elders).

Examination is a good and faithful practice that contributes to the health and vitality of the church. It helps to ensure that our officers are well prepared for leadership. At the same time, it is a wonderful opportunity to affirm the importance of our calling

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and service; to share the faith and build up the church as we celebrate each other's journey in it; to acknowledge with gratitude the gifts of those who were elected, and those who are completing periods of service; and to affirm our vital connection as part of the PC(USA).

This paper reviews some of the basic principles that guide our examination of persons who have been elected to office – both when examination is easy and joyful and, on occasion, when it raises more difficult questions that we struggle with in the church.

## I. THE EXAMINATION PROCESS

### **Churchwide standards establish the framework**

The PCUSA has adopted constitutional standards for ordained service that reflect our desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. Ordained leaders must be “*persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord*” and their “*manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world*” (G-2.0104a). Sessions and presbyteries must be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying these standards (G-2.0104b). The examining council also must ensure that the candidate is able and committed to fulfil the requirements expressed in the questions that are asked at ordinations and installations (W-4.4003).

Our ordination standards were established, and may be amended, only by approval of General Assembly and a majority of the presbyteries (G-6.03 and G-6.04). General Assembly also may issue authoritative interpretations of standards, where those are unclear (G-6.02). **Sessions and presbyteries are always governed by these actions of the *whole* church – lower councils can neither ignore, nor add to, these churchwide standards.** Thus, the GAPJC has admonished that “no lower governing body can

constitutionally define, diminish, augment or modify standards for ordination and installation of church officers.”<sup>1</sup>

- Several years ago, when a session declared that it would not apply the “fidelity-and-chastity” standard of former G-6.0106b, the GAPJC held that that declaration was unconstitutional.<sup>2</sup>
- Likewise, local efforts to add requirements that are stricter than those which have been adopted by the whole church are unconstitutional. For example, it has been held unlawful for a presbytery to adopt its own, so-called “Biblical Standards for Christian Leaders,”<sup>3</sup> and for a session to require that officers-elect make certain affirmations regarding Jesus Christ, the infallibility of Scripture, and forbearance from sexual relations outside heterosexual marriage.<sup>4</sup> Local policies which purport to establish “essentials” in advance of particular examinations, or which undermine our constitutional guarantee that candidates may declare conscientious departures from standards, also have been struck down.<sup>5</sup> In recent months, following the church’s elimination of G-6.0106b, some sessions and presbyteries have considered adopting policies that would re-establish “fidelity-and-chastity” as a local requirement. Numerous decisions of the synod PJs and GAPJC make clear that these policies, if challenged judicially, will be struck down as unconstitutional.

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<sup>1</sup> *Buescher v. Presbytery of Olympia*, PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, pp. 316, 318 (2008); *Bush v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh*, PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, pp. 319, 322 (2008).

<sup>2</sup> *Londonderry Pres. Church v. Presbytery of Northern New England*, PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 577 (2001).

<sup>3</sup> *First Presbyterian Church v. Presbytery of Washington* (SPJC-Trinity 2007), *affirmed on other grounds*, PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 324 (2008).

<sup>4</sup> *First Presbyterian Church v. Blessing* (SPJC-South Atlantic 2002).

<sup>5</sup> *Buescher*, Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 316 (2008); *Bush*, Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 319 (2008); *Davis Community Church v. Sacramento Presbytery* (SPJC-Pacific 2007).

In short, although church leaders are elected and ordained locally, ordination is an act of the whole church, and persons who are ordained must meet the standards of the whole church. Sessions and presbyteries must apply churchwide standards in deciding, on a case-by-case basis, whether particular officers-elect are fit for ordered ministry. They may not adopt general policies that either relax the standards of the whole church or that exclude persons who qualify for service under those standards.

### **The candidate's conscience is important**

Presbyterianism was born in the Reformation (1517-1648), when Christians in Western Europe began protesting against what they saw as abuses in the Roman Catholic Church. At issue were matters of both belief (like the primacy of Scripture) and personal conduct (like a requirement that all clergy must be celibate). The Reformers protested against such things as matters of conscience, asserting the right to read Scripture and to follow their convictions even if these did not agree with official church positions.

