

“Presbyterian Blue”

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May 22, 2011 – Presbyterian Heritage Sunday

Colossians 1:15-23

What an extraordinary time to be a Presbyterian! On this Presbyterian Heritage Sunday many Presbyterians are bemoaning the direction of our Presbyterian Church USA. While those who share a negative view of the future of our Church could point to declining membership, many would point to the recent ratification of Amendment 10-A as the primary reason to bemoan our future. But, on the other hand, many are quite excited about the direction of the PCUSA. While they could point to our quick response and presence during disasters, and our emphasis on caring for the least of these, many would point to the recent ratification of Amendment 10-A as the primary reason they are excited about our future. Yes, it is quite an interesting time to be a Presbyterian!

Whether you are one who mourns or applauds the passage of Amendment 10-A, the amendment identifies several fundamental Presbyterian principles which are worth celebrating on this Presbyterian Heritage Sunday. For those who might not be aware, in essence, Amendment 10-A changes the language in our Book of Order concerning the qualifications for the ordination of Elder, Deacon and Minister of Word and Sacrament. The Dayton Daily News described the change in a headline last Saturday as, “*Area Presbyterians now allowed to ordain gays; Some cheer change in church’s stance, others grieve over ‘rejection of Christian teaching.’*” (DDN, May 14, 2011, p. D7) Even though the amendment is about ordination standards in general, the DDN headline captured what most think of when Amendment 10-A is mentioned.....the ordination of gays and lesbians.

We have 173 presbyteries in our PCUSA denomination and it takes a majority vote of these presbyteries to change the Book of Order. Within our denomination and in our church, many cheered and many grieved when the Twin Cities presbytery cast the majority vote on May 10th to ratify this amendment. *But what and who are these presbyteries?*

We are in the Presbytery of the Miami Valley which takes in the geographical area of southwest Ohio, excluding Cincinnati. We have 62 churches in our Presbytery, Fairmont being one of them. The Presbytery of the Miami Valley meets for four regular meetings each year.

Voting members are elders from each local church and pastor members of the local presbytery. Some might think of the Presbytery as a hierarchical bureaucracy disconnected from the grass roots of the local church. Not true! *How many of you have been to a Presbytery meeting? How many of you have voted in a Presbytery meeting?* The Presbytery is *us* and on February 12th the Presbytery of the Miami Valley met at Mt. Pleasant Retirement Village and voted 58-36 in favor of Amendment 10-A. Those voting from our church were: Ed Schwinn, Jim Runkle, Rev. Denise Ingram and I.

On this *Presbyterian Heritage Sunday* we celebrate the Presbyterian principle that all who voted on Amendment 10-A, including the four of us from Fairmont, were free to vote our conscience. Let me make this as clear as I possibly can...voting elders and pastors, whether voting at Session meetings, Presbytery meetings, the Synod or General Assembly, do not represent any constituency. One of our cherished principles is that elected elders and pastors are not required to vote the way those who elected them would like for them to vote. They are called upon to vote how they believe God is leading them to vote. In that way, you could say, they are representing God. This is one of our basic Historic Principles of Church Order that we hold dear at every level of church government. It comes from the Book of Order, ***“God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men....”*** (G-1.0301a) Ordinary, grass roots Presbyterians like Ed, Jim, Denise and I voted throughout our denomination and the majority of our denomination’s 173 Presbyteries voted to ratify Amendment 10-A.

In your bulletin you will find a letter from John Mauntler, moderator of our Presbytery and an elder at the Troy Presbyterian Church, and Marge Morgan chair of our Presbytery Council and an elder at Sugar Creek Presbyterian Church. They quote the old and the new:

“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.”

This paragraph has now been replaced in our constitution. Question: *When do you think this paragraph became a part of our Book of Order?* The answer may surprise you. This section, known as the “*fidelity and chastity amendment*” **G-6.0106b**, was ratified by a majority of our presbyteries in **1997**. Granted the issue of ordaining gays and lesbians has been hotly debated since the 1970s but the insistence that those being ordained must be in “*the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness*” was not included in our Book of Order until very recently....1997. The Presbyterian Church for two and a half centuries, until 1997, had resisted the temptation to legislate specific behavioral standards for ordination. With Amendment 10-A our denomination has returned to our historic roots.

Please look at Amendment 10-A which will replace **G-6.0106b**:

“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 guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.”

This amendment, rather than dictating behavioral standards for ordination, makes it clear that our Session has the authority to examine our candidates on the basis of calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for fulfilling the responsibilities of the office. Our Session is also to be guided in its examination by the constitutional questions for ordination and by Scripture and the confessions. If our Session determined that a standard for ordination was to be faithful in “*marriage between a man and woman or chastity in singleness*” they have the right to insist on such behavior. But the point is.....it’s the ***local Session’s determination*** based on calling, gifts, preparation, suitability, constitutional questions, scripture and our confessions. Not forced from above! The same is true for ordaining a pastor.....the ***local Presbytery determines*** a candidate’s suitability for ordination. This is classic, historic Presbyterianism. (*info in lobbies*)

I know some are concerned that the Presbytery will force the local congregation to ordain homosexuals and/or call a gay or lesbian person as pastor. The local church is now free to ordain whoever they would like and call whoever they would like including gay and lesbian individuals. Fairmont will not be forced one way or the other. It's Fairmont's decision to ordain and call whomever you choose. Amendment 10-A does not force the Session to ordain gay elders and/or deacons nor does it force congregations to call a gay pastor. The decision rightfully belongs with the people.

Another aspect of Amendment 10-A I appreciate is found in the first sentence. *“Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life.”* This is vintage Presbyterianism. The very first principle set forth in our Book of Order is *“God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body.”* (G-1.0100a) I am glad Amendment 10-A reaffirms this eternal principle which Paul also set forth in Colossians 1:15-23. I invite you to read with me:

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. ²¹And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²²he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— ²³provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

While we might differ on biblical interpretation, ordination standards, worship practices, what it means to do things decently and in order, and many other aspects of the church's life....the one thing all Presbyterians agree upon is that Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God," "the Head of the body, the church," that Jesus is to be lord of all of life and is to have "first place in everything." Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior....he is the One who holds us together and continues to reconcile us in our many differences. Christ's reconciling work is an ongoing work that will ultimately be completed on the other side of the grave.

Being a Presbyterian is not always easy. We have our disagreements and differences but we keep coming back to the Center....the One who died for us and through his death and resurrection power continues to complete his work of reconciliation. That reconciliation is not yet final but one day it will be complete. Until that day our fundamental calling is to "***submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life.***" Jesus is the reason for our being!

My wife, Connie, has a vanity license tag.... LUV BLU. She has had many come up to her and say, "*you must be a Michigan fan*" or "*you must be a Kentucky fan.*"

But the truth is that when Connie decided on LUV BLU for her tag she didn't think of Michigan, Kentucky or any other team. She was simply thinking of her love for the color blue and how special her blue Toyota Corolla is to her.

While we have many different beliefs, opinions and thoughts on very important matters including ordination standards, on this Presbyterian Heritage Sunday, let us reaffirm our unifying commitment to the One who is Lord and Savior of us all. His name is Jesus Christ who said of himself, "*I am the way, the truth and the life.*" From the days of John Calvin, Presbyterians have bowed to Jesus as *our* way, *our* truth and *our* life. May we continue to honor our Presbyterian heritage as, together, we sort out the implications of Amendment 10-A in the unity of Jesus Christ! To God be the glory!

Amen