

Ordination / Installation Vows – Selected Questions
Stephen H. (Steve) Wilkins

Note: Most of the theologically oriented ordination / installation questions can be gleaned from my statement of faith, so I have chosen to answer two of the more ministry-related questions. By the way, I have always answered the questions in the affirmative with integrity of heart, and that is my intent when I am installed in my new position.

Question 7 – Do you promise to further the peace, unity and purity of the church?

This tricky triad has always challenged and motivated me in ministry. As I write this piece, we are approaching the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, which began as an insistence on a return to truth regarding our salvation as revealed in the Bible. In a very real sense, the compulsion to further the purity of the church gave birth to our branch of the Christian Church family tree. And I cherish our Reformed emphasis on “Solus Christus, Sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia.” But the 500 years of reformation have not been as successful in cultivating peace and unity, as they have in debating purity, as witnessed by the thousands upon thousands of Christian movements and denominations that have formed largely through separation from one another.

As a pastor who appreciates theology and doctrine that approximates orthodoxy, I have been deeply troubled by the inability of the church to promote peace and unity. And so when there is a tension among the triad of peace, unity, and purity in the church, as a pastor my first impulse is to focus on peace and unity. I do this for two reasons. One, Jesus prayed for the peace and unity of his disciples (John 20:17ff), and Paul goes to great lengths to promote unity in the Body of Christ (note his emphases on one-ness (e.g., 4:1-6), that we need each other and that the Body needs many and various parts (e.g., 1 Cor. 12), that we are to approach one another with the love of 1 Cor. 13, and other teachings of Paul); in other words, peace and unity in the church is a strong biblical imperative. The second reason is that I think it is much easier to have discussions of purity and doctrinal correctness when we have first cultivated a community where there is mutual respect. When we experience unity in the community of faith, then the conversations about purity will bear more fruit.

Question 9 – Will you be a faithful teaching elder, proclaiming the good news in Word and Sacrament, teaching faith and caring for people? Will you be active in government and discipline, serving in the councils of the church; and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

This question means the world to me on several levels. First, it asks whether I will be a *faithful* teaching elder. I find that motivating, because it doesn't seek perfection, but faithfulness. It is a question that asks if I am willing to pour myself and offer my gifts in the service of the people of Graves Memorial Presbyterian Church. Am I willing to enter their world – rejoicing with them at the experience of God's love and grace, accompanying them through the journey of forgiveness and healing, inviting them to partner together in the proclamation of the gospel? My answer is an emphatic Yes.

Even when our polity can be cumbersome and slow, I have always appreciated the importance of a healthy Session and a strong supportive relationship with the Presbytery. I believe it is vital for the Session to cultivate trust and respect among one another, even when we have differences; I do not seek an unquestioning unanimity, but a respectful unity. I hope that the Session members can come to trust one another, and to delegate responsibilities to the various ministries (i.e., committees) by granting permission to carry out their respective ministries without undue micromanagement. I value the role of the Presbytery in contributing to the well-being of the congregations within its bounds, and I will seek to restore a healthy relationship between GMPC and the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina. I am willing to serve the larger church (i.e., presbytery committees, commissions, etc.) but I respectfully request to be given at least a year to invest in the congregation of GMPC prior to any formal involvement at the presbytery level.

Any survey of my work (sermons, Bible studies, blogs, etc.) will quickly lead one to understand the centrality of the love of Christ in my ministry. It's not a permissive, everything-goes love, but a love that genuinely wants the best for the other; a love that forgives, that seeks reconciliation, that seeks to build up and encourage. The love and justice of Christ are not really separable; indeed, the love of Christ compels me to seek justice. The love of Christ will not give me rest and peace in the face of injustice.

This ordination / installation question truly summarizes who I strive to be as a teaching elder.