

Reaffirming “Fidelity and Chastity” in Your Session and Presbytery

By Rev. Bob Dooling

Now that 10-A is an accomplished fact, is there any way to reaffirm “fidelity and chastity” in our presbyteries and sessions? That was the question that I recently put to a friend who is generally considered to be a wonk-among-wonks when it comes to the constitution of our church. I have rewritten his answer in order to protect the guilty. Any misinterpretations of his work are mine alone.

The polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) does not allow lower governing bodies (i.e. presbyteries and sessions) to adopt ordination standards in addition to those adopted by the church as a whole. Nor can they, as a condition of ordination, require that candidates subscribe to a list of what they have determined to be “essential tenets” of the Reformed faith.

On the other hand, these governing bodies are allowed rigorously to examine candidates on matters of belief and behavior that are pertinent to the candidate’s “gifts, calling, preparation and suitability” for the responsibilities of office, as well as to ascertain his/her “ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation.” In this examination process, examiners are to be guided by Scripture and the confessions in the evaluation of candidates, and are free to determine on an individual basis whether a candidate’s personal faith and behavior meets their understanding of these criteria – including what may or may not constitute a “necessary and essential article of faith.”

But, there’s more.

Presbyteries and sessions are also able to adopt ethical and behavioral standards that govern the members and officers under their jurisdiction. Again, these standards may not be used as a litmus test in the consideration of a candidate. That is because a candidate must be allowed to attempt to provide a theological defense of his/her beliefs and behavior. But, having said that, the ethical and behavioral standards adopted by a presbytery or session may inform the examiners’ decisions about individual candidates for ordination. Further, if necessary, these standards may be enforced upon those under their jurisdiction.

If it is the will of a presbytery or session to do so, one way in which the standards of “fidelity and chastity” may be reaffirmed is by inserting them into that body’s “sexual misconduct policy.” For example, a presbytery’s sexual misconduct statement could be amended by adding the following language at the appropriate place:

It is the policy of _____ that each minister member of the Presbytery and all persons serving in pastoral relationships under the jurisdiction of the Presbytery, shall adhere to biblical standards of personal sexual behavior, including sexual fidelity within the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman, and chastity in singleness.

A similar amendment could be made to a session’s sexual misconduct policy that would cover officers, employees and other persons in a position of responsibility in the church.

If adopted, this kind of amendment would govern ministers (in the presbytery) and officers/ leaders (in particular congregations).