

What G-6.0106b Means

A White Paper Prepared by
The Presbyterian Coalition
Task Force on Church Discipline

The 215th General Assembly has before it two requests that involve the meaning of G-6.0106b of the Book of Order: the "Statement of Compliance" from Christ Church in Burlington, Vermont, in which Christ Church sets out its own interpretation of that section; and Overture 03-12, which asks for an authoritative interpretation according to constitutional process. G-6.0106b requires that persons serving as ordained officers, must live in either fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness. This paper examines the background of that section of the constitution and the resources already available to understand the meaning of the ordination standards; this paper is offered to help resolve the issue.

I. Chronology of the Development of G-6.0106b

A. The Adoption of the "Authoritative Interpretation," known before 1993 as the "Definitive Guidance"

1. 1976--The 188th General Assembly received a request from the Presbyteries of New York City and of the Palisades to give "definitive guidance" concerning the eligibility for ordination as ministers persons who openly acknowledge homosexual orientation and practice.

The GA (of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA) established a task force to study and report on the subject.

2. Jan., 1978--the task force gave its final report, with a minority report, to the Advisory Council of Church and Society, which recommended the adoption of the majority report.

3. May, 1978--the 190th General Assembly sent the task force reports, along with 17 overtures and 21 resolutions on homosexuality from presbyteries (plus a large number of communications from congregations and individuals) to a committee. That committee issued a report. After more than 10 hours of debate by the full assembly, the assembly adopted an official policy statement and recommendations, plus an unofficial background paper of 47 pages for study. This statement and recommendations became the "Definitive Guidance." The Stated Clerk of the 190th Assembly, William P. Thompson, prefaced the printed copy of the statement with the declaration: "These are the official positions of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church concerning homosexuality." (Page 6 of the 62-page document "The Church and Homosexuality," The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1978, Office of the General Assembly.)

4. 1979--A similar interpretive statement was adopted by the Presbyterian Church in the US, which reunited with the United Presbyterian Church in the USA in 1983 to form the current PCUSA. (Minutes, PCUS, 1979, Part I, p.

201-210)

5. 1993--the 205th General Assembly of the PCUSA stated that the 1978 "Definitive Guidance" carried the weight of "authoritative interpretation" and officially adopted it as such. (Minutes, 1993, p. 322)

B. The Provisions of the Authoritative Interpretation

NOTE: The text of the Authoritative Interpretation is located at the end of this document as Appendix A. The paragraphs have been numbered for easy reference.

1. The policy statement section sets forth several conclusions about sexuality and sin.

a. "[H]omosexuality is not God's wish for humanity....Even where the homosexual orientation has not been consciously sought or chosen, it is neither a gift from God nor a state nor a condition like race; it is a result of our living in a fallen world." (Paragraph 13)

b. Jesus Christ call us out of our fallen state into a new life, which "redeems us as sexual beings but is impossible without repentance.... Though none of us will ever achieve perfect fulfillment of God's will, all Christians are responsible to view their sins as God views them and to strive against them." (Paragraphs 18, 22)

c. " In Matt. 19:1-12, Jesus reaffirms God's intention for sexual intercourse, enduring marriage between husband and wife, and affirms godly celibacy for those not entering the marriage covenant." (Paragraph 29)

d. "Officers are not free from repeated expressions of sin. Neither are members and officers free to adopt a lifestyle of conscious, continuing, and unresisted sin an any area of their lives. 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....Therefore our present understanding of God's will precludes the ordination of persons who do not repent of homosexual practice." (Paragraph 36)

2. The policy statement sets forth its conclusion with respect to ordination with the following "definitive guidance":

"That unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination set forth in Form of Government, Chapter VII, Section 3 (37.03): "...It is indispensable that, besides possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired, everyone undertaking a particular ministry should have a sense of inner persuasion, be sound in the

faith, live according to godliness, have the approval of God's people and the concurring judgment of a lawful judicatory of the Church.'" (Paragraph 52)

[NOTE: That section of the former constitution is similar to G-6.0106a of our current constitution.]

