



May 23, 2011

Dear Friends,

Many of you have read in the news that our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), has recently voted to change its standards for who may or may not be ordained as a minister or elder in the church. Several of you have asked what First Presbyterian Church's response to this action will be.

First, let us tell you about the change. We are governed by our Book of Order, which is changed only through a lengthy process involving votes from each of our 173 presbyteries. By Tuesday of last week, a majority of presbyteries had voted to change the wording of our Book of Order meaning that on July 10th of this year the new wording will become the law of the denomination.

The current wording of the Book of Order is as follows:

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.

The new language reads:

Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.14.0240; G- 14.0450) 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 (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

In the Presbyterian Church, ministers are called by local churches but are ordained by the presbytery. Elders are elected by a local church and are ordained by a local session. The change in the Book of Order emphasizes the historic role of the local presbytery or session to assess a person's fitness for ordination. It removes the explicit prohibition of practicing gays and lesbians from being ordained while maintaining the central role of scripture and the confessions in evaluating a candidate's call to ministry. It requires ordaining bodies to take scripture and the confessions very seriously in its examinations. The new language underscores the requirement that all candidates "joyfully submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life." No presbytery or session can be forced to ordain or receive as a member any person which the presbytery or session does not approve.

Further, the Book of Order continues to affirm the sanctity of marriage: "Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publically witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith," Book of Order W-4.9000)

So, the question people ask is, "What impact will this have on the First Presbyterian Church?"

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Our call and ministry has not changed. At its stated meeting last Thursday on May 19th the Session reaffirmed its commitment of May 17, 2001 which reads as follows: "The Session of First Presbyterian Church of Winston Salem joins faithful believers throughout the Church in confessing:

- That Jesus Christ alone is the Lord of all and the way of salvation.
- That Holy Scripture is the triune God's revealed Word, the Church's only infallible rule of faith and life
- That God's people are called to holiness in all aspects of life. This includes honoring the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman, the only relationship in which sexual activity is appropriate."

We are the same church we were two weeks ago when the amendment passed and we will be same church tomorrow. And we continue our faithful journey as God leads us forward into His future for First Presbyterian. For every one of us this is a time to be reminded of the central calling of our faith, to bear witness to the love of Jesus Christ. The work God is doing in and through the First Presbyterian Church is too important to let anything sidetrack us. In fact, we are convinced that what has crippled many churches has not been their position on this issue, but the amount of time and energy they have taken in debating and discussing this issue.

Our calling to share the love of Jesus Christ is too important and too pressing to let us take our eyes off of that calling. God is doing amazing things through the ministry of FPC, and we can look forward to that work continuing for many, many years to come.

First Presbyterian Church will press on as always, seeking to be faithful to the calling God has set before us. We give thanks to God for the privilege we have of serving with you in this important work. As the session that has been called to lead our congregation, we will continue prayerfully and actively to follow this issue as we continue to serve God together faithfully.

If you have any questions, you may contact any of the Session members whose names are below

In Christ,

Class of 2011

Anna Gissing
Mark Johnson
Tricia Mendenhall
Virginia Perry
David Rainey
Carlo Castañeda

Class of 2012

Tina Haynie
Martha Lowry
Vaughn McCall
Katie Satterwhite
Brian White

Class of 2013

Ron Britt
Betsy Brown
Jackie Cooke
Todd Rabold
Karen Rice
Tim Sechrest

Senior Leadership Team: Harry Daniel, Chuck Hobbs, Amy Holloway, Mike Horne, Jeff White