

Where Do We Go From Here?
April 16, 2011

INTRO: The most debated portion of our Book of Order has been G-6.0106b, which is our sexuality ethic for ordained deacons, elders, and pastors. Last summer's General Assembly voted to replace our fidelity and chastity language with new language. The presbyteries across our denomination are currently voting on this amendment. The unofficial vote right now is 80-59, where 87 votes are needed to pass it. Sometime around May 10-11, I believe that our current fidelity and chastity language will be removed from our Form of Government. I would like to offer you my suggestions about what this means, how this affects us, and where we go from here.

Our present language states "that 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" (G-6.0106b).

This would be replaced by new language which says "Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to joyfully submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240; G-14.050) shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of the 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".

If it passes, this new language would be a major change in that it would drop any mention of a sexual ethic from our Book of Order. It would remove the national prohibition from ordaining people who are sexually active outside of marriage, including active homosexual people. Our standard has not prohibited people from being ordained based on their orientation, but on their behavior/sexual practice. This would move these decisions completely to the presbytery and session levels, without any Book of Order guidance. While the numbers would probably be small, and it could be challenged in our church courts, it is possible that we could see some presbyteries begin to ordain people who are openly engaged in sexual activity outside of marriage. This would be a major shift in the life of our denomination.

Our presbytery has voted 4 times in favor of fidelity and chastity. At our last vote in November, it passed by about 75% - 25%. For some churches, this change may not get much attention. For others, this represents a point of crisis. For many churches across our denomination, this becomes a tipping point. We will be in a new place we have not been in before. This deserves much prayer, thought, and discernment about how the Lord would want us to proceed. But, we also must act, and we must not be afraid to act.

EARTHQUAKE: For some in our denomination, the impact of this change will feel like the impact of an earthquake and the tsunami that it creates. Some see this huge wave of water

surging towards them which they are powerless to stop. It is an overwhelming feeling and people are bracing themselves for what the impact might be. Living here in southern CA, we know there are three ways that people feel the effects of an earthquake. The FIRST are those people who live near the epicenter or the fault line. Their homes or businesses suffer significant damage. These people lose a lot and all of their energy is devoted to trying to recover from this disaster. Some churches and some presbyteries will experience this vote like that. They will crumble under the impact of this wave. They will lose members, lose money, and struggle with anger and depression. The SECOND group of people are those who feel their homes sway. They rock back and forth. A couple of glasses fall off the shelf and break. People get scared at the initial impact, and continue to feel some aftershocks, but over time, things settle down, and they realize they will survive. Some churches and presbyteries will be like this. They will have an initial scare, but they will be able to weather the storm, and things will eventually settle down. The THIRD group of people are those who don't feel the earthquake at all. They don't even know there was an earthquake until they see it on the news or a relative from back east calls and asks if they are OK. Some churches will be like this. They will experience no change as a result of this vote. But, we all know that just because we don't feel an earthquake, that doesn't mean that one didn't actually happen. Each congregation experiences the earthquake and the aftershocks differently.

Our encouragement, which comes from Jesus in Matthew 7:25, is that "The rains came down, the floods rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock." I believe in the sovereignty of God. I have a lot of confidence in our God. I have a lot of confidence in our presbytery. We have done a lot to invest in our infrastructure over the years, and I believe we will be like the second group – after the initial impact, we will be one of those houses that are left standing. But, it also means that we have a responsibility to act and to reach out to those who are asking for help.

As you have heard me say before, I believe the purpose of a presbytery is to provide a covenant community that cultivates a missional imagination among its people to join with the Trinity in what God is doing in our world, to live out our faith in a way that changes people's lives, changes people's hearts, and changes whole communities for Jesus Christ. We exist for the mission. We live in a time when the mission is hard. We live in a transitional time. We continue to live in a fluid, dynamic, ever-changing reality. We are dealing with some big adaptive challenges. If they were technical challenges, we would have solved them by now. This is a time that requires us to be in prayer to discern what next steps God would have us take.

IDENTITY: I believe that our presbytery has a good chance to survive and thrive through this time, because like people who prepare for an earthquake, we have been making our own preparations. We have been forging an identity in recent years that will continue. The DNA of the Presbytery of San Diego has been shaped by spiritual, missional, and relational strands.

In 2003, we approved the Essential Tenets and Reformed Distinctives as guidelines for preparing and evaluating candidates through the Committee on Preparation for Ministry, for directing incoming ministers through the Committee on Ministry, and for educating and training our officers and members. They have helped to shape the spiritual strand of our identity.

