Examining Inquirers and Candidates

The overall preparation for ministry process is a means by which councils of the church (in this case sessions through their endorsements and presbyteries through control of their roll of inquirers and candidates [G-2.0609] and determinations regarding “readiness to begin ordered ministry as a minister of the Word and Sacrament” [G-2.0607]) fulfill their responsibility to “examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry” (G-2.0104b; cf. G-2.0603 and 2.0604). Within that overall process, there will also be specific periods of examination related to being enrolled as an inquirer, advancement to candidacy, and final assessment of the person’s “fitness and readiness” for “examination for ordination, pending a call” to a ministry requiring ordination as a minister of the Word and Sacrament.

Following the presbyteries’ approval in 2011 of G-2.0104b, questions have been raised concerning whether issues regarding a person’s sexual relationships or other aspects of his or her “manner of life” may be considered in determining the outcomes of these examinations of applicants, inquirers, and candidates.

It should be emphasized that to this point there have been no interpretations of G-2.0104b either by the General Assembly or via General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) cases. Consequently, there is no certainty regarding how that constitutional provision will be applied in cases where there is disagreement.

One portion of the advisory opinion on “Ordination Standards and the new Form of Government” looks specifically at the question of when the ordination standards of G-2.0104b may be “used and by whom” (pp. 1-2). That advisory opinion states:

Candidates will have to discern during their candidacy whether they are willing and able to fulfill all the requirements found in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation found in the Directory for Worship (W-[4.0404]).

Ordaining councils will have to discern at the time of examination of the candidate, guided by Scripture and the confessions, whether the candidate is able and willing to fulfill all the requirements found in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation found in the Directory for Worship (W-[4.0404]). This is in addition to the discernment by the ordaining council whether the candidate is called, prepared, and has gifts suitable for the responsibilities of ordered ministry.

The provisions for “final assessment” in G-2.0607 are explicitly identified in G-2.0104b, and so the presbytery or its commission has responsibilities in this area during the period of preparation for ministry. Previous PJC cases have established that with regard to inquirers and candidates presbyteries may defer the time for consideration of the question whether the person can affirm the standards set forth in the ordination questions (W-4.0404) until the point when a call to ministry requiring ordination as a minister of the Word and Sacrament is actually pending. There have also been cases that supported presbyteries’ right not to advance a person to candidacy because it was clear in a presbytery’s judgment the person would not be “eligible” for ordination in the future.

In light of these actions the advisory opinion on “The Call to Ordered Ministry” provides the following guidance to presbyteries (p. 6):

The proper time to determine whether a candidate has expressed a departure from the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity is at the time of the council’s examination of the candidate for ordination, not determination of readiness for examination. However, a presbytery has the responsibility to assess a candidate’s or inquirer’s suitability, fitness and readiness for ordered ministry throughout the preparation for ministry process. Therefore, a presbytery may, for sufficient reasons, remove a candidate or inquirer at any point in the process, as long as the candidate or inquirer has been given the opportunity to be heard on the removal.

Consequently several different courses of action are potentially open to presbyteries and their committees overseeing the preparation process. They may consider whether or not the individual’s “manner of life” would make him or her unsuitable for ordination, or they may defer that decision along with determination of any possible “departure from the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity” to a council of the church that at some future point may consider the individual in relation to a specific call requiring ordination. They may determine that the person is already ineligible for ordination or that in the view of the presbytery or committee there are no hindrances, while also recognizing that another council of the church may reach a different conclusion.

What the committee/presbytery must do is consider “manner of life” issues in the light of the whole person (and not a preset rule applied without consideration of the individual). It
is also appropriate during the preparation period for the committee to consider whether
the person has gifts suitable for ordered ministry within the church broadly and not with
regard to a specific place (since as yet there is no specific call).

How will you be “guided by the Scripture and the confessions in applying
standards to individuals?"

Recognizing the PC(USA) represents a wide diversity of views, what would be
“outside the bounds” for an inquirer or candidate under care of your presbytery?