

Response by the Pittsburgh Presbytery Overture Advocate to the ACC's comment on Item 06-03: On Amending G-6.0108b to Safeguard the Amendment Process

The Pittsburgh Presbytery Overture Advocate for Item 06-03 recommends that the advice given by the Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) to disapprove Item 06-03 be disregarded, since the advice is based on multiple misrepresentations.

Rationale

1. The ACC misrepresents the PUP Task Force's own view of Recommendation 5. The ACC claims that “the premise of this overture [Item 06-03]. . . is incorrect”; namely, that “the task force recommendation treats G-6.0106b as nonessential.” Yet the Task Force itself states: “If an ordaining or installing body determines that an officer-elect has departed from G-6.0106b. . . [and judges the departure] not to violate the essentials of Reformed faith and polity . . . then there is no barrier to ordination” (ll. 1222-29). This clearly enables any ordaining/installing body to treat the sexuality requirement in G-6.0106b as nonessential.

2. The ACC both misrepresents and ignores the wording of the Pittsburgh Overture.

(a) The ACC misrepresents the Pittsburgh Overture by portraying it as being at odds with previous decisions of the highest governing bodies of the PCUSA. In fact, it is the Task Force's proposed “authoritative interpretation” and the ACC's support for it that are at odds with such decisions. The Pittsburgh Overture merely *preserves* the right of a plurality of presbyteries to set *binding* or *compulsory* national ordination standards or requirements through amendment to the *Book of Order*. The Task Force's proposal would take away this right by declaring that only individual sessions and presbyteries have the right to determine which ordination requirements are compulsory—including requirements regarding sexual behavior of any sort, women's ordination, and confession of Christ as Savior and Lord.

In disapproving of the Pittsburgh Overture, the ACC is disapproving of *all* past national rulings and actions pertaining to *mandatory* practices in the *Book of Order*, including the 1974 *Maxwell* case repudiating individual scruples against women's ordination. The ACC is also tacitly rebuking the 2000 Londonderry case of the GAPJC which ruled that ordaining homosexually active persons would be an act of *non-compliance* with respect to G-6.0106b, which would “exceed the constitutional bounds of freedom of conscience” allowed by G-6.0108 and “disregard . . . part of the *Constitution*.” The ACC is in direct conflict with this decision when it criticizes Item 06-03 for “assum[ing] that [G-6.0106b] contains an unambiguous standard that the task force report seeks to circumvent.”

(b) The ACC ignores key wording in the Pittsburgh Overture. The latter proposes that a sentence be added to G-6.0108b declaring that an ordination/installation standard for officers in *Book of Order* be treated as an “essential” if it is (1) “singled out from amongst other confessional standards,” (2) “explicitly labeled a requirement,” or (3) “associated with mandatory practice by the use of ‘shall’ language.” The ACC focuses exclusively on (3) and ignores (1) and (2). Since the second sentence of G-6.0106b incorporates *both* (1) and (2) into its prohibition of sexual relations for officers outside “the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman,” it is clear that the overture would indeed achieve the intent of making this prohibition binding, irrespective of the ACC's argument about “shall” (3).

3. The ACC misrepresents the sexuality requirement in G-6.0106b by not reading contextually. The ACC alleges that when the third and last sentence of G-6.0106b states, “Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin *shall not* be ordained” it does not specify *which* practices “the confessions call sin.” The ACC then claims that the only way for the assembly to “accomplish the intent set forth in the rationale of these overtures” (the Pittsburgh Overture and similar overtures) would be to specify “a list of practices that would preclude ordination or installation.”

The ACC is incorrect in asserting that G-6.0106b does not specify what the phrase “practices that the confessions call sin” would *minimally include*. The immediately preceding sentence in G-6.0106b establishes all unrepentant sexual relations outside “the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman” to be a particular instance of “refusing to repent of . . . practice[s] which the confessions call sin.” It is contradictory for the ACC to advise that the overture’s intent could be met only by “defining as specifically as possible the practices that the confessions call sin” when the ACC ignores one such specification already in G-6.0106b.

4. The ACC misrepresents Scripture’s and the confessions’ call to repentance. The most egregious of the ACC’s errors, which would destroy classical Christian ethics at its root, is its insinuation that the church cannot call officers to repent of practices they do not believe to be sin. The ACC starts with the tautologous assertion that “a person can only repent of conduct he or she genuinely believes to be sinful.” It then infers that persons who believe their homosexual behavior to be good cannot be charged with “refusing to repent” since it is not willful. Such reasoning, which parrots an argument in a Covenant Network paper (Moffett, Nave, Oddleifson, “Interpreting *Book of Order* §G-6.0106b,” 2003, p. 8), would make G-6.0106b non-applicable to self-avowed homosexual activity. It is wrong on two counts.

(a) Christ’s and his church’s *call* to repentance is *never* contingent upon offenders first concurring with the verdict that their behavior is sinful. The verdict acquires validity from Christ and his apostolic witness in Scripture, to which the corporate body of the church bears witness through its confessions. It needs no validation from offending individuals. That this is so is obvious from the fact that the call to repentance is both universal and specific, as is the call to believe the gospel (e.g., Mark 1:4, 15; 6:12; Matt 11:20-21; 12:41; Luke 13:3-5; 17:3-4; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:19-23; 17:30; Rom 2:4; 2 Cor 7:9-10; 12:21; Heb 6:1-6; 2 Pet 3:9). To think otherwise is to arrive at the absurd ethical position that the church has no right to call *anyone* to repentance who does not acknowledge his or her behavior to be sinful.

(b) Willfulness does play a part in a person’s decision to accept or reject the verdict of Scripture and the confessions on one’s behavior. While the mere experience of an impulse is usually not willful, an individual’s moral assessment of that impulse does contain an element of willfulness. This is true even when it involves self-deception arising from a desire to gratify the impulse (cf. Rom 1:18-32; 1 Cor 5; 6:9; Eph 4:17-24). Can officers or candidates for office who persist in self-affirming adultery, fornication, polyamory, or pedophilia rightly dodge the “refusing to repent” clause of G-6.0106b on the grounds that they believe such behavior to be within God’s will? Accept the ACC’s radical logic and your answer is “yes.”

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For further information on the above points see the fuller response at www.robagnon.net