

Sierra Vista

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Pastoral Letter to the Members and Friends of Sierra Vista Presbyterian Church

You may have heard that on Tuesday, May 10th, the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted to change the ordination standards for the church. The change will take effect July 11, 2011. We want to assure you that this change will not bring any changes to Sierra Vista. The following is offered to help you understand what these changes will mean.

WHAT IS BEING CHANGED?

The current text of G-6.0106b in our Book of Order reads:

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life of 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 (W-4.9001), 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.

The amendment that will replace G-6.0106b reads:

Standards for ordained service reflect the Church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Christ in all aspects of life (G.1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240; 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 most obvious change from our current standards is that the proposed language eliminates reference to sexual behavior as an explicit standard for ordained office in the church. Since 1997, this language has been in effect. Prior to 1997, the Book of Order contained no explicit language addressing sexuality or sexual practice as part of the standards for ordination or installation.

WHAT DOES THIS CHANGE MEAN?

Specifically, it reaffirms the responsibility of sessions and Presbyteries for determining "fitness" for ordained office (elders, deacons and pastors). There will now be no constitutionally explicit standard about sexual ethics and each candidate for office will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Our intention is that nothing will change at Sierra Vista Presbyterian Church. We have had and will continue to uphold a clear consistent teaching that sexual relationships are only affirmed within committed marriages between a man and woman. We have long discerned that this standard is among the many that make up a “life worthy of the gospel” that is expected of church leaders. Our presbytery (San Joaquin Presbytery) has also affirmed this standard by its voting record.

At the same time, other churches and other presbyteries may interpret Scripture with greater latitude for ethical behavior than we might. While we find this regrettable and in error, it is almost certain that some churches and presbyteries will act on their conviction that gay persons in committed relationships should be affirmed for ordained office.

AS A RESULT, OUR CHURCH CAN AFFIRM THE FOLLOWING:

We affirm there is nothing in this new amendment that compromises our convictions. We remain committed to being faithful to our Lord and His Word and we will humbly endeavor to be so in all ways.

We affirm that there is nothing in this new amendment that requires or compels Sierra Vista to change our ordination standards for officers. As such, we will not change our standards for ordination. Indeed, even with this change no one can compel us to call or ordain any person to ordained office.

We understand that others will make decisions that we are uncomfortable with, but we are committed to maintaining our theological, Biblical and ethical convictions and upholding the unity of the Church at the same time. We will remain dedicated to our witness as a church that is committed to fidelity to the Scripture and to the mission of Jesus Christ to make disciples, to proclaim and demonstrate the good news of the Kingdom of God, and to be an authentic Christian community.

ANNOUNCEMENT

On Wednesday, May 18 from 6:00 - 7:00 p.m. there will be a meeting (in the sanctuary) to answer any questions and to discuss any concerns this new amendment might bring. We invite you to come. The meeting will be followed at 7:00 p.m. by a Solemn Assembly. This is a time of prayer. We invite you to come to this prayer meeting and join us in praying for our church and denomination.

If you have immediate concerns please contact any elder or one of our pastors.

The Session (elders) of Sierra Vista is prayerfully studying this issue. We are working on what might be a faithful, compassionate and reasoned response. We covet your prayers and suggestions. The Session will keep you informed of any of their decisions regarding this amendment.

God bless you!

Rick Lemberg

Paul De Pledge