

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church Breaks Trust with Its Own Denomination

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On June 20, 2006, the 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—or, more precisely, 57% of GA—broke constitutional trust with its own denomination by voting 298-221 to approve the controversial “Recommendation 5” of the *Final Report* of the Peace-Unity-Purity Task Force.

Contrary to longstanding practice in the PCUSA, approval of this recommendation will now allow individual ordaining and installing bodies—regional presbyteries for ministers and local church sessions for elders and deacons—to decide for themselves which ordination “requirements” are “essential” and which are nonessential, thereby posing no necessary barrier to ordination. It amounts to *de facto* local option, or local license, on ordination standards. In committee and in the plenary Rec. 5 was amended slightly to say that ordination and installation decisions could be reviewed by higher governing bodies to see if they “comply with the constitution of the PCUSA.” Nevertheless, it is very doubtful that this amendment will significantly inhibit local license on ordination since, as we shall see in a moment, the Task Force’s own rationale for Rec. 5 cites a particularly overt act of noncompliance with respect to an explicit provision of the *Book of Order* as within the bounds of acceptability.

This is an unusual development for a denomination that has always prided itself on its national “connectionalism.” In effect, so far as ordination requirements are concerned, this new development converts the connectionalism of the PCUSA into congregationalism, a loose affiliation of basically autonomous local churches.

The reason for this polity about-face is the issue of homosexual practice. Recommendation 5 was aimed particularly against a provision in the *Book of Order* (the polity half of the *Constitution* of the PCUSA) known as G-6.0106b, which prohibits the ordination and/or installation of officers of the church engaged in unrepentant sexual relations outside “the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman.” In its rationale for Rec. 5, the Task Force cited G-6.0106b as its *only* specific example of an explicit provision of the *Book of Order* that could be deemed nonessential by ordaining/installing bodies.

The GA broke trust with its own denomination in two ways.

First, the GA accepted the Task Force’s convoluted rationale that this radical change of denominational polity could be achieved merely through an “authoritative interpretation” of the *Book of Order* rather than through a constitutional amendment.

The former requires only a majority vote of the General Assembly (which meets once every two years). The latter is far more difficult to achieve because it requires, in addition, approval by a majority of the presbyteries. Both in 1997-98 and 2001-2002 supporters of homosexual unions attempted to remove or radically modify G-6.0106b through constitutional amendment. Both efforts succeeded at the General Assembly level, by increasingly large margins. But both failed at the presbytery level, also by increasingly large margins.

The 2001-2002 attempt is especially noteworthy. It began with a 2001 overture from the Baltimore Presbytery that looks remarkably like the current Rec. 5. The overture petitioned the General Assembly to declare, by “authoritative interpretation,” that G-6.0106b was not an essential of Reformed faith and polity and give ordaining/installing bodies the latitude not to require compliance with G-6.0106b. However, the 2001 Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) advised that “the method of revoking portions of the *Book of Order* is by the amendment process” and not “by an act of the General Assembly alone.” This advice was consistent with *all* decisions rendered over previous 25 years or more by the Presbyterian high court (the GA Permanent Judicial Commission), the General Assembly, and even the ACC. (For this and the next paragraph see James Tony and Gordon Fish, “ACC Advice on PUP: Omissions, Misrepresentations, and Contradictions,” especially parts 4, 6, 7, at <http://www.presbycoalition.org/pupadvice1.htm>.)

Consequently, the 2001 General Assembly, by a nearly two-thirds margin, sent an *amendment* to the presbyteries to remove G-6.0106b and add a line to G-6.0106a that would give each ordaining body the right to determine which ordination requirements were essential. However, nearly three-quarters of the presbyteries rejected the proposed amendment. The result gave powerful testimony to the fact that the 500 or so commissioners that voted at General Assemblies were no longer representative of the denomination as a whole, at least as regards sexuality issues.

Based on that experience, the PUP Task Force and a sympathetic 2006 General Assembly knew that it could never get the proposal of local determination passed by a constitutional amendment. So it followed the route of the 2001 Baltimore Presbytery in putting forward an “authoritative interpretation.” This time it had the help of the ACC, which reversed all its earlier opinions to declare that local ordination license was now “within the power of the General Assembly [alone] to approve if it chooses.”

