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Voting on Ordination Standard Begins

By Alan Hager

Our local presbytery- the Presbytery of the James- voted on the amendment to replace the current wording in the Book of Order on standards for candidates for ordination at its recent meeting on October 16, 2010. This will begin a series of votes in each of the 173 presbyteries across the country on the topic. The amendment, which was approved at this summer's General Assembly meeting, will require a majority of the presbyteries to approve it in order for it to become the official new standard for the church.

What will be removed and what is the new wording of the amendment that is being proposed? Currently, the Book of Order states that those who are called to serve as an officer of the church are to "live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and woman or chastity in singleness." The amendment that has been proposed would replace the paragraph where those words are found with, "*Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. 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. Governing bodies shall be governed by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.*"

As you can see, the new wording sounds very biblical and significant. However, in relation to what is being removed there is a substantial change in that the new standard could potentially allow for persons sexually active outside of marriage to become officers in the church. (Those speaking in favor of the amendment at the recent presbytery meeting clearly indicated this was their intent.) Our session has gone on record at various times in the past to affirm the current standards for prospective officers of the church and to oppose the attempts to replace these clear and timely requirements on ordination and sexual practice with language that is either vague or indefinite on what it allows.

So how did the Presbytery of the James vote on the proposed amendment? The vote in favor of the amendment (which would replace the existing standard with the new wording mentioned above) was 152; against the amendment (which would retain the current standards for prospective officers of the church) was 152; and there were 3 abstentions. It could not get any closer, but officially this will be recorded as a "no" vote by the Presbytery of the James regarding the amendment. (A majority vote is required to affirm the amendment and a tie vote falls short of a majority.)

From my perspective, I am grateful that this was the outcome of the vote. However, like many others who are concerned about the possibility of our denomination changing its ordination standards, this is troubling in that the vote was as close as it was. The natural questions that arise include, what will be the vote in the remaining 172 presbyteries? Likewise, how do we handle the persistent recurrence of attempts to make a similar change to our constitution each time General Assembly meets?

I ask for your continued commitment to pray for our denomination, as well as our church session in these times of uncertainty. Our session has taken a number of important steps over the recent years to communicate with the congregation what is taking place in the denomination and to respond with appropriate actions as the circumstances require. If you have questions about the denomination or any of the past actions of the church related to this issue, you may speak with me or any session member.

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