

What the Amended PUP Report Actually Means

By Rev. Dr. Clark D. Cowden
Evangelist Presbyterian/Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of San Joaquin

Now that the dust is beginning to settle on the decisions of this last General Assembly meeting, the meaning of the amended PUP report is finally becoming clear. The Office of the General Assembly (OGA) has published a document called Constitutional Musings #11 on Examining Officers. Item six of this paper states that “an individual may declare a scruple concerning the appropriateness of a mandatory provision, but a governing body cannot excuse a mandatory provision, for it lacks the power to set aside a provision of the Constitution. However, a candidate may still be ordained or installed so long as she/he is still willing to comply with the mandatory provisions. This was confirmed by the GA PJC in the Hambrick decision: The Commission recognizes the right of individuals to hold views contrary to the constitution of the PCUSA but, for the sake of order, actions contrary to the Constitution are not sanctioned.” Item seven of this paper states that the new Authoritative Interpretation does not overturn any previous authoritative interpretations.

Most of the uproar around the PUP report centers around how it affects G-6.0106b (one of our ordination standards is the requirement for officers to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness). So, what does this now mean? It means this:

A candidate can declare a scruple versus fidelity and chastity, saying they don't believe it. The governing body cannot excuse compliance with the standard, since it is a mandatory requirement. The candidate must still obey it. The candidate may be ordained and installed, even if they don't believe in the requirement, as long as they are willing to abide and live by the requirement. Governing bodies still do not have the option of ordaining self-affirming, practicing homosexuals, or any others who are actively engaged in sexual behavior outside of a one man/one woman marriage.

The General Assembly did not remove G-6.0106b, but instead re-affirmed it with an 81% vote. The General Assembly did not remove the 1993 Authoritative Interpretation on homosexuality, which reiterated the 1978 prohibition of ordaining sexually active gay persons, but instead voted to send it out to the presbyteries for study and discussion. Therefore, these continue to be mandatory requirements that all elders, deacons, and pastors must agree to live by. The approval of the amended PUP report does not change any of this, and does not give governing bodies “wiggle room” to allow disobedience of the requirements.

This being the case, we are left with two key items: a perception problem and an implementation issue. The perception problem is that many believe our ordination standards have changed, or that presbyteries now have local option or local license to ordain people who refuse to comply with these requirements. That is not true. People can disagree with our ordination standards, but no presbytery can give permission to defy and disobey them. Even if a presbytery believes the requirements are not essential, the candidate must still comply. We have a lot of work to do to correct the misunderstandings and misperceptions that exist in our denomination. We must communicate clearly, repeatedly, and repetitiously, so that people really understand that we have not permitted local disobedience.

Secondly, we have an implementation issue. Some people do not trust our system to make the rules work. There have been instances in our past where presbyteries or Permanent Judicial Commissions (PJC's) have not ruled according to the Constitution, or have dismissed charges on minor procedural matters, ignoring the weightier matters of substance, permitting defiance of our Constitution. This is not acceptable. In order to begin re-building trust in our church, we must call on every presbytery and every PJC to rule according to the constitution, even if they disagree with it. Our constitution protects dissent and the right to disagree. Our constitution does not allow defiance or disobedience. We cannot sanction, nor can we appear to sanction, actions of disobedience.

If we can tackle these two key areas, our denomination can weather the storm we're in. To paraphrase what Mark Twain once said, the rumors of our death will be exaggerated.