In 2006, our presbytery discussed a resolution that expressed a concern that the Presbyterian Church (USA) was moving away from the essential convictions that formed the covenant that we received and entered. In order to answer the questions raised in the resolution that was adopted, the Task Force on the Way Forward was formed. This report recommended a Year of Preparation to devote time to corporate worship, communal discernment, and interactive prayer. It expressed a desire to create a new paradigm for the presbytery. It listed ten areas of concern.

In 2007, the Way Forward Work Group was formed to follow up on these areas of focus. The final report that was approved in 2008, stated that our presbytery is no longer primarily a governing body, but that we are primarily a relational community, and we hope to someday become primarily a mission agency. This helped develop the missional and relational strands of our DNA. This document outlined the beginnings of our missional vision, and to engage in some exploratory missional pilot projects, which have continued to grow in the years since. We voted to affiliate with the Presbyterian Global Fellowship, and organized our first Moving Back into the Neighborhood event. We reaffirmed our theological identity, strengthened our local ordination standards, adopted a property covenant, and sought to expand our networks and partnerships. We also stated that we might need to develop responses to future scenarios such as actions to set aside ordination standards. It said we would LEAD, not LEAVE. In 2010, we reaffirmed our Standards of Ethical Conduct. As we move forward, I believe there are three things we need to do.

FIRST is to focus on our SPIRITUAL DNA (Belief). This involves TEACHING THE FAITH. The teaching role of the church now becomes even more important. Joe Small, the recently retired director of our Office of Theology and Worship, has said that we Presbyterians do not know our own faith. Most people only read the Bible during the weekly worship service. Most Presbyterians do not know what Covenant Theology is. We need to be teaching the faith to our people again. We must teach our people the great stories and narratives of the faith. Even though the standard to live in “chastity in singleness” is being removed, we still must teach our people that chastity is a virtue and promiscuity is a vice. Even though the standard to live “in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman” will be removed, we must teach our people that the Bible calls married people to be sexually faithful to one another. Even though the standard that “those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture” will be removed, we must teach our people to obey the teachings of the Bible. Even though the standard that “persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, and minister of the Word and Sacrament” will be removed, we must teach our people that the Bible calls us to repent of all our actions that the scriptures call sin, and that continuing, ongoing, unrepentant behaviors are inconsistent with the Christian life. It is often helpful to affirm and reaffirm our faith during these times of change. It would also be helpful to set aside a day of prayer and fasting for our denomination.

We need to REMEMBER WHAT OUR BOOKS SAY. We need to remember that our most important book is the Bible. Our second most important book is the Book of Confessions. Our third most important book is the Book of Order. So, even if language is removed from our Book of Order, no language is being removed from the Bible or our Book of Confessions, and there is

still plenty of guidance and direction there that we are not losing. We need to help our people understand what these books say about these issues, because their instruction remains in place. We also need to remember that our Book of Order says that “every Christian Church, or union or association of particular churches is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion” (G-1.0302). As a presbytery, we will continue to decide which people we will ordain as pastors and which pastors we believe are being called to serve our churches. Nobody else will decide that for us. Nobody will force a pastor on us that we do not believe is being called into our presbytery. We still have the freedom to discern the mind of Christ, just as before

The **SECOND** thing we need to do is to focus on the **MISSIONAL** part of our DNA (Behavior). We need to continue to **LEARN HOW TO DO MINISTRY IN TODAY’S WORLD**. The Church in North America today is being challenged to find ways to join what God is doing in the ever changing world around us. If we don’t connect the good news of Christ with the unchurched of our society, we will continue to decline. I believe this remains our **TOP PRIORITY**. We must listen to our people, listen to our communities, and listen to God. We must discern what God is already up to in our communities and discern how God is calling us to join in the Spirit’s work. We must become even more creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial. We must launch more missional experiments. Regardless of whatever else may happen in our denomination, we must not allow ourselves to be distracted from our calling to minister where God has planted us. I believe it is very important for all of our congregations to send some members and leaders to participate in our conversation that we are calling **Moving Back in the Neighborhood 2.0**. It will be held here at Solana Beach on August 18-19. I hope you will come, as I believe this gathering will be very important to our moving forward together.