C. The Call for a Constitutional Amendment to Set Ordination Standards

1. Challenges to the Authoritative Interpretation

The Authoritative Interpretation's conclusions with respect to the sinfulness of homosexual behavior and its disqualification from office of self-affirmed practicing homosexuals were cited as controlling policy in a number of judicial cases decided by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission over the next 17 years from 1978 to 1995.

a. 1985 -- The Authoritative Interpretation was challenged, however, even from its first use in a case (*Union Presbyterian Church of Blasdell, et al. v. Presbytery of Western New York* (Remedial Case 197-9, Minutes, p. 118, 1985). In the *Blasdell* decision, the GAPJC ruled that the 190th General Assembly's interpretation of the Constitution, as set out in the Definitive Guidance, was determinative for local churches, and that congregations must abide by it. However, five GAPJC members dissented, stating that the Guidance had defined a second category of membership and changed the constitution without using the amendment processes required by the governing document.

b. 1994--In 1994, a five-member minority of the GAPJC dissented on the same grounds in the case of *Hope Presbyterian Church v. Central Presbyterian Church* (Remedial Case 206-3, Minutes, p. 142).

c. October, 1995-- seven of the 15 members of the GAPJC wrote a concurring opinion in *Central Presbyterian Church v. Presbytery of Long Island* (Remedial Case 208-4, 1996) that the 1978 Definitive Guidance, the subsequent reaffirmations of it by other general assemblies, and the judicial decisions based on it were adopted in violation of the Constitution because they had established ordination standards without following the necessary process of constitutional amendment.

2. Constitution is Amended by G-60106b

As a result of these challenges to the Authoritative Interpretation, a number of presbyteries overtured General Assembly to amend the Book of Order to incorporate the substance of the Authoritative Interpretation and thereby

remove any ambiguity as to its force.

a. July, 1996--the 208th General Assembly sent out for presbytery approval the section G-6.0106b that is now in the Constitution. After a vote of 97 presbyteries in favor and 74 opposed, the amendment became effective in 1997. The amendment was known as "Amendment B" because of its order in the list of amendments sent out. The amendment included a preamble that explains the committee and Assembly's intent in proposing the section, and provides help in understanding its meaning. **NOTE: The text of the Preamble is available at the end of this document as Appendix B.**

b. 1997-- the 209th General Assembly, sent out an amendment to replace the "fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness" language of G-6.0106b with "fidelity and integrity in marriage or singleness". The proposal failed, with a vote of 59 yes and 114 no. This was known as the first Amendment A.

c. June, 2001-- the 213th General Assembly sent out an amendment to repeal G-6.0106b, the Authoritative Interpretation, and all the judicial cases that relied on them. It also proposed an amendment to G-6.0106a to state the ordaining or installing governing body had the responsibility to decide the suitability of any candidate for ordained position. The amendment (also called Amendment A) failed by a vote of 46 yes and 127 no.

d. Current Position--The official position of the PCUSA since 1978 that a self-affirmed practicing homosexual may not be ordained or installed in office has continued to this day to be the law of the church, through the Authoritative Interpretation, the explicit language in G-6.0106b, and the judicial cases based on them. The 1997 and 2001 attempts to modify or delete G-6.0106b failed by increasing margins in presbytery voting.

II. The Meaning of G-6.0106b

Although many commentators have opined concerning the interpretation of various words in G-6.0106b, no judicial case has yet fully explored the meaning of all the specific terms used.

Therefore, to understand what the section means, we must rely on standard principles for constructing its provisions. We begin with the words themselves, other parts of the constitution, other statements of general assemblies, namely, the Authoritative Interpretation and the Preamble to Amendment B, and other tools such as a dictionary. The preferred and proper interpretation is one that best gives meaning and effect to all the provisions of the Constitution. The GAPJC has concurred ([*Londonderry v. Presbytery of Northern New England, Remedial Case 213-2, 2000, reported 2002*](#)), ruling that no governing body or judicial commission may declare any properly adopted part of the constitution invalid, including G-6.0106b.

G-6.0106b. "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."