At every step of the way in committee and plenary sessions of the 2006 General Assembly, supporters of the Task Force proposal steadfastly refused to refer the matter to the presbyteries for further discernment. They succeeded in ramming through GA an amendment to the *Book of Order* in the guise of an “authoritative interpretation” that needed no ratification by the presbyteries. In so doing, they did an end-run around the constitutional right of the plurality of presbyteries to set compulsory ordination standards, taking away the power of the presbyteries without their consent and eliminating an important check-and-balance in Presbyterian polity. That amounts to a breach of constitutional trust. A determined

minority of the PCUSA has imposed its will on the overwhelming majority of PCUSA members.

A second and even more insidious way in which the 217th General Assembly has broken trust with its own denomination is by twisting words in the *Book of Order* to mean what in context they could never mean to reasonable persons acting reasonably.

I am a professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. If I were to tell a class, “There will be a major exam in four weeks,” and then give an additional, unannounced major exam three days later, I would break trust with the class. I would do so by interpreting words to mean what, in context, they do not normally mean to reasonable persons. The very act of announcing a future exam creates the common supposition that there will be no second, intervening exam. It would be wholly inappropriate to say in my defense, “But I never explicitly said that I *wouldn’t* give an exam in three days.”

Similarly, G-6.0106b makes a point of explicitly *singling out* from amongst “the historic confessional standards of the church” one that is particularly obligatory for “those who are called to office in the church”; namely, “the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness.” This singling out creates an implicit linguistic contract with its readers that does not require explicit use of the word “essential.” **How can an ordination requirement in the Book of the Order that is specifically singled out for obedience from amongst all other confessional standards be construed reasonably by an ordaining or installing body as nonessential?**

Such a construal would make nonsensical the act of singling out a standard for obedience. *Why make a point of singling out a standard if not to insist that this standard, at least, must be observed as an essential of ordained office?* Moreover, Scripture treats homosexual practice as a violation whose severity is on the order of, or worse than, a man having consensual sexual relations with his mother. This assessment has also been the historic view of the church over two millennia. Contrary to what the PUP Task Force *Final Report* says, the requirement that officers of the church refrain from serial, unrepentant acts of adultery, fornication, incest, and same-sex intercourse has never been merely “aspirational.” Furthermore, in the debates of 1996-97, 1997-98, and 2001-2002 supporters and opponents of G-6.0106b alike recognized that G-6.0106b set a compulsory national ordination requirement. So the literary and historical context for the ordination requirement cited in the second sentence of G-6.0106b makes clear that the requirement is to be understood as essential. *Even if the Task Force’s distinction between an ordination “requirement” and an ordination “essential” were credible, surely the language of G-6.0106b and its historical context would establish that this requirement, at least, is an essential ordination standard.*

It is not necessary in such a context to use the explicit word “essential” to communicate the absolutely mandatory character of the standard. And yet, against all reason, the Task Force *Final Report* states in its rationale for Rec. 5:

If an ordaining or installing body determines that an officer-elect has departed from G-6.0106b, a manner of life standard. . . . [and judges the departure] not to violate the essentials of Reformed faith and polity, . . . then there is no barrier to ordination. . . .

[T]he ordaining/installing body would make the decision, with the help of the Spirit [!]. (ll. 1222-32)

By the same token, even though the word “essential” is not explicitly used of the **first ordination vow**—“Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?”—it would be an obvious distortion of the *Constitution* for an ordaining or installing body to conclude that this is a nonessential standard for ordination. The fact that it is an ordination *vow*—indeed, the first one—and the significance of the confession of Christ as Lord and Savior both in the New Testament and in the historic faith of the church make clear that this confession is essential for ordination and installation.

Non-compliance with the plain meaning of the Book of Order betrays the common trust. And yet commissioners at this year’s General Assembly repeatedly heard from supporters of Recommendation 5, “*Trust us.*”

The PCUSA has entered a new, postmodernist phase in interpreting the *Book of Order*. *Reasonable people can no longer count on explicit provisions of the Book of Order being reasonably interpreted.* The rules of the game have changed in mid-game to accommodate an unprincipled position. Constitutional trust has been virtually obliterated by the General Assembly’s actions.