In light of this history and the theological conviction in which it is grounded, the Westminster Confession (6.109) declares that “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.” This same principle is stated in our Constitution as the first of our Historic Principles of Church Order (F-3.0101). We emphasize this so much because we believe that biblically formed conscience is a sacred forum in which God holds each person accountable. In fact, our confessions (7.215) warn that “making men the lords of our faith and conscience” is idolatrous, and prohibited by the First Commandment (Exodus 20:3): “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Each of us doubtless believes that others would be better off if they adopted our own understanding of Scripture on most things. Certainly there are some things that are so central – like belief in the saving power of Jesus Christ – that we must all believe them. In other areas, though, we recognize that true discernment in a community of

diverse people may come over time, through dialogue from different perspectives under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Christians in our Reformed tradition long have insisted that although conscience may be instructed by the church, it must not be coerced. Our Historic Principles of Church Order remind us that “there are truths and forms, with respect to which men [and women] of good characters and principles may differ” and that each of us has “the duty . . . to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other” (F-1.0305). This rule has been carried forward in our present Constitution, which requires that persons who are being ordained or installed need not subscribe to a detailed set of views, but simply affirm that they “sincerely receive and adopt *the essential tenets* of the Reformed faith” (W-4.4003c) (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup>

Presbyterians have always resisted defining “essentials” in the abstract. In order to ensure that we honor the individual’s biblically-formed conscience, *we have a conversation, not a checklist*. What a person believes, and how he or she lives out those beliefs, may differ significantly from one person to the next. When a session or presbytery is considering a candidate’s fitness for office, it must consider each *particular* candidate in light of its experience with *that candidate* – including his or her statement of faith, answers to questions during examination, demonstrated manner of life, fit for the office of call, and the like. Our Constitution guarantees each candidate the opportunity to express his or her conscience, and to engage in meaningful discernment with the examining body about what points of difference might mean.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This was made a founding principle of American presbyterianism with the “Adopting Act” of 1729. That required ministers to declare their general acceptance of the Westminster Standards but also allowed them to declare disagreements (sometimes called “scruples”), and provided that a presbytery could not exclude someone unless it believed that the point of departure was so fundamental (that is, “essential”) that it rendered the church and candidate “incapable of communion” with each other. See Guy Klett, ed., *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America 1706-1788*, pp. 103-04 (Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> For a classic summary of these points, see the unanimous declaration of General Assembly in resolving the “fundamentalist controversy” of the 1920s. UPC Minutes (1927), Pt. 1 at pp. 78-79. After the more recent period of controversy about same-sex relationships, General Assembly affirmed the renewed emphasis given these principles by its Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity. PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, pp. 515-18 (2006). These principles have been affirmed in a number of judicial cases. See, e.g., *Naegeli v. Presbytery of San Francisco*, PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 390 (2008); *Buescher*, Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 316 (2008); *Bush*, Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 319 (2008); *Simmons v. Presbytery of Suwannee*, PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, p.

## II. INTERPRETING OUR ORDINATION STANDARDS

The Constitution (G-2.0104b) says that councils “shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.” This is a critically important requirement, and one which must govern our lives together in years to come. However, in requiring that we be “instructed” and “guided” by the confessions, the Constitution makes clear that we may bring to our process of discernment the recognition that times and understandings change.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, strict adherence to various provisions in the confessions may raise issues about many, relatively common practices. For example, it could disqualify persons who work or fail to attend church on Sunday,<sup>9</sup> are employed in the financial services industry,<sup>10</sup> voluntarily serve in armed conflict,<sup>11</sup> enjoy recreational gambling,<sup>12</sup> waste environmental resources,<sup>13</sup> remarry after divorce,<sup>14</sup> or generate controversy in their zeal to judge others.<sup>15</sup> Whether or not such practices might disqualify someone under G-2.0104b, in any given case, requires deliberate and prayerful interpretation by candidates and examining councils.