A. The Authorities of Scripture, Confessions, Book of Order, Authoritative Interpretation, and Preamble to Amendment B

G-6.0106b rightly recovers the historic Reformed principle that Christians are to live in obedience to Holy Scripture as the "only rule of faith and manners" (G-1.0307) and the "only rule of faith and life" (Westminster Confession, 7.113). It is a false dichotomy to separate Jesus Christ from Holy Scriptures, "which are received and obeyed as the word of God written" (Confession of 1967, 9.27), just as we are to trust and obey "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture" (Barmen, 8.11). These contemporary expressions of understanding agree with the historic Reformed confessional standards--Scots (3.18-3.19), Second Helvetic (5.002-5.004), and Westminster (6.050, 7.002-7.003). _

While G-6.0106b does not contain any specific definition of terms, it does make Holy Scripture and the historic confessional standards of the church (Part I of the Constitution--the Book of Confessions) the authoritative basis of its provisions. In context, it further elaborates the nature of a manner of life demonstrating the Christian Gospel, as required of officers in the immediately preceding section, G-6.0106a. The section first refers to Scripture, and states that officers are to live "in obedience" to it. Reflecting the second ordination question, the provision further requires that officers' lives are also to be "in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church" as reliable expositions of what Scripture teaches us to believe *and do*. The confessions are often regarded as being a "lens" through which we view Scripture, since our consciences as officers are to be "captive to the Word of God *as interpreted* in the standards of the church" (G-6.0108b). G-6.0106b goes on to affirm the standard of "fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness" as being an integral part of our confessional understanding, specifically referencing the *Book of Order's* understanding of the nature of marriage.

Thus, the explicit language of G-6.0106b requires us to use, in combination, the provisions of Holy Scripture and both parts of the Constitution to properly understand its provisions. In addition, our polity demands that we look further to the 1993 Authoritative Interpretation and the Preamble to Amendment B.

B. The Meaning of Specific Words

1. "Fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001)"

- a. W-4.9001 is part of the second division of the Book of Order, the Directory for Worship. The section defines marriage both as a civil contract between a man and a woman and as a covenant lived out in Christian discipleship before God.
- b. If we need more information about "fidelity in marriage," there are numerous teachings in the Book of Confessions which uphold:
 - i. the relationship between a man and a woman as God's ordering of the interpersonal life for humankind. (Confession of 1967, 9.47) The church is to lead people out of sexual anarchy and confusion.
 - ii. adultery is forbidden, and we are to keep pure and holy in marriage (Heidelberg Catechism 4.108-4.109; 4.087; Second Helvetic 5.246-5.247; Westminster Catechism 7.248 and 7.249).
- c. Those precepts in the Westminster Catechism 7.248 and 7.249 have noted references to the Scripture which teaches these truths.
- d. The Authoritative Interpretation examines Scripture and concludes that sexual intercourse is intended only for a man and woman in an enduring marriage. (Paragraphs 9, 10, 21, 29, 30)
- e. The Stated Clerk of the PCUSA issued Polity [Reflections Note 19](#) in 1998. In seeking to define "fidelity in marriage, the Clerk correctly looks to W-4.9001, but fails to consider the ample discussion of fidelity in marriage in the confessions, Scripture, or the Authoritative Interpretation.

2. "chastity in singleness"

- a. The Confessions discuss what a single life entails and also set forth a number of examples of behavior that are "chaste" or "unchaste:"
 - i. fornication (unmarried heterosexual intimacy) and homosexual perversion are forbidden (Heidelberg 4.087);
 - ii. chastity in thought, word, and action is required by God in the single life (Heidelberg 4.108-4.109; Westminster Catechism 7.071-7.072)
 - iii. examples of chastity in body, mind, and behavior are given (Westminster Catechism 7.248)
 - iv. fornication, rape, incest, and sodomy are forbidden as examples of

unchaste behavior (Westminster Catechism 7.249)

b. The teachings in Westminster Catechisms 7.071, 7.072, 7.248, and 7.249 have noted references to the Scripture on which they are based.

c. The Authoritative Interpretation examines Scriptural teaching about sexual behavior outside of marriage that God proscribes; homosexual behavior is forbidden. (Paragraphs 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30)

d. The Preamble to Amendment B states that Scripture, as guided by the confessions, defines homosexual practice as a sin. (Paragraphs 9, 10, 11)

e. Polity Reflections Note 19 neglects any examination of the confessions, Scripture, or the Authoritative Interpretation; thus, it erroneously advises that governing bodies are free to decide what "chaste" and "single" mean.

