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“Tell us Lord, what has happened to us? Where did we go astray?” These words haunted a Faith and Order gathering in Santiago de Compostela when an Orthodox priest ended each petition confessing the slander, persecution, schisms and warfare that have marked the ways Christians have treated one another over the millenniums of our existence with “Tell us Lord, what has happened to us?” and the people responded: “Where did we go astray?” It was a telling indictment of our failings as Christians.

After nearly a generation of conflict over ordination standards is it not time to do the same – to step back and look at what we have done to one another? The 2006 General Assembly called us to remember our history: that the Presbyterian Church at its best has worked its way through profound social and theological disagreements by exercising “mutual forbearance” when divided over matters subsidiary to the affirmation that “Jesus is Lord.” The subsequent two Assemblies have done the same. Is it not time to cease endless efforts to impose a consensus on one another when we have always been called to honor the discernment of ordaining bodies regarding individual candidates within the bounds of our theology and polity – all of it, not just a piece of it? Why did we abandon this obligation of mutual forbearance as Presbyterians to one another in Christ? Is it not time to end a warfare that has diverted us from proclaiming the gospel to all who would love God?

“Where did we go astray?” As someone who has been involved with the ecclesiastical life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessor denominations for more than 45 years let me offer a few personal observations for those who were not there at the pivotal points.

In 1976 two presbyteries (New York City and Palisades) sought the advice of the broader church (UPC) regarding “the ordination of persons who may be otherwise well qualified but who affirm their own homosexual identity and practice.” They didn’t have to do that, but like Paul’s proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles they knew that Peter and the apostles in Jerusalem might have some concerns. After two years of study a special committee of the General Assembly affirmed the possibility that God may indeed be calling such persons to leadership in the church. The 1978 General Assembly disagreed. (It is well documented that presbytery after presbytery sought to bind the conscious of its commissioners by instructing them on how to vote on the recommendations.) Unlike Peter we were unwilling to allow the good news of the gospel’s radical inclusion of all who love God to define our lives as Presbyterians. That Assembly

used a phrase that did not exist in the *Constitution* – “definitive guidance.” (In fact, a clear statement of the authority of the General Assembly to offer “authoritative interpretation” did not appear in our *Constitution* until 1987.) In 1979 the PCUS adopted a similar statement. Neither Assembly was willing to close the discussion. Both passed a series of recommendations calling for further study and dialogue among those who disagreed with those positions. Every Assembly since has done the same.

It wasn't until 1985 - following reunion that the “definitive guidance” became binding on the conscious of all Presbyterians when the PJC forbade congregations and presbyteries from ordaining “any self-affirming practicing and unrepentant homosexual as elder, deacon, or minister of the Word.” A minority noted that the definitive guidance was in conflict with other provisions of the *Constitution* and therefore could not serve as a trump card. When the *Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church*” report of 2006, echoing that minority opinion, reminded us that ordaining bodies are to apply *all* of the standard of the church to individual candidates and to exercise mutual forbearance with one another in all matters nonessential in faith, practice and governance they returned us to the standards set by the Jerusalem church and affirmed in the 1729 Adopting Act of the Presbyterian Church in the New World when conflicts arose among immigrants from differing Reformed communities.

Tell us Lord, what has happened to us? Where did we go astray? Warfare began 1992 when the PJC applied the trump card to Jane Spahr and Lisa Largess, and following years of conflicting Overtures calling for inclusion and exclusion a highly politicized General Assembly in 1997 initiated what is now G-6.0106b, **a provision with which the church has not been able to live.** Make no mistake about it: this provision is contrary to the historic principles of Presbyterian governance and hypocritical in its intent and application. It requires the impossible standard of works righteousness and perfect obedience to Scripture and our Confessions (refusing to repent of “any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin” see Westminster 7.209 - 7.258 as examples of this impossibility), yet substituting interpretations of clear confessional language so as not to offend some “unrepentant sinners” e.g. “marriage between a man and a women” to allow for divorced officers when Westminster (6.131) clearly states “one man and one woman.” Furthermore the existence of this provision has enabled attempts in judicial case after judicial case to equate “chastity” with “celibacy” when Assembly after Assembly has refused to do so and Westminster (6.126) itself calls for chastity within the bounds of marriage, and Heidelberg (4.018) calls for a chaste and disciple life, whether in holy wedlock or in single life. Westminster further warns us against “entangling vows of single life” (7.249). Where did we go astray?

