

## A Pastoral Letter to Foothills Presbytery

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On Sunday May 1, Foothills Presbytery held its Spring stated meeting at Westminster Presbyterian Church (Fernwood) in Spartanburg. We worshiped together, sang together, and prayed together. We also examined and approved two candidates for the ministry. Three Inquirers were moved to Candidacy. We heard reports about Campus Ministry, disaster relief and our presbytery budget.

Our presbytery also took action on proposed amendments to the *Constitution* of the church. Any time the *Book of Order* is amended, a majority of the Presbyteries must approve the proposed change. You may have heard that one of these proposed amendments, Amendment 10-A, will make a significant change in the *Book of Order* regarding ordination of ministers, elders and deacons.

In 1996 the Presbyterian Church sought to clarify its ordination standards in light of controversy in the church and culture regarding sexuality. The following language was added to the *Book of Order* after approval by a majority of the presbyteries:

***“...Those who are called to ordained 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.”***

Now, in 2011, the presbyteries are voting on Amendment 10-A, which removes the language above and adds the following language:

***“Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.000). 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 (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.”***

**Foothills Presbytery voted to disapprove this amendment by a vote of 95-64.** However, it is now clear that a sufficient number of presbyteries (87) have voted to amend the *Book of Order* as indicated above.

This change to our constitution means that the language regarding fidelity and chastity will be removed from our ordination standards. The language that will be added is consistent with the understanding of ordination that has been a part of American Presbyterianism since 1758.

- The new wording requires a thorough examination of candidates, in all areas, and places the responsibility for such examinations in the session for elders and deacons and in the presbytery for Ministers of Word and Sacrament.
- There is nothing in this language that requires a church or presbytery to ordain or receive by transfer a person it believes does not meet its standards of faithfulness.

- However, a session or presbytery may choose to extend ordination to a person who may not meet the previous fidelity/chastity standard.

Many in our presbytery will be distressed by the passage of Amendment 10-A. Others will feel that it is time for this change in our constitution. My hope is that we will all practice mutual forbearance in humility with one another recognizing that this change is significant for our life together as a church. I invite you to pray with me for our church and to ask for the mind of Christ as we live into this new emerging reality.

This is not the first time that Presbyterians have addressed and altered our interpretation of Scripture on divisive issues that have arisen in the church. In such times, we have historically tried to find ways to agree to disagree and to respect our differences, while staying together in the church. We have also sought to focus on those things which unite us, notably Christ Himself, and the mission He calls us to embrace. A broken world which hungers for the gospel needs our church to turn our focus upward and outward again.

In closing, it is a great joy to serve a presbytery like Foothills, where I believe there tends to be a gracious spirit and where we are defined more by our mission together than by the votes we take in presbytery meetings. As your Presbytery Executive and Stated Clerk, I am committed to encouraging that spirit and to building those relationships. I think that I speak for all of the leaders in our presbytery when I say that we are committed to providing whatever assistance we can to our pastors, officers and congregations as we navigate our way through challenging times. I hope that you will not hesitate to contact me if we can help in any way.

Grace and peace,

George G. Wilkes  
Executive Presbyter/Stated Clerk