This postmodernist phase has even affected the plain meaning of G-6.0106b as regards a prohibition of unrepentant homosexual practice on the part of officers of the church. The 2006 Advisory Committee on the Constitution, for example, has stated that G-6.0106b does not clearly prohibit homosexual practice.

- The ACC argues that “**chastity in singleness**” is unclear. Yet “chastity *in singleness*” as the only alternative to “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman” has historically meant in the church only one thing: abstinence from *all* sexual activity. Jesus himself was quite clear that sexual relations must be confined to marriage between a man and a woman (Matthew 19). According to Jesus, even “born eunuchs,” who in Jesus’ day probably included men with an exclusive sexual attraction for men, were subject to this prerequisite (19:10-12).
- The ACC also claims that the phrase “**any practice that the confessions call sin**” is too ambiguous. Yet surely the immediately preceding sentence makes clear that the phrase *minimally* includes sexual relations outside of marriage.
- Finally, the ACC makes the astounding claim that a person cannot be charged with “**refusing to repent**” if he or she does not believe the behavior in question to be sinful. But it is precisely to such a person that a call to repentance is most needed. Christ’s call to repentance is both universal and specific and in no way depends on the concurrence of offenders for its validity. Had the apostle Paul operated with the ACC’s view of repentance he could never have called to repentance the Christian man who was in a sexual relationship with his stepmother (1 Corinthians 5; compare 2 Corinthians 7:9-10; 12:21).

When G-6.0106b was put in the *Book of Order* in 1996-97 and constitutional attempts were made to remove it in 1997-98 and 2001-2002, both supporters and opponents knew, and acted as if they believed, that G-6.0106b prohibited unrepentant homosexual practice on the part of officers. In rejecting the Minority Report on Item 04-02, which would have clarified this already obvious point for the hardcore deniers, this year's GA set the stage for the 2008 General Assembly to construe, by mere "authoritative interpretation," "chastity in singleness" in G-6.0106b to include committed homosexual unions. This, along with a GA rejection of the 1978 "Definitive Guidance" on homosexuality in 2008, would effectively eliminate even a constitutional "standard" (let alone "essential") against homosexual practice—all without submitting anything to the presbyteries for national approval.

In breaking constitutional trust—both in (1) making constitutional changes that bypass the amendment process and (2) construing the language of G-6.0106b to mean what no reasonable person acting reasonably would understand it to mean—the 217th General Assembly may have done irreparable damage to the unity of the denomination. It may have precipitated a constitutional crisis. *Whether the denomination will stay together now depends in large measure on the high court of the PCUSA, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission.* If the GAPJC, in response to soon-to-come blatant ordinations of multiple, practicing homosexual persons, does not interpret the amendments to Rec. 5 regarding compliance with the *Constitution* to mean that such persons cannot be ordained, then a serious fracture of the denomination will be difficult to stop. The call to mutual trust rings hollow when it issues from the mouths of persons who have broken that trust through constitutional misdeeds.

As a final word, it may be helpful to note the fine line between tragedy and comedy in all this; that is, the **three instances of irony in the 2006 GA's decision.**

- There is the irony **regarding trust**, already mentioned. Supporters of Rec. 5 have browbeaten non-supporters with the charge that the latter are not exercising trust. This browbeating has occurred precisely at the moment when the former have breached constitutional trust by bypassing the amendment process and twisting the language of the *Book of Order* to mean what it clearly does not. I "trust" supporters of homosexual unions to be in active non-compliance with G-6.0106b because that is exactly what the rationale of the Task Force's *Final Report* permits them to do.
- There is the irony **regarding women's ordination**. This year's General Assembly celebrated the 50th anniversary of women as ministers of Word and Sacrament by, in effect, calling compulsory national compliance with women's ordination a mistake. For the unintended effect of Rec. 5 is to eliminate *any* compulsory national standards for ordination, including a non-discrimination standard with respect to women. Now, to be sure, some supporters of Rec. 5 are willing to call such a standard a mistake, though it seems they do so only in view of the fact that women's ordination is no longer significantly threatened in the PCUSA. Opponents of women's ordination were long ago driven out. If women's ordination were today a matter seriously hanging in the balance, it is inconceivable that Rec. 5 would have been approved by the General Assembly. This means, in turn, that advocacy for Rec. 5 is basically an

