

Passage of Amendment 10-A in the PCUSA

To: The Congregation

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As of yesterday, the requisite number of presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 87 of 173, voted “yes” on Amendment 10-A. Since the 219th General Assembly in Minneapolis last summer, Amendment 10-A has been the focal point of the human sexuality dialogue within the PCUSA. Amendment 10-A reads:

Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation 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. Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

Amendment 10-A emphasizes the Lordship of Jesus Christ; a requirement for rigorous examinations, based on both external authorities and personal qualities; the importance of Scripture, the confessions, and the constitutional ordination/installation questions; and the historic Presbyterian balance – established in the Synod of Philadelphia’s Adopting Act of 1729 – between shared national standards and application to individual candidates by the church council that knows them best.

Amendment 10-A will replace the existing language in our constitution regarding ordination standards. The current language, which as a result of yesterday’s vote will be changed effective July 10, 2011, reads:

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 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.

For more than 30 years, mainline Christian denominations in the United States have discussed in their judicatories the matter of human sexuality, especially as it pertains to ordained office. The PCUSA has not been immune from the discussion. Of late, the conversation has focused narrowly and almost exclusively on whether or not to ordain gays and lesbians, who are either single and celibate or in a committed relationship, to the offices of deacon, elder, and minister.

One persistent objection to Amendment 10-A has been in what it *doesn't* say, namely "fidelity and chastity." The minister and elder commissioners to a majority of presbyteries of the PCUSA have determined that the constitution's language that will be replaced was too constricted. The newly approved language is more in keeping with the broad constitutional standards of ordination -- strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In other words, the commissioners chose to go with language that considers the whole of one's discipleship rather than one particular aspect of one's discipleship, namely his or her sexuality, when making decisions as to who or who not to ordain to church office.

For now and the foreseeable future, the way in which First Presbyterian Church nominates, elects, examines, and ordains and installs officers for leadership will proceed as it did before the passage of Amendment 10-A. We are aware that fully understanding and effectively implementing Amendment 10-A will take time. It will require the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Job. It will also call for the grace of Jesus Christ. We are not at the end of the discussion on human sexuality. We may not even have arrived at the midway point.

Some Presbyterians will applaud the passage of Amendment 10-A. Some Presbyterians will lament the passage of Amendment 10-A. Lines will be drawn and distinctions made. Jesus in the Gospels did not divide his world into insiders and outsiders or winners and losers based on then-prevalent distinctions. The distinction that seems to have mattered the most to Jesus was between those who knew themselves to be sinners in need of redemption by God's grace and those who were oblivious to their spiritual condition. The "excluded" in the gospels are the ones who excluded themselves by failing to show charity and mercy to those Jesus' called "the least." The grace of God in Jesus Christ is expansive. Our challenge is to exhibit a similarly expansive grace in Jesus' name.

Presbyterians have long-debated human sexuality and ordination standards and will most likely continue to do so. We will have to trust the Holy Spirit to one day bring us to consensus on this as well as other contentious matters. In the very near future, we will be holding forums for the purpose of sharing information about our denomination's action and responding to any questions persons may have about the action.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.