The Adopting Act standards were reaffirmed in 1758, 1870, and 1927 to resolve previous ruptures over our ordination standards. In each case, the church struggled for a period with the

perception that a point of disagreement in the church was so important that the church's historic law and practice of forbearance must be overthrown. In each case, however, this sense of crisis was resolved through a reaffirmation of mutual forbearance in cases of conscience. Thus, we have been drawn back to our historic Presbyterian identity many times in our history through gracious and redemptive processes of reformation e. g. when we were able to acknowledge our error regarding the suitability for ordained office of those with an African heritage, divorced men, and most recently women. Today by God's grace we are called to forbearance once again as God's Spirit has led many of us to recognize homosexual persons as brothers and sisters in Christ and full members of the body of Christ. Tell us Lord, what has happened to us? Lead us to repentance for the ways we have treated one another over the past generation.

G-6.0106b must be stricken from our *Constitution* so that our historic principles of being Presbyterian may again be honored – where respect for the individual's biblically formed conscience is tested by those governing bodies who know the candidates for ordained office best and the broader church exercises mutual forbearance. Beginning with Peter and Paul our ancestors in the faith founds ways to maintain the bounds of unity. Can we not do the same?

Amendment 10-A now before the presbyteries offers a way forward.

The first sentence of the proposed replacement sets forth the purpose of ordination standards in the church:

“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).”

Standards are not designed to be arbitrary or punitive – they are undertaken voluntarily and joyfully in submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This reaffirms that there is not a “right” to ordained service in our polity. Accordingly, the standards do not simply relate to one area of life, such as sexuality, but “in all aspects of life.” The model for these standards is Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church. While all of G-1.0000 is relevant to understanding the nature of ordination standards, of particular importance is G-1.0000c, which reads,

“Christ gives to his Church its faith and life, its unity and mission, its officers and ordinances. Insofar as Christ's will for the Church is set forth in Scripture, it is to be obeyed. In the worship and service of God and the government of the church, matters are to be ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”

The application of standards to particular candidates must therefore be consistent with this ethic. Candidates should be examined “according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”

The balance of the provision puts forth specifics regarding the examination.

“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.”

This sentence reflects the “New Side/New School” traditions of ordination standards inherited from the English Puritan stream of American Presbyterianism. It focuses on call (both the candidate’s sense of call and the church’s affirmation of that call), gifts, preparation, and “suitability for the responsibilities of office.” This last dimension will undoubtedly create some anxiety in candidates. The criteria for determination of “suitability” will undoubtedly reflect the local judgment of particular governing bodies. However, the question of “suitability” is related to “the responsibilities of office.” Matters such as gender or race would be excluded from consideration as these have been specifically addressed in confessional documents of the church. A candidate’s sexual behavior (but not orientation) could be a factor considered in determining a particular candidate’s “suitability.” Since the examining body would be required to examine “*each candidate’s*” suitability, it would not be permissible for a governing body to bar a class of people. But the candidate’s behavior would need to be examined in the larger context of the person’s gifts, calling, and preparation. Matters related to the conscience of a candidate would be considered as they are now, since these relate to G-6.0108, not G-6.0106. Departures from constitutional provisions (i.e., “scruples”) could be declared, weighed, and granted if a presbytery determined it did not affect an essential tenet of the Reformed faith.

The provision continues by affirming:

“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).”

This sentence incorporates the historic “Old Side/Old School” concerns regarding ordination standards inherited from the Scots-Irish stream of American Presbyterianism. The examination is not merely a subjective evaluation of the candidate’s call, or merely the candidate’s verbal assent to standards. The examining body must be satisfied of the candidate’s “ability and commitment” to fulfill the requirements expressed in *all* the constitutional questions for office. The questions cover a wide range of concerns: theological orthodoxy; authority of Scripture and the confessions; acceptance of our polity; commitment to collegiality; furtherance of the peace, unity, and purity of the church; and demonstration of the love and justice of Christ. This is a significant shift from the amendment approved by the previous General Assembly that was defeated by the presbyteries.

By taking a both/and approach to the two main historic streams of American Presbyterianism, Amendment 10-A reflects the position articulated in the Adopting Act of 1729 and reaffirmed whenever the church has encountered division on ordination standards (1758, 1870, 1927). For this reason, persons whose theology of ordination is exclusively in one tradition or the other may find the amendment not fully satisfactory. A view to history and our past attempts to

resolve the polarity in our tradition shows the wisdom of the middle-way approach taken by the Adopting Act and its subsequent affirmations.

Finally, the provision concludes by adding:

“Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.”

This sentence makes explicit the reliance on Scripture and the confessions mentioned in G-1.0000c, while also indicating that standards shall be applied individually in the consideration of candidates. This is a *précis* of the Adopting Act – objective criteria established by Scripture and the confessions, applied pastorally and in the full context of a candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for office. It strikes the time-tested balance between universal standards and individual call and character that has been the touchstone of American Presbyterianism.

It is time to end our warfare, to reaffirm our historic ability to honor the conscience of others through mutual forbearance in matters non-essential, and to once again devote all our resources, energy, imagination, intelligence and love to proclaiming the gospel of God’s radical and redeeming love to a broken, lonely and hurting world.