The **THIRD** thing we need to do is to focus on the **RELATIONAL** part of our DNA (Belonging), and to understand how our relationships with our denomination are going to change. This new language about ordination standards **MOVES US TO A MORE DE-CENTRALIZED MODEL OF CHURCH**. Some people have said that they think the denomination is like a sinking ship. I disagree. I think the denomination is like a **FLEET OF SHIPS**. Our 173 presbyteries act like 173 ships. They are somewhat connected, but they are also very different. Some will be strong, some may sputter, and some may sink. The paradox is that we are connected but distinct.

The denomination is like a **GARDEN**. We have potatoes, lettuce, radishes, onions, beets, and green beans. Some will ask us what we potatoes here in San Diego have in common with those radishes and onions over there in San Francisco or Minneapolis or New York City? Those answers may vary. We are all planted in our faith in Jesus Christ, in the same historical soil of the Reformation, but we have taken those historical roots in different directions. We smell and taste and think and act very differently.

There are both positives and negatives to the de-centralization of the church. Some churches and presbyteries may not handle this increased authority well, while others will be fine. I have said before that what **WE** do as a presbytery is far more important than what the General Assembly does. I believe that is becoming truer all the time. As we experience the shift towards de-centralization, it will become more and more important what presbytery a congregation is a part of. We are likely to see churches transferring from one presbytery to another, for spiritual, missional, and relational purposes. We have already been contacted by two congregations that

are expressing a desire to transfer into our presbytery. It is time for us to begin those conversations, to think through what it would mean to welcome in other congregations who see and hear what we are doing and who want to be a part of us. I believe we have a responsibility to prayerfully discern requests for new relationships and partnerships that will come our way.

As we experience the shift towards de-centralization, the question that becomes more and more important is “what holds us together as a denomination?” and “where do we find unity, common ground, or a common DNA?” What holds us together as a presbytery is easier to answer than what holds us together as a denomination. What holds us together as a denomination. will no longer be common ordination practices. Some presbyteries will ordain people that other presbyteries would not ordain and will not accept on transfer. Others will wonder if they can faithfully stay in this denomination. I believe the Holy Spirit is going to use this time to re-shape what we look like. I believe there is a new Reformation taking place in the North American Church for the reformation of the world. I believe God wants us as a presbytery to think bigger than we have. I don’t think God wants us to just focus on our ministry here, but how can we participate in the larger mission of God in North America, in our denomination, and in our world. I believe God may be calling us to step up to a greater leadership role, because of the high caliber of people, churches, and ministries, that we have here in our presbytery. Members of the denomination’s Middle Governing Body Commission are looking at new models for presbyteries that would be more flexible and adaptable to be able to shift with the times of discontinuous change we live in today. Nobody has a crystal ball. Nobody can predict what these new configurations might be. But, we are used to that, because the Bible teaches us that we walk by faith, and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

OUR COMMUNITY: The temptation in times like this is to isolate ourselves – to make decisions alone and to begin making plans alone. I think that would be a big mistake. This is a time for acting together. As a presbytery, I want us to see if we can act together. I believe that we will be stronger if we hold together as a presbytery. Our Presbytery Council has asked me to pull together a group of people to consider some recommendations for the Next Wave of our ministry. If it would help, I am more than happy to come and talk with your session or members of your churches, about what our presbytery is doing, and I know others would do the same. We will be in a time of ambiguity for a while, before we reach a time of clarity. But, God can bring good things out of that.

OUR WITNESS: Jesus tells us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. (Matthew 5:13-16) I believe we are called to be witnesses for Christ, not just in the world, but also in the church. We have an opportunity to witness both to the world and to the denomination that we are in covenant with. The way we handle this transition can be a witness to others. We need to cultivate our imagination, new ideas, and creativity for how to address these issues, as we move into new territory. This is not a time to diminish our influence in the denomination. This is a time to expand it in some imaginative ways. We have been called to lead, not leave.

We care about the church because the Bible tells us that the church is the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12) and the bride of Christ (Revelation 19:7). It is not a waste of time to invest ourselves in the strengthening of our communion. Regardless of decisions that others make in our denomination, we are still called to be a witness where Christ has planted us. We cannot control what happens

in other places, but we can control what happens here. And where we do exercise influence, we must not abdicate our responsibility to do so. We will need to act. We must not be afraid to do so.

CLOSING: We are reminded that “all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Our encouragement comes from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who said “I will build My Church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it (Matthew 16:18). Amen.