

Session's Response to Denominational Change in Ordination Standards

(initial draft 5/17/11, revised 8/4/11)

As was widely reported in secular media outlets, on Tuesday May 10, 2011 the deciding vote was cast to remove from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) constitution a clause requiring that ordained leaders – which includes deacons, elders, and pastors – either be faithful to their spouse within the covenant of marriage or chaste outside of marriage. The pastoral staff and session of East Main strongly oppose this change because we believe it represents a departure from our understanding of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as our authority for faith and practice, and of Jesus as Lord whose will supersedes our own wills as well as the values of our culture.

The media has highlighted that this change clears the way for the ordination of gays and lesbians and who do not see homosexual practice as something of which God in Scripture calls us to repent. We wish to make clear that the concern of East Main's leadership is not motivated by prejudice against those who are gay, lesbian, or bi-sexual. While cultural attitudes toward homosexuality are changing, we grieve that gays and lesbians have long been subject to ridicule and condemnation; and, to our shame, that Christian people have too often contributed to such ungodly attitudes and behaviors. The gospel is clear that each person – regardless of sexual orientation or practice – comes to God as a sinner in need of forgiveness, and that Christ's followers are called to reflect the love God showed for all people in sending Jesus into the world and even to Calvary's Cross. We call upon followers of Christ to repent of sinful attitudes, speech, and actions toward gay and lesbian people, and commit to demonstrating Jesus' costly love.

We would also clarify that the biblical standard of fidelity within the covenant of marriage or chastity in singleness applies equally to those who are heterosexual. Lack of chastity among unmarried heterosexuals, which is far more prevalent among followers of Jesus than active homosexual practice, is also something of which God calls his people to repent. We also recognize that for many unmarried persons the call to chastity does not seem to be good news; however we believe God is not capricious, and thus his word to us is always ultimately a gracious word for his glory and our good.

Again, the reason for our serious concern over this change in ordination standards is because we believe that it sets aside the clear teaching of Scripture regarding sexual ethics; and that it places conformity to culture and our own preferences over devotion to Jesus as Lord of our lives. It is true that some who advocate the removal of this standard seek to base their position in Scripture. But we believe such revisionist readings of the Bible are seriously flawed, and, if followed would tend to nullify the notion that Scripture might speak clearly and with relevance on virtually any subject. In other words, we see the sexual morality issues as symptomatic of the deeper and more serious matters of the Lordship of Jesus and the authority of Scripture, both being foundational to the Church.

We agree with those who point out that the Bible speaks more clearly and comprehensively about other kinds of sin such as gossip, lack of compassion, failing to care for the poor, judgmental attitudes, etc. The difference between these and what our new standard does regarding sexual sin centers on the biblically crucial teaching concerning repentance. Followers of Jesus would not likely argue that the Bible is wrong in calling them to care for the poor, or try to reinterpret Scripture in ways that justify greed, or an unforgiving heart. When we fail to follow our Lord on these matters we rightly feel guilty and hopefully repent, which means turning from such behavior and attitudes. Thus our position is not that sexual sins are inherently more sinful than other sins. But to claim, as the new standard does in removing clear language upholding biblical sexual morality, that sex outside the bonds of marriage is not

sin that needs to be repented of, is to declare that the Bible is no longer our standard for discerning God's will, and that Jesus is no longer our Lord, at least not in this area of our lives.

How is East Main's session and pastoral staff responding? In the longer term we recognize a valuable opportunity to lead the congregation in learning, rediscovering, and embracing in deeper ways 1) who Jesus Christ is and what it means to confess him as Lord. 2) What the Bible is and what it means to embrace it as our authority. And 3) the moral/ethical implications that flow from a serious commitment to Christ and Scripture. The order and emphasis is important: we do not lead with morality because we want to avoid a Pharisaical legalism. Rather than being known for rules about sex and other behaviors, we want East Main to be mainly regarded as a church deeply in love with Jesus Christ and his mission to the world.

Also, we reaffirm East Main's long standing policy that tithes and offerings will not, unless otherwise directed by those who give them, go to support the institutional structure of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

And we are committed to working with others with whom we can stand together on these matters. In this vein, we are grateful that our Shenango Presbytery, consisting of the 68 PCUSA churches in Mercer and Lawrence counties, has adopted a strong resolution against this new policy of the denomination. We are also following closely the work of Fellowship PCUSA, a group of concerned Presbyterians from across the nation. At the same time we are investigating the Evangelical Presbyterian Church as a possible new denominational home. We believe that more prayer, study, and listening to others – especially to you, the members of East Main – is necessary before making a recommendation. But, given the history and ethos of East Main, it is becoming clearer to us that at some point we will need to decide either: to remain in the PCUSA with a serious commitment to work and pray for spiritual revival within the denomination which would include seeking to change policies with which we deeply disagree; or find a denominational home with others with whom we are in more fundamental alignment.

We are especially grateful for our members and friends who enjoy East Main as a congregation in which to worship, serve, and grow in the Lord, and who care little about these denominational issues. We want to assure you that this action by our denomination will not change what you find attractive about East Main. Also the more significant challenges we face in seeking to become a more Christ-honoring church such as: getting better at sharing our faith, caring for people who are hurting, growing deeper in our understanding and experience of the grace of our Lord, all these have little to do with our denominational label. Please continue to help our Session and Pastoral staff to, as Hebrews 12 says, keep our eyes fixed not on controversy in our denomination, but on Jesus, the only One worthy of our worshipful attention.