

COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY
Presbytery of San Francisco
November 10, 2009

Lisa Larges' Statement of Departure from G-6.0106b
and Affirmation of Essentials of Faith and Polity

"The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity. The Church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ. The new reality revealed in Jesus Christ is the new humanity, a new creation, a new beginning for human life in the world: Sin is forgiven. Reconciliation is accomplished. The dividing walls of hostility are torn down. The Church is the body of Christ, both in its corporate life and in the lives of its individual members, and is called to give shape and substance to this truth." G-3.0200 Inclusive

In gratitude for the Church and its particular expression as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for the ways in which it has taught me of the love of God, of the work of salvation in Jesus Christ and of the demands on our lives to love and serve one another and this sweet world; for all that the church has meant in my life, and in hope for all that the church can and must be in a world desperate to know of God's love, grace, and mercy: therefore, out of gratitude, love and hope for the church, I am compelled by my conscience and charged by my faith to firmly, clearly, and in every way declare that the provisions at G-6.0106b are a mar upon the church and a stumbling block to its mission. As a matter of faith, conscience and integrity I can neither actively concur nor passively submit to this provision, and as a candidate for Minister of Word and Sacrament I submit to the Presbytery of San Francisco through its Committee on Ministry this statement of departure.

Insofar as "*The decision as to whether a person has departed from essentials of Reformed faith and polity is made initially by the individual concerned,*"¹ I offer the following rationale which has led me to conclude that:

- a. the standards set forth at G-6.0106b do not express essentials of Reformed faith and polity
- b. further, the standards expressed at G-6.0106b are indeed contrary to essentials of Reformed faith and polity and therefore
- c. to actively concur or passively submit to the standards expressed at G-6.0106b would require that I should elevate a flawed standard above standards of faith and polity which I understand to be essential.

Rationale

1. Jesus Christ alone is the authority to which all other authorities are subordinate. This faith claim is essential to our faith and polity and the joy and substance of our witness. The preliminary principles that head our "Form of Government" assert:

"All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. 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

¹ See at G-6.0108b

And

“In affirming with the earliest Christians that Jesus is Lord, the Church confesses that he is its hope and that the Church, as Christ’s body, is bound to his authority and thus free to live in the lively, joyous reality of the grace of God.” G-1.0100d.

By this essential of our faith and polity, officers in this communion promise to *“...trust in Jesus Christ as Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church.”*² All other vows upheld by officers in this church flow from this first declaration of obedience to Christ.

Yet the provision at G-6.0106b sets a contrary standard: *“Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture ...”* Our tradition upholds the promise that Scripture is the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ, the living Word and author and perfecter of our faith. To lead a life *“in obedience to Scripture”* sets the authority of Scripture above the authority of Christ and returns us to life under the law. This misstatement of our theological understanding of Christ’s preeminence is my primary scruple regarding this provision, and the errors found in the remainder of the section at G-6.0106b arise, I believe, from this initial misconception.

2. The provision further states that *“all who are called to office in the church shall live a life ... in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church.”*

Our Constitution defines the functions of the Confessions at G-2.0100b:

“These statements identify the church as a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions. They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation.”

In the requirement that officers of the church be conformed to the historic Confessional standards of the church, the provision at G-6.0106b misstates the proper use and function of the Confessions. Scripture calls us to be imitators of Christ. To conform our lives to a lesser standard trespasses on both the authority of Christ and Scripture.

The fourth question put to all officers of the church expresses the right ordering of authority within the Reformed tradition: *“Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?”*³

3. The text of G-6.0106b continues by singling out one particular derived standard from the historic confessional standards, namely, *“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.”*

By my conscience, faith and theology I cannot and will not accept the terms of this standard.

- It deliberately and intentionally denies the dignity and lived experience of same gender loving people.

² See at W-4.4003a

³ W-4.4003d

- In so doing it raises one category of persons, heterosexual persons, above all others and thereby makes an idol of heterosexuality.
- Its formulation is based on a certain interpretation of Scripture to the exclusion of other interpretations, which are as sound, held by faithful Christians within our church.⁴
- It imposes a false and impossible choice upon same gender loving persons by not recognizing faithful covenanted relationships between two persons of the same gender.
- It puts the church and its officers in an untenable position by failing to acknowledge the expanded definition of legal marriage as a “*contract between two persons*,” as held at this writing, in the jurisdictions of six U.S. states.
- By elevating this standard above any others it has caused our church to be mired in inappropriate and scandalous inquiries into the sexual acts of persons seeking Ordained office.
- It removes sex from the context of intimacy and covenantal relationship and denies the fullness and richness of committed loving relationships between persons of the same gender.
- It denies the full humanity of lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender persons by focusing solely and exclusively on one part of their lives.
- It distracts the church from seeking a deeper understanding of sexual ethics, so that sexual misconduct by officers of this church continues at an alarming rate.
- It puts upon the door of the church an “*Unwelcome*” sign for all gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons and their families.
- It props up and provides religious cover for acts of violence committed against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons.
- It has caused schism within our church by driving out gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons who cannot fellowship within a church which regards them categorically as inferior.
- It is a scandal to the Gospel and destroys the peace, unity and purity of the church.

In my own life, while I affirm the moral values of fidelity and chastity, I will not and can not claim chastity in singleness unless and until fidelity between two persons of the same gender within a covenantal relationship is recognized.

I will not submit in any way to a reduction of who I am as a Lesbian to language about “*practice*,” nor will I participate in perpetrating such a false and demeaning dichotomy upon any other member of this church.

⁴ “The interpretation of Scripture, we confess, does not belong to any private or public person, nor yet to any Kirk for pre-eminence or precedence, personal or local, which it has above others, but pertains to the Spirit of God by whom the Scriptures were written. When controversy arises about the right understanding of any passage or sentence of Scripture, or for the reformation of any abuse within the Kirk of God, we ought not so much to ask what men have said or done before us, as what the Holy Spirit uniformly speaks within the body of the Scriptures and what Christ Jesus himself did and commanded. ... We dare not receive or admit any interpretation which is contrary to any principle point of our faith, or to any other plain text of the Scripture, or to the rule of love.”
Book of Confessions 3.18

4. The text of G-6.0106b concludes with this mandate: “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.”

It is an essential of Reformed faith that sin is a condition of our being and not a bill of particulars. There is no assertion more foundational to our Reformed understanding of Scripture than that God, who alone knows our hearts, is alone our judge. The examination of one’s conscience and contrition for particular sins arises out of gratitude for God’s astounding and unending grace. While, under the authority of Scripture, we are accountable to one another for guidance and admonition, there is, nonetheless, no test of righteousness that might in any way impinge on the humble, simple, and direct acceptance of the gift of God’s incontrovertible, unsurpassable and all-sufficient grace through Jesus the Christ. This concluding sentence at G-6.0106b reflects an incomplete and misleading formulation of the understanding of sin and repentance within our tradition, and leads back to a kind of “*works righteousness*.”

Conclusion

I affirm with joy the standards as expressed at G-6.0106a and believe them to be a sufficient expression of both the gifts and the requirements for officers of the church.

I can and I will affirm with joy all the questions for ordination found at W-4.4003.

I believe that as a candidate called to serve in this Church as Minister of Word and Sacrament, nothing in my faith or in my manner of life departs from the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.

Finally insofar as “*the decision as to whether a person has departed from essentials of Reformed faith and polity ... ultimately becomes the responsibility of the governing body in which he or she serves*”⁵ I hereby submit this statement and seek with you the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

Lisa Larges, December 2007, Revised, September, 2009

⁵ See at G-6.0108b