



What Has Changed (And What Hasn't)
Bill Teague, Langhorne Presbyterian Church
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Timeline of PCUSA understanding of ordination standards

1970: We reaffirm our adherence to the moral law of God that the practice of homosexuality is sin.... Also we affirm that any self-righteous attitude of others who would condemn persons who have so sinned is also sin.

1976: The 188th General Assembly (1976) declares again its commitment to this (1970) statement. Therefore, on broad Scriptural and confessional grounds, it appears that it would at the present time be injudicious, if not improper, for a presbytery to ordain to the professional ministry of the gospel a person who is an avowed practicing homosexual.

1978 Authoritative Interpretation: Unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination set forth in Form of Government, 'It is indispensable that, besides possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired, everyone undertaking a particular ministry should have a sense of inner persuasion, be sound in the faith, live according to godliness, have the approval of God's people and the concurring judgment of a lawful judicatory of the Church.'

1996: Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament. (G-6.106.b)

2008: Interpretive statements concerning ordained service of homosexual church members by the 190th General Assembly (1978) of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and the 119th General Assembly (1979) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and all subsequent affirmations thereof, have no further force or effect.

2011: 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). 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. 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). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

The action of the 218th General Assembly (2008) to delete the 1978 and 1979 authoritative interpretations, coupled with the presbyteries' ratification of new language for G-6.0106b, means that now there is no specific prohibition against a session or presbytery ordaining or

installing a person involved in a same-gender relationship. Advisory Opinion #24, Stated Clerk, General Assembly, PCUSA

From *The collapse of the Swearingen Compromise*

Written by Edward Koster, Presbyterian Outlook, September 2007

The 1927 General Assembly allowed the higher criticism of Modernism, but it probably never expected that the Compromise would allow a Presbytery to grant membership to a person who refused to declare one of the fundamental core beliefs of the Christian Church. But this is exactly what happened in 1981, when in the case *Rankin v. National Capital Union Presbytery* the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission cited the report of the Swearingen Commission to say that a higher governing body did not have the power to direct a presbytery whom it could or could not accept into membership, except in extraordinary circumstances. In this case, the National Capital Union Presbytery voted to install Mansfield Kaseman, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, as the pastor of a union UCC/PC(USA) church. When examined by the Presbytery, he refused to affirm a series of statements, including a refusal to state he believed in the divinity of Christ. The Permanent Judicial Commission declared that this refusal was not sufficiently extraordinary to override the decision of the Presbytery.

Not long before the decision on Mr. Kaseman, the General Assembly had declared that a governing body did not have the authority to ordain a person who declared his intent to refuse to carry out an act authorized by the Book of Order. In this 1975 case, *Maxwell v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh*, Walter Kenyon told the Presbytery of Pittsburgh that he would not oppose the ordination of a woman, would work with an ordained woman, and would even permit another to come to his church for the ordination of a woman elder, but he himself would not participate in such an act. He defended himself by citing Scripture. Pittsburgh Presbytery was prohibited from ordaining Mr. Kenyon on the grounds that a presbytery cannot ordain a person who declared he would not comply with the Constitution.

What happened in these two cases spelled doom for the Swearingen Compromise. The *Rankin* GAPJC said the General Assembly could not dictate what a Presbytery must consider essential to ordination, even if there be what many consider heresy; in *Maxwell* the GAPJC declared a presbytery must require a pledge to comply with a provision of the Book of Order. The combined effect of the two cases appeared to lift polity over Scripture and the Confessions.

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Presbytery does not have the power to permit the ordination of Mr. Kenyon, who rejects this part of the polity of our Church. Mr. Kenyon (not the church) must make the judgment whether in good conscience and with his understanding of the Bible, he can accept a constitutional provision adopted by The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. It is not seemly to challenge the right of Mr. Kenyon to his beliefs, but it is the responsibility of our Church to deny ordination to one who has refused to ordain women.

UPCUSA, 1975, p. 254 Maxwell v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh (Rem. Case 1)