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114 (1985); *Rankin v. National Capital Union Presbytery*, UPCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 113 (1981); *Anderson v. Synod of New Jersey*, UPC Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 316 (1962).

<sup>8</sup> For general principles that are meant to guide our interpretation and usage of Scripture, see PC(USA) Office of Theology & Worship, ed., *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture*, Position Statement Adopted by the 123rd General Assembly (1983) of the PCUS, and *Biblical Authority and Interpretation*, Resource Document Received by the 194th General Assembly (1982) of the UPCUSA (1999) (available online at <http://oga.pcusa.org/publications/scripture-use.pdf>). *Book of Order* § F-2.01 describes the place of the Confessions in the life of the church, and W-4.4003 carries that over in the affirmations that must be made upon ordination and installation.

<sup>9</sup> Provisions that may be relevant include §§ 4.092, 5.223-224, 6.119, 7.060-062, 7.226-231, and 7.246.

<sup>10</sup> Provisions that may be relevant include §§ 4.110, 5.115 and 7.251-252.

<sup>11</sup> Provisions that may be relevant include §§ 3.14, 4.105, 5.256, 6.128, 7.069, 7.245-246 and 9.45.

<sup>12</sup> Provisions that may be relevant include § 7.252.

<sup>13</sup> Provisions that may be relevant include §§ 4.110, 7.246, 7.251-252, 9.46 and 10.3.

<sup>14</sup> Provisions that may be relevant include §§ 6.131-139.

<sup>15</sup> Provisions that may be relevant include §§ 4.112, 7.078, 7.215, 7.246 and 7.254-7.255.

When questions arise during examination, the first step is for the candidate to enter into discernment with the council about what Scripture and the confessions require. After such conversation, councils typically do not vote on whether a particular interpretation of Scripture or the confessions is correct or not – rather, the council votes on the fitness of the candidate, in light of all that its members have heard and discerned together. In so doing, each member of the council must consider whether the candidate’s positions are faithfully held and within the bounds of interpretive freedom guaranteed by our Constitution.<sup>16</sup>

### **Same-sex relationships**

While the church has removed the old “fidelity-and-chastity” provision (G-6.0106b) from the Constitution, examination in some cases clearly may involve debate about whether Scripture and the confessions permit conjugal, same-sex relationships. There is significant disagreement about what the Bible and confessions teach in this regard.

Same-sex relationships at one time were simply assumed to be wrong – just as women at one time were assumed to be unequal to men. However, a growing number of scholars have thought more carefully about this in recent years and concluded that such

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<sup>16</sup> At one time, the Book of Order contained a provision – the “fidelity and chastity” clause of G-6.0106b – which many felt was so explicit any candidate who could not comply with it must declare a “scruple” (stating that he or she dissented as a matter of conscience and would not comply with it). In such cases, the examining body was required to discern whether that scruple constituted such a fundamental disagreement with Reformed faith and polity that it must be regarded as disqualifying (that is, “essential”) as to that candidate. This process appears unlikely to arise under the current Constitution. Because we have a *collection* of different confessions by which collective discernment must be *guided* (rather than a single confession to which strict adherence might be required), the Constitution no longer contains a standard so explicit that declaration of a “scruple” appears necessary. There doubtless will continue to be cases where a candidate expresses views or intentions that some members of an examining body may consider to be wrong – and in some cases, the majority may discern that that disagreement is so fundamental (even given our constitutional guarantees of freedom of conscience) that the candidate should not be ordained or installed. However, because governing bodies typically vote *on the candidate* – not separately on individual questions that might arise during examination – and because the Constitution does not clearly mandate a single position on most issues that might be debated today, the examination process now appears most likely to be structured as a conversation about different interpretations of Scripture, guided by the mutual forbearance we owe each other in matters of conscience, rather than the formal declaration of departure from a specific mandate.