3. "repent"

a. "Repent" appears often in our confessions. The word is consistently defined as grieving for, hating, and turning from sin and then turning toward God. These elements are noted in Heidelberg 4. 088, 4.089; Second Helvetic 5.093; Westminster 6.081-6.086; and Westminster Catechism 7.186.

b. The confessional teaching in Westminster Catechism 7.186 refers to the Scripture that deals with repentance.

c. The Preamble to Amendment B states the importance of acknowledging and repenting of sin. (Paragraph 9)

d. In Polity Reflections Note 19, the Stated Clerk, overlooking the clear and lengthy explanation of repentance in the confessions and Scripture, declares that "repent" is not defined and governing bodies will need to decide upon and use a reasonable definition.

4. "self-acknowledged"

The confessions and Scripture do not define this term; however, the Authoritative Interpretation describes circumstances of disclosure. (Paragraph 44) It urges various committees with authority to examine candidates for ordination to use discretion in making inquiry into "sexual orientation or practice... *where the person involved has not taken the initiative in declaring his or her sexual orientation.*" (Emphasis added) The statement places no limit on where or when such declaration occurred.

In the case of *Letourneau et al. v. Presbytery of Twin Cities Area* (Remedial Case 205-4, Minutes, p. 164, 1993), the GAPJC confirmed the principle in

Paragraph 44 of the Authoritative Interpretation, ruling that sexual orientation and practice is relevant to a candidate's qualifications for ordination and must be investigated by an examining body when the candidate has taken the initiative in declaring his or her sexual orientation. However, rulings in more recent cases ([*Wier v. Second Presbyterian Church, Remedial Case 214-5*](#), 2002; and [*Presbytery of San Joaquin v. Presbytery of the Redwoods, Remedial Case 215-8*](#), 2003) have applied an increasingly stringent standard. *Wier* requires that "in whatever form it may take, self-acknowledgment must be plain, palpable, and obvious and details of this must be alleged in [a] complaint." *San Joaquin* further overturns the principle of Paragraph 44 and *Letourneau* that self-acknowledgment of homosexual orientation creates an obligation for further inquiry. Instead, the GAPJC held that self-acknowledgment of homosexual or other orientation by itself is not a proper basis "for singling out a candidate for additional questioning. Therefore, if a person does not self-acknowledge a *practice* that the confessions call sin, then a governing body has a positive obligation to make further inquiry" (emphasis added) only if it has specific knowledge of a violation. The *Wier* and *Letourneau* decisions also raise the bar for inquiry and evidence significantly higher than comparable standards in secular law, e.g. in family courts dealing with matrimonial disputes.

The GAPJC has not ruled in any case whether or not a candidate can refuse to answer legitimate questions from an examining body, despite the ordination vow to be governed by the church's polity and abide by its discipline. Church office is undertaken voluntarily, and a candidate always retains the right to terminate inquiry he/she considers intrusive by withdrawing the candidacy.

5. "practice"

The Authoritative Interpretation provides an understanding of this term. It states:

"Officers are not free from repeated expressions of sin. Neither are members and officers free to adopt a *lifestyle of conscious, continuing, and unresisted sin* in any area of their lives." (Paragraph 36, emphasis added)

The Preamble to Amendment B, in paragraph 9, refers to "manner of life," which indicates a persistent pattern of behavior.

III. Conclusion

The constitutional and legislative materials relating to G-6.0106b provide ample, clear, and consistent interpretation of that section. Such understanding is binding on all officers who have agreed to the vows to be governed by our church's polity, as well as governing bodies, which are

united in their mutual relationship.

[Appendix I: The Authoritative Interpretation](#)

[Appendix II: The Preamble to Amendment B](#)

Other Links:

[Polity Reflection #19](#)

[Polity Reflection #43](#)

[Polity Reflection #44: ACTIONS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY RELATING TO HOMOSEXUALITY - 1970-2001](#)

