

Westminster Presbyterian Church

"LIFTING HIGH THE CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST"

The Reverend Trevor H. G. Smith, Pastor
The Reverend Leslie S. Dibble, Pastor

Dear Members and Friends of the Westminster Presbyterian Church

In the course of the last two weeks our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Charlotte Presbytery of which we are a member congregation, have voted to approve a change to our Constitution. The effect of this change is that on a Presbytery by Presbytery and church by church basis, people engaging in sexual relationships outside of what the Bible ordains for our good, that is, marriage between a man and a woman, or celibacy in singleness, may now be ordained to the offices of pastor, elder and deacon.

If you have followed reports of this change in the news you will know that it is commonly being reported as affecting a single issue – the ordination of men and women in sexually active same-sex relationships . It is important to note ‘sexually active’ here because the church has never said that one’s sexual orientation is sinful, only one’s actions.

You should observe too that this change *permits*, but does not *mandate*. Indeed, it is important to look precisely at the change which has been made because, without knowing the historical context, you would not know from the wording alone that a change of any sort has taken place. Here then is the language that has been removed and the new language added.

The language that was removed is currently found in our Book of Order, 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, 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. (emphasis added)

The language which was approved as a substitute is as follows:

"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." (emphasis added)

However, the context of this change is well understood by everyone. The intent is to open ordination to people (both heterosexual and homosexual) who wish to express their sexuality outside the bounds of covenant marriage between a man and woman or celibacy in singleness.

Both of your pastors and the Session are deeply saddened, though not completely surprised by this change. We pray for strength and discernment to understand the culture we are in and for courage to boldly and lovingly speak to its misleading ways, especially and so often tragically in the area of our sexuality.

Further, we are united in our opposition to this change. We believe that our church's former standard was in accord with both the biblical standards for the right use of God's gift of sexuality and the biblical law of love which seeks God's very best for all people. As your leaders, we want Westminster to be a place where everyone can experience the transforming power of Christ to live in faithful obedience to his word, and in abundant holiness that is for all of God's people. Holiness however is not defined by the standards of our culture but by the gracious and merciful words of God's revelation in Scripture, seen most fully in the life of Jesus.

So, where to from here? At present, we believe the following will serve us well as guiding principles:

- 1 That we currently remain within the bounds of the PC(USA) and continue to work for the reversal of this decision and the renewal of this particular denominational expression of the Church of Jesus Christ.

We will not do anything in a precipitous manner, but will remain open to any options the Lord opens to us. Our intent is to bring honor to Jesus Christ before the watching world. If people who claim Jesus as Savior and Lord cannot live together agreeably what does our witness to the world look like?

- 2 That we work with other renewal groups to require faithfulness to Biblical standards within our own presbytery of Charlotte and throughout the denomination while seeking the peace, unity and purity of the Church.

Toward this end several of your officers will attend a meeting of like-minded Presbyterians in Minneapolis scheduled for the end of August in which a number of our best leaders will help us all pray, think through, and plan on how to best honor Jesus in any decision we make. Likewise, discussions have already begun with like-minded churches in our own Presbytery to accomplish this same purpose. One idea already starting to percolate through the church is the formation of new presbyteries (which we believe is even now possible within our Book of Order) of like-minded churches.

- 3 That we continue to hold as the standard for ordination at Westminster to the office of elder and deacon the language of G6.0106b - *fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness* to which we joyfully submit.

Warmly yours in Christ,

Trevor H.G. Smith & Leslie S. Dibble
Pastors

Kent Moore
Clerk of Session