unprincipled position since it adopts a principle of local license in ordination standards only when circumstances do not threaten a cherished national mandate. To adopt a principle only when it serves one's ideological interests and to eschew it when it does not is to arrive at an unprincipled stance. Let it be said, too, that the principle underlying Rec. 5 is patently absurd. For few would seriously argue that there should be absolutely no nationally mandated prerequisites for ordination, such as self-professed Christian faith (it's probably not a good idea to ordain atheists) or basic minimal ethical standards (e.g., it's probably not a good idea to ordain serial killers).

- There is the irony **regarding unity**. The biggest claim by proponents of Rec. 5 has been that it will bring unity. And yet (1) we were told at GA that projected membership losses next year for the PCUSA will be a high of 85,000, undoubtedly in large measure because of actions taken at the 2006 GA. Moreover, (2) 43% of the commissioners at this year's GA opposed Rec. 5—a very high number for a legislative body that has consistently been left-of-center on sexuality issues in relation to the PCUSA as a whole. In addition, (3) Rec. 5 will not stop conflict at the national level over the sexuality issue. In 2008 such conflict will only intensify. Everyone knows, or ought to be able to figure out, that pro-homosex advocacy groups do not view approval of Rec. 5 as a terminus or stable endpoint for the church but rather as a transitional stage (compare the websites for the Covenant Network and “More Light” Presbyterians for their commentary on the passage of Rec. 5). Even some members of the Task Force who affirm homosexual unions have stated publicly that, while they could not get everything they want at the present time, what they did get (Rec. 5) will lead ultimately to getting everything they want: unrestricted acceptance for candidates in “committed” homosexual unions. Indeed, Rec. 5 will hasten that day by officially validating widespread and blatant noncompliance with G-6.0106b on the constitutionally and scripturally false premise that the sexual standard prescribed in G-6.0106b is nonessential.

Along with the conflict increasing at the national level, (4) the approval of Rec. 5 will extend that conflict to every session and every presbytery in the country on the local and regional levels. Every ordaining and installing body will now have to fight it out over whether practicing homosexual persons will be accepted for ordination. American history buffs may think of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in pre-Civil War America—an act that took what had hitherto been treated as a *nationally* decided policy on the extension of slavery and made it into a *state* decided policy. Although advocates of the Kansas-Nebraska Act touted it as a measure that would reduce national discord, the actual effect was the exact opposite. It brought the national conflict down the state level and increased overall conflict measurably. Probably no act leading up to the Civil War was a greater catalyst for national conflict. The 2006 GA's decision will have a similar effect (minus the bloodshed, of course). On top of all these things, (5) Rec. 5 will lead to the problem that the ordination of some will not be accepted by all presbyteries. What will happen when homosexually active officers in one presbytery or session move to a presbytery or session where their ordination is not accepted? Certainly this will heighten conflict and increase tensions, especially given the fact that Rec. 5d of the Task Force *Final Report* states that “all

parties should endeavor to outdo one another in honoring one another's decisions, according the presumption of wisdom to ordaining/installing bodies." How can a presbytery or session that has determined homosexual practice is strongly inconsistent with Scripture, the confessions, and the *Constitution* of the PCUSA "honor" and "accord the presumption of wisdom" to the ordination of practicing, unrepentant homosexual persons? Finally, (6) how can unity be fostered by a GA decision that creates general alienation around the denomination by the circumvention of the amendment process and of the plain meaning both of the *Constitution* and, worse, of Scripture as regards homosexual practice? Ironically and tragically, what was passed largely on the supposition that it would significantly increase the unity of the church will have the exact opposite effect: *GA's approval of Rec. 5 will bring significantly greater disunity in the PCUSA, possibly to the point of schism.*

Faithful Presbyterians everywhere should call on the GAPJC (the high court) and all the presbyteries to restore trust to the PCUSA by turning aside from postmodernist twisting of language in the *Book of Order* and letting words mean what reasonable people reasonably infer them to mean. Only then can we begin the long, hard work of restoring constitutional trust in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.

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