

Covenant of Dissent to Amendment B

Adopted by the Session of Stone Church of Willow Glen (PCUSA)
February 1998

With the enactment of G-6.0106b – popularly known as Amendment B, or the Fidelity and Chastity Amendment to the *Book of Order*, the Session of The Stone Church of Willow Glen, Presbyterian Church (USA) finds itself in spiritual pain over the conflicts that exist between the provisions of this amendment¹ and:

- Our supreme obligation to obey Jesus Christ.
- Our understanding of Scripture.
- Our guidance by the *Book of Confessions*.
- Our compliance with the *Book of Order*.

Therefore, with great reluctance we must broach our dissent to this action of our denomination. And we strongly support the proposed G-6.0106b approved by the 1997 General Assembly,² which resolves these problems.

As Galileo found after observing the solar system through the telescope, we are compelled to reconcile our beliefs with the observable reality of the world that God has created.³ Our faith that Jesus calls us to dissent from the newly enacted amendment comes from our personal witness to the work done in his name and to his glory by those whom this amendment bans from church offices, in particular the gay and lesbian Presbyterians against whom it is targeted.⁴ They have worshipped with us in the pews. They have made music in the choir. They have spoken to us from the pulpit. They have taught and ministered to us and to our children. They have contributed their spiritual gifts and their worldly resources to the mission of Christ's church. They have patched the mortar, tended the flowers and cleaned the toilets of God's house. And we confidently believe they have been serving the Lord in these and other ways since the founding of the church, before it began to be acceptable for their sexuality to be known. They have served well and faithfully in the offices from which they are now excluded. They are God's beloved children, different from others in distinctions people alone choose to recognize.⁵

We believe the enacted amendment is a grave violation of the central lesson of Jesus' teaching and his example on earth: To love, as he did, all women and men, regardless of their individual human conditions, including social, political and legal outcasts, which in his day included lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes. There is no instance in scripture where Jesus turned aside anyone who came to him in faithfulness. The Presbyterian Church, following his example, requires only a profession of faith for membership (G-5.0101a).⁶ This is the Christ we must obey.

We believe the enacted amendment reverses the Reformed tradition understanding of the place of the confessions relative to Christ and Scripture, that is: Christ first, Scripture second, and Confessions third. The amendment makes adherence to specific portions of

the confessions an absolute, over-riding requirement for ordination and installation. This contradicts our promise at ordination to be "in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions" (G- 14.0207d for deacons and elders and G- 14.0405b4 for ministers⁷). The enacted amendment makes conformity with the confessions a primary requirement for ordination, independent of our understanding of Christ as revealed in Scripture. This contradicts the understanding of the Reformed faith, expressed in the Book of Order that: "... these confessional statements are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him" (G-2.0200). The enacted amendment equates obedience to the confessions with obedience to Christ. This contradicts the understanding of the Reformed faith, expressed in the Book of Order that: "... the Word confessed is always judged by the living Word, Jesus Christ, as attested in Scripture" (W-2.2009).

We believe the enacted amendment contradicts both the Reformed Tradition understanding of the confessions and the authority the confessions accord themselves. The confessions "are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both," according to the Westminster Confession of Faith (C-6.1753).⁸ The enacted amendment disqualifies virtually all members from office for failure to live up to numerous confessional standards, many of which are properly disregarded as inapplicable in our place and time. The enacted amendment requires vows of chastity, which are forbidden by the Westminster Confession of Faith (C-6.126)⁹ and the Larger Catechism (C-7.249),¹⁰ both of which are contained in the Book of Confessions. The enacted amendment places the confessions on equal footing with obedience to Jesus Christ, even though the confessions yield to him as final authority.¹¹

We believe the enacted amendment usurps the democratic foundation of church government embodied in the Book of Order, which has served the church well since its founding,¹² and places us in an untenable position by requiring compliance with contradictory rules. We cannot comply with the enacted amendment without violating the right of members to elect members of their choosing in G-1.0306.¹³ We cannot comply with the enacted amendment without violating the requirement that we not deny membership to anyone for any" reason not related to profession of faith" in G-5.0103.¹⁴ We cannot comply with the enacted amendment without violating the rights of all members "to vote and hold office" in G-5.0202.¹⁵ We cannot comply with the enacted amendment without violating the principle that church government is representative and the "inalienable" right of God's people to elect their officers in G-6.0107.¹⁶ We cannot comply with the enacted amendment without creating a standard of ordination forbidden in G-6.0102.¹⁷ We cannot comply with the enacted amendment and obey our consciences as required in G-1.0301.¹⁸ We cannot comply with the enacted amendment and fulfill our ordination promise to be "... in obedience only to Jesus Christ" in G-14.0207d and G14.0405b4.¹⁹

The version of G-6.0106b passed by the General Assembly in 1997 and awaiting ratification by the Presbyteries does not require us to discriminate against our fellow Presbyterians. It does not place our obedience to Christ in conflict with Scripture, the

Book of Confessions or the Book of Order. And it does not elevate the authority of the confessions to equal obedience to Christ's will.