views reflect cultural and time-bound assumptions, rather than the true teaching of the Bible.<sup>17</sup> Reputable scholars have shown that each of the six, isolated texts which *might* address same-sex relationships may address other concerns entirely. For example, stories about same-sex rape (Genesis 19:1-26) do not really address consensual same-sex partnerships.<sup>18</sup> Old Testament rules (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13) may have constituted prohibitions against cultic prostitution or part of ancient “purity” laws that are not authoritative for the church of Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the few apostolic mentions of same-sex relations may be interpreted as condemnations of heterosexual licentiousness (Romans 1:24-32)<sup>20</sup> and of sexual slavery and child abuse (1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10).<sup>21</sup> In 2001, over half of the Bible faculty in our Presbyterian seminaries signed a statement expressing their belief that Scripture does *not* condemn all same-sex

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<sup>17</sup> Two excellent overviews of gracious readings of the texts that are often used to exclude are Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (WJK 2006), and Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* (Alamo Square, 2000 (2d ed.)). For other helpful works discussing diverse views on these texts, see, e.g. William Stacy Johnson, *A Time To Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics* (Wm. Eerdmans, 2006); Robert L. Brawley, ed., *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture* (Louisville: WJK 1996); Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1983); Choon-Leong Seow, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Louisville: WJK 1996); Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville: WJK 1994); and Walter Wink, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1999).

<sup>18</sup> While some claim that Genesis 1-2 makes heterosexuality the only permissible form of relationship, the Creation accounts may talk in terms of heterosexuality (as the condition to which most people would relate) without necessarily excluding same-sex relationships. In fact, the only word spoken by God here relates equally to heterosexual and homosexual persons: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). “Celibacy” – what proponents of exclusionary standards seek to impose on gay and lesbian persons – comes from the Latin word *caelebs*, meaning “alone.”

<sup>19</sup> Helpful commentaries include Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus* (Louisville: WJK, 1996), pp. 297-99; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), pp. 196-97; and N.H. Snaith, *Leviticus and Numbers* (Greenwood: Attic Press, 1967), p. 126.

<sup>20</sup> Helpful commentaries include David L. Bartlett, *Romans* (Louisville: WJK, 1995), pp. 30-31; Christopher Bryan, *A Preface to Romans* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 84-89; Brendan Byrne, *Romans* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), pp. 68-71; and Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 50-52, 94-97.

<sup>21</sup> Helpful commentaries include Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 438-452; and Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 39.

relationships.<sup>22</sup> This therefore is clearly an area in which freedom of conscience in interpreting Scripture plays a critical role.

Similarly, there are only two passages in the confessions that might speak directly to same-sex relationships and, again, there is significant debate about how they should be interpreted. The Westminster Confession, which condemns “sodomy” and “unnatural lust” (7.249), might well be concerned with violence/rape (as existed in the story of Sodom) or with obsessive sexual interest – not with loving, covenantal partnerships. Scholars have shown that the only other potentially relevant passage, which refers to “homosexual perversion” (4.087), is a mis-translation that General Assembly has initiated a process to correct.<sup>23</sup> In any case, one might conclude that even this passage, as it is mis-translated now, no more condemns all same-sex relations than a warning against “heterosexual perversion” condemns all heterosexual relations.

Such interpretive issues are not unique – the church, throughout its history, has had significant disagreements about sexual ethics. We no longer believe (as the church did through much of its history) that sex is solely for the production of children and that “chastity” requires a total renunciation of sexual pleasure. Leaders of the Reformation rejected the Roman Catholic rule that all clergy must be celibate.<sup>24</sup> We have come to new understandings of divorce and remarriage, and the use of birth control.

In 1978-79, General Assemblies erroneously singled out a single, contested sexual ethic and made conscience irrelevant to it, stating that “unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination.” After thirty years of debate, the

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<sup>22</sup> “*The Whole Bible for the Whole Human Family*” (available online at <http://www.covnetpres.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/Bible-faculty-statement.pdf>).

