

Frequently Asked Questions

The Change in Ordination Standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

1. How is the change in ordination standards happening?

It appears likely that a majority of the 173 presbyteries will approve a change in language for ordination standards recommended by The General Assembly in 2010. In all, since the General Assembly meeting, 55% of the total number of commissioners voting in presbyteries is approving the amendment.

2. What does the change in ordination standards mean?

The ordination standards have changed from “living in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness” to “joyfully submitting to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.” This removes a national standard categorically prohibiting the ordination of persons in sexual relationships outside of marriage between a man and a woman.

3. What does the change in ordination standards represent?

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has shifted the authority for applying its ordination standards from the national level to the local presbytery and session level. This represents a de-centralization of the church and puts more discernment in the hands of people at the local level.

4. May congregations now ordain people who are openly gay?

The previous standards were never based on a person’s orientation, but on their behavior. The new standards do not list specific behaviors that automatically exclude someone for consideration for ordination. Each examining body is responsible to look at all possible factors to determine if someone is being called into ordained ministry.

5. Specifically, what was changed?

The primary change is the removal of language requiring those ordained “to live either in fidelity in the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.” It also adds language referring to obedience to Christ, and indicates that fidelity to church standards is judged case by case by the examining body.

6. What practical changes will we see?

If pastors, elders, and deacons who are ordained in one area move to another location, they shall be examined by that ordaining body before being able to take up their office. That body may choose to apply ordination standards differently from the officer’s previous body.

7. Is the ordination of sexually active gays and lesbians mandated?

No, it is not required, but it is no longer prohibited by specific Constitutional language.

8. Will a congregation be required to change anything?

A congregation cannot be forced to ordain or receive pastors or elders or deacons of whom they do not approve. The congregation retains the right to determine who will serve as officers.

9. May a congregation continue to consider sexual activity outside marriage between a man and a woman as impermissible for its officers?

Yes, as long as the application is on a case by case basis. The authority for ordaining elders and deacons is fully vested in the local congregation. The new language calls the ordaining body to be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying ordination standards to individual candidates.

10. May a congregation or presbytery now ordain or install a sexually active homosexual?

Yes, if after a thorough examination, the congregation or presbytery believes the person to be called by God to serve as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament, elder or deacon and not to be living in violation of the church's ordination standard, its Confessions, or Scripture.

11. Does the new language give candidates who are sexually active outside the covenant of marriage between a woman and a man the "right" to be ordained?

Nobody has a "right" to be ordained. Ordination is based on a sense of God's call as confirmed by the ordaining body.

12. May a presbytery continue to function with the standard of "fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness" when examining candidates for ordination?

Yes, as long as the application is on a case by case basis. The new language calls the ordaining body to be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying ordination standards to each candidate.

13. Is a presbytery required to receive, by transfer of membership, an ordained sexually active gay or lesbian minister?

No, each presbytery determines which ministers to receive into its membership.

14. May questions about a candidate's sexuality be asked or are such questions forbidden?

All questions are allowed during an examination. The acknowledgment of being sexually active outside the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman does not automatically disqualify a person from being ordained.

15. Is a congregation required to call a pastor who is openly gay or lesbian?

No.