Therefore we covenant together to:²⁰

- Reaffirm our action in 1989 making all members of Stone Church, regardless of race, ethnic background or sexual orientation, eligible for ordination and installation to church offices.
- Instruct the nominating committee to disregard the provisions of the enacted G-6.0106b.
- Practice and encourage tolerance and respect for those members of Stone Church who dissent from our views and actions.²¹
- Work and pray for the ratification of the proposed new G-6.0106b adopted by the 1997 General Assembly and for the reconciliation of the church.
- Remain in the Presbyterian Church (USA).
- Continue full financial support of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and its per capital apportionment.
- Participate in the disciplinary measures that may be brought against us as a result of this covenant.

¹ In 1996 the 208th General Assembly voted to submit for presbytery approval the following amendment to G-6.0106 of the *Book of Order*. It added a second paragraph, G-6.0106b, reading as follows: "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 of 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." The amendment was approved 97-74 with one abstaining presbytery and took effect at the close of the 209th General Assembly in June.

² The 209th General Assembly voted in June to send a new G-6.0106b to the presbyteries for ratification: "Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture and instructed by the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to demonstrate fidelity and integrity in marriage or singleness, and in all relationships of life. Candidates for ordained office shall acknowledge their own sinfulness, their need for repentance, and their reliance on the grace and mercy of God to fulfill the duties of their office."

³ Citing the Galileo anecdote is a favorite Protestant jab at the Roman Catholic Church for dogged adherence to dogma. Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong used it at Stone Church last fall to argue for understanding and interpreting the Bible beyond a literal context.

⁴ Amendment B does not use the terms "homosexual, gay or lesbian." However, the group that wrote the amendment, the 208th General Assembly Committee on Ordination and Human Sexuality, wrote in its preamble to the amendment: "We have concluded that now is the time to allow the church at the grass roots through its presbyteries to study and decide whether it is God's will to ordain self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons to the office of deacon, elder or minister of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA)."

⁵ Galatians 3:26-28: "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Also, Colossians 3:1 1: "In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!"

⁶ G-5.0101a: "The incarnation of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ gives to the church not only its mission but also its understanding of membership. One becomes an active member of the church through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and acceptance of his Lordship in all of life. Baptism and a public profession of faith in Jesus as Lord are the visible signs of entrance into the active membership of the church."

⁷ G-14.0207d: "Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?" This is an ordination question for deacons and elders. G-14.0405b4: "Will you be a minister of the Word and Sacrament in obedience to Jesus Christ under the authority of Scripture, and continually guided by our confessions?" This is an ordination question for ministers.

⁸ C-6.1753: "All synods or councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both."

⁹ C-6.126: "No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded, or which is not in his own power, and for the performance whereof he hath no promise or ability from God. In which respects, monastical vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience, are so far from being degrees of higher perfection, that they are superstitious and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself." Amendment B would require chastity for anyone but husband and wife. The dissent position is taken from the fourth paragraph of "What's the Background of the 'Fidelity and Chastity Amendment? A Witherspoon Society Background Paper for the 208th General Assembly."

¹⁰ C-7.249: Among the sins forbidden in the Seventh Commandment in the Larger Catechism is: "entangling vows of single life."

¹¹ C-9.03, the preface to the Confession of 1967: "Confessions and declarations are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him. No one type of confession is exclusively valid, no one statement is irreformable. Obedience to Jesus Christ alone identifies the one universal church and supplies the continuity of its tradition. This obedience is the ground of the church's duty and freedom to reform itself in life and doctrine as new occasions, in God's providence, may demand." This language is repeated in G-2.0200. The Rev. Charles L. Rassieur, a clergy commissioner from the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area, wrote a commentary on Amendment B following the 208th General Assembly. He noted Matthew 23:10, "for you have one master, the Christ," and Matthew 6:24, "No one can serve two masters."

¹² The position that the qualifications for ordination were adequately addressed in the *Book of Order* prior to Amendment B is contained in a document called "A Few Words." It was addressed to elders and ministers who voted on the amendment at the presbytery level and was signed by 32 retired synod and presbytery executives of the PCUSA.

¹³ G-1.0306: "... that though the character, qualifications, and authority of Church officers are laid down in the Holy Scriptures, as well as the proper method of their investiture and institution, yet the election of the persons to the exercise of this authority, in any particular society, is in that society."

¹⁴ G-5.0103: "No persons shall be denied membership for cause of race, ethnic origin, worldly condition, or any other reason not related to profession of faith."

¹⁵ G-5.0202: "An active member is entitled to all the rights and privileges of the church, including the right to participate in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, to present children for baptism, to take part in meetings of the congregation, and to vote and hold office."

¹⁶ G-6.0107: "The government of this church is representative, and the right of God's people to elect their officers is inalienable."

¹⁷ G-6.0102: "These ordained officers differ from other members in function only."

¹⁸ G- 1.0301: "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith and worship." This provision in the *Book of Order* is quoted from the Westminster Confession of Faith (C-6.109), a component of the Book of Confessions.

¹⁹ See endnote 7.

²⁰ The covenant portion of the dissent is taken largely from the model proposed by the Rev. Timothy Hart-Andersen at Old Presbyterian Church, San Francisco. The key concepts are that we will disobey Amendment B and subject ourselves to the discipline of the church. This places us within the framework of civil disobedience as practiced by Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Rosa Parks. By challenging the church to discipline us rather than pledging to leave the church, we become part of a group of dissenters that we hope will be so large as to force the denomination to rescind the amendment.

²¹ G-1.0305: "We also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other."