<sup>23</sup> PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, pp. 18-19, 1260-1262 (2008). General Assembly in 2010 directed that this work continue as a cooperative project with other Reformed denominations who have undertaken similar efforts to correct their translations.

<sup>24</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), Bk. III, Ch. 19 and Bk. IV, Ch. 10 (John T. McNeill, ed.) (Ford Lewis Battles, trans.) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960); Paul E. Capetz, [Binding and Unbinding the Conscience: Luther’s Significance for the Plight of a Gay Protestant](#), THEOLOGY & SEXUALITY 16 (March 2002): 67-96.

218th General Assembly (2008) finally corrected this, declaring that the 1978-79 statements and “all subsequent affirmations thereof” are of “no further force or effect.”<sup>25</sup> In so doing, General Assembly made clear that faithful Presbyterians may hold a range of different views about what Scripture and the confessions teach about same-sex relationships. In short, an examining council might well conclude that neither Scripture nor the confessions condemn the kind of relationship in which a particular candidate is engaged.

Some have taken the view that Scripture or the confessions require all persons to be celibate outside heterosexual marriage, and have asked GLBT candidates (or others) to promise that they will be celibate as a condition to ordination or installation. This is clearly unconstitutional. Our Constitution declares that “there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty” (F-3.0104), and that the decisions of church councils “are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both” (6.175). General Assembly has affirmed that the Constitution “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.”<sup>26</sup> In short, what a person believes and how he or she lives are inseparable – and our Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience in both.<sup>27</sup>

Certainly there is still room for discussion with a candidate about his or her sexual ethics. For example, two gay men might declare that they cannot comply with an interpretation of Scripture that would prohibit all sexual activity outside heterosexual marriage. However, if one candidate is living in a monogamous lifetime partnership, and

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<sup>25</sup> PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, pp. 42-43, 371-373 (2008).

<sup>26</sup> PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, pp. 42-43, 380 (2008).

<sup>27</sup> Requests for “vows of chastity” are problematic for other reasons as well. The confessions clearly condemn “entangling vows of single life” (7.249), and warn that “vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience, are so far from being degrees of higher perfection, that they are superstitious and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself” (6.126). Moreover, examining councils may not augment or modify churchwide standards. Requiring a vow of chastity, which is not part of the affirmations required upon ordination and installation (W-4.4003), would do precisely that.

the other candidate espouses an “open” sexual ethic with casual partners, a session or presbytery might well assess the two candidates differently.

### **Rejections of essential Presbyterian polity**

The Constitution requires that candidates for ordered ministry “shall adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity” (G-2.0105). Thus, two different kinds of “essentials” may become important in an examination. For example, an *essential of Reformed faith* – the most serious kind of question that might arise – would be at issue if a candidate could not affirm the saving grace of Jesus Christ. An *essential of Reformed polity* might involve something less serious, which doesn’t go to the core of Christian belief but relates in a fundamental way to what makes us Presbyterians (rather than, say, Roman Catholics). There are at least two features of Reformed polity that a candidate must affirm if he or she is to serve in ordered ministry in this church.

First, ordained leaders in the PC(USA) have the duty to show each other mutual forbearance in non-essential matters of conscientious disagreement (F-3.0105). Thus, a candidate must be able to affirm his or her commitment to work collegially with others in the church who may have different convictions about many matters. A candidate is *not* required to affirm that he or she will *accept* someone else’s convictions, but he or she must be committed to the mutual forbearance that enables us to remain a community in diversity, seeking the truth together in collective discernment under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The candidate who advocates simple exclusion or schism is likely to be disqualified under D-2.0105 as “infringing on the rights and views of others” and “obstructing the constitutional governance of the church.”

