

## Advisory Opinion #21

### Ordination Standards and Examinations

#### Essentials, Reformed Faith and Polity

In 2006, the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly adopted an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) of G-6.0108<sup>1</sup> that clarified the relative powers of the governing bodies within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This AI was affirmed and clarified by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission in February of 2008 in the opinions found in three cases.<sup>2 3 4</sup>

The 2006 General Assembly AI provides that *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government of the *Book of Order* set forth the scriptural and constitutional standards for ordination and installation.<sup>5</sup> Section 5b of the Authoritative Interpretation states that “these standards are determined by the whole church, after the careful study of Scripture and theology, solely by the constitutional process of approval by the General Assembly with the approval of the presbyteries. These standards may be interpreted by the General Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission.”<sup>6</sup> (See at G-13.0103r.)

The GAPJC, in the three February 2008 cases, found the following:

1. Authoritative Interpretations may not change an ordination standard.

The GAPJC affirmed the General Assembly’s Authoritative Interpretation adopted from the Peace, Unity and Purity Report and Recommendations and found that “the GA Authoritative Interpretation did not (and constitutionally could not) change any ordination standard found in *The Book of Confessions* or the *Book of Order*.”<sup>7</sup>

2. Governing bodies may not restate, augment, diminish or define ordination standards.

The GAPJC found that attempts by other governing bodies to adopt resolutions, statements or policies that paraphrase or restate provisions of the *Book of Order* and/or declare them as “essentials of Reformed faith and polity” are confusing and unnecessary and are in violation of the constitution. Such declarations are obstructions to the requirement that a governing body must examine candidates for ordination. (See at G-10.0102 l and G-11.0103n.) “... [N]o lower governing body can constitutionally define, diminish, augment or modify standards for ordination and installation of church officers.”<sup>8</sup> “Governing bodies do not have the authority to restate or define these standards.”<sup>9</sup>

3. Governing bodies may not waive the G-6.0106b ordination standard.

Specifically, the GAPJC reiterated that “[t]he examining body is best suited to make decisions about the candidate’s fitness for office and in this determination they may not permit departure from the ‘fidelity and chastity’ requirement found in G-6.0106b.”<sup>10</sup> In determining whether a candidate is in compliance with the constitutional standards, the examining governing body may allow a candidate to exercise their freedom of conscience with respect to interpretation of Scripture under G-6.0108 “to the extent that it is not a serious departure from the essential standards of Reformed faith and polity, does not infringe on the rights and views of others, and does not obstruct the constitutional governance of the church.”<sup>11</sup> An examining governing body may not allow a candidate to exercise their freedom of conscience if that “ignore[s] or waive[s] a specific standard of behavior that has been adopted by the whole church such as the ‘fidelity and chastity’ portion of G-6.0106b or any other similarly specific provision.”<sup>12</sup>

4. A candidate's actions must conform to the ordination standards.

“...[T]he church has required those who aspire to ordained office to conform their actions, though not necessarily their beliefs or opinions, to certain standards in those contexts in which the church has deemed conformity to be necessary or essential. G-6.0106b contains a provision where conformity is required by church officers....”<sup>13</sup> The responsibility for determination of failure to repent of any “practice which the confessions call sin”<sup>14</sup> is first placed on the candidate and then on the examining governing body to determine whether a departure is a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.

5) “The ordaining body must examine the candidate individually.”<sup>15</sup>

The GAPJC also emphasized that each candidate must be examined individually by the examining governing body. Only in this way can the body determine whether any potential departure is a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.

In order to obtain a complete understanding of these decisions, we recommend that readers study all three of the cases, which may be found online at

<http://www.pcusa.org/gapjc/decisions/pjc21809.pdf> (Buescher et al v. Pby of Olympia)

<http://www.pcusa.org/gapjc/decisions/pjc21810.pdf> (Bush et al v. Pby of Pittsburgh)

<http://www.pcusa.org/gapjc/decisions/pjc21815withconcurrences.pdf> (First Presbyterian Church session of Washington v. Pby of Washington)