Second, a person who wishes to engage in ordered ministry must be prepared to carry out the functions of office. General Assembly has affirmed that an examining body “cannot excuse a candidate’s inability to perform the constitutional functions unique to his or her office (such as administration of the sacraments).”<sup>28</sup> Consistent with this, a series

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<sup>28</sup> PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, pp. 42-43, 380 (2008).

of judicial cases has made clear that a presbytery may not ordain or install someone who declares that he will not participate in the ordination of women.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, it is fundamental to our polity that the responsibility for assessing the fitness of officers-elect is vested in councils (sessions and presbyteries), not in individuals. Accordingly, the pastor who officiates at an ordination thereby performs a *ministerial* act that is required by the Constitution (not a discretionary one), and the act of officiating indicates neither approval nor disapproval of the congregation's choice of leaders and council's approval of them.<sup>30</sup> This point pertains primarily to pastors, who must officiate at child baptisms, ordination and installation of church leaders, and the like. While candidates who cannot agree to perform such functions in conformity with Presbyterian polity may be fine Christians, they may not be ordained or installed in the PC(USA).

### III. AFTER THE EXAMINATION

Sessions and presbyteries do not act in a vacuum – they are subject to the oversight of higher governing bodies, through administrative or judicial review. These can ensure that sessions and presbyteries apply our standards with integrity (that is, “reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately”).<sup>31</sup> An examining body can neither ignore, nor add to, church standards. In addition, if an examination was done hastily, or carelessly, it may be returned to the examining body for more careful and deliberate attention.

That said, it must be remembered that when a candidate is being examined for office, the session or presbytery is the only body whose members actually see and hear that person. Often they have insight into the character and qualifications of the candidate from years of preparation for ministry, or from life together in a congregation. Given such

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<sup>29</sup> *Simmons*, PCUSA Minutes, p. 114; *Hambrick v. Synod of North Carolina*, PCUS Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 43 (1983); *Huie v. Synod of Southeast*, PCUS Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 112 (1977); *Maxwell v. Pittsburgh Presbytery*, UPC Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 254 (1977).

<sup>30</sup> This was recognized in at least one high-profile case brought under former G-6.0106b. *PC(USA) v. Van Kuiken* (Presbytery-Cincinnati slip op. Apr. 21, 2003) (pastor could not be disciplined for ordaining gay/lesbian officers, because the Constitution vests responsibility for assessing their fitness in the session).

<sup>31</sup> PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, pp. 28-29, 514-19 (2006).

considerations, and the discretion historically vested in sessions and presbyteries, a higher governing body cannot substitute its judgment for that of the examining body unless there are “the most extraordinary reasons” for doing so.<sup>32</sup>

Some have suggested that if a candidate adopts a controversial interpretation of Scripture or the confessions and is then ordained, he or she may be subject to immediate accusations in a disciplinary proceeding for whatever conduct was at issue. That is not correct. A disciplinary case cannot be brought against a newly-installed officer on the basis of facts that the ordaining body knew about when it found that person fit for service.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Our polity “presupposes the fellowship of women, men, and children united in covenant relationship with one another and with God through Jesus Christ. The organization rests on the fellowship and is not designed to work without trust and love” (G-1.0102). Our sense of community has been sorely tried at various times in our history, as Presbyterians of good faith lost sight of the principles of biblically-formed conscience and mutual forbearance that make us a Reformed community of faith. Nonetheless, we have always returned to these principles, placing our trust in the grace that calls us together as a reconciling and witnessing community. Examination for ordered ministry, at its best, preserves and reminds the church of these important principles that make us Presbyterians.

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<sup>32</sup> Rem. Case 220-01, *White v. St. Paul Presbyterian Church* (GAPJC slip op. Aug. 8, 2010); *Simmons*, PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 114 (1985); *Rankin*, UPCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 113 (1981); *Anderson*, UPC Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 316 (1962); UPC Minutes, Pt. 1, pp. 58, 65 (1927).

<sup>33</sup> *Wier v. Second Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale*, PCUSA Minutes, Pt. 1, p. 831 (1998); *Anderson*, UPC Minutes, Pt. 1, at pp. 324-25 (1962); UPC Minutes, Pt. 1, pp. 58, 69 (1927).