

Observations by Corey Schlosser-Hall, EP
North Puget Sound Presbytery

Dear Colleagues in Presbytery Leadership,

All of us are going to be faced with the challenge in coming days to interpret the actions of the 218th General Assembly to our churches, none more so than the vote to send an overture to the Presbyteries to delete G-6.0106b.

Everyone is aware that this action has the potential to generate a lot of turmoil in our denomination. Some of us here in San Jose have been putting our heads together in order to think about how the Assembly action could be honestly shared with pastors and congregations in a way that would minimize the potential for damage.

If we can present a unified and accurate message to our presbyteries about what has happened in San Jose, we are hopeful that it can help prevent people in our presbyteries from accepting whole heartedly, the more hysterical "spins" on the Assembly action that are sure to follow.

We think it is going to be critically important to emphasize to congregations that the Assembly has **not** with this action removed the church's standard and prohibition on the ordination of people who identify as "self-affirming, practicing" gay or lesbian. An honest and non-inflammatory presentation would describe this action as the national church needing to check in again with the Presbyteries on this issue that continues to occupy our attention as a denomination.

Allowing the Presbyteries to weigh in again has been a course recommended by the GAPJC, and also by conservative critics of the PUP Task Force, who have said repeatedly that the matter needs to go to the wider church for approval.

In Moderator Reyes Chow's spirit of being transparent and not spinning anything through a rose lens, we think it very important to be as honest as possible about the Authoritative Interpretation in the John Knox overture (05-12) and the deletion of previous authoritative interpretations that came with the action to send G-6.0106b to presbyteries for approval.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Regarding the Definition of Marriage

The 218th General Assembly decided by a 77% to 23% margin to uphold our definition of marriage found in the Directory of Worship (4.9001) in the Book of Order.

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship (W-4.9001).

Regarding G-6.0106b

The 218th General Assembly, by a 54% to 46% vote decided to send an overture (known as the Boston Overture) to the 173 presbyteries around the country to ask them to vote on whether they would like to change one of our current ordination standards which says officers of the church must live by “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.”--G-6.0106b in our *Book of Order*

To this language:

Those who are called to ordained service in the church, by their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003), pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions. In so doing, they declare their fidelity to the standards of the Church. Each governing body charged with examination for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240 and G-14.0450) establishes the candidate's sincere efforts to adhere to these standards.

After the assembly it will be sent to 173 presbyteries for their discernment, deliberation, and a vote. When you begin to engage this question as a presbytery, please incorporate the Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force's recommendations on discernment. To aid that process, get a copy of Vicky Curtiss' most recently drafted manual, *Guidelines for Communal Discernment* available from.

In order for the proposed change to become part of our constitution it must be ratified by a majority of the 173 presbyteries. That process will take about 1 year.

The action of the assembly also voided Authoritative Interpretations from 1978 and 1979 known together as “Definitive Guidance.” The new Authoritative Interpretation states:

Interpretive statements concerning ordained service of homosexual church members by the 190th General Assembly (1978) of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and the 119th General Assembly (1979) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and all subsequent affirmations thereof, have no further force or effect.

Brief Background on current Ord Standards

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1996 – The current language of ordination standard was added to our book of order (G-60106b): *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 between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), 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.*

This was approved by a vote of 97 presbyteries in favor, 74 against, and 1 abstention

1997 – During the 209th General Assembly, an amendment to the Book of Order (referred to as “Amendment A”) was approved and sent to the 173 presbyteries for their consideration and potential ratification. The language of that amendment was to replace *“fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness”* with *“fidelity and integrity in marriage or singleness and all relationships in the life of church officers.”* The presbyteries disapproved that amendment by a vote of 59 presbyteries in favor and 114 against.

2001 – During the 213th General Assembly, an amendment to the Book of Order to simply delete-- *Among these standards is 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--*was passed by the General Assembly and it again failed the ratification process by a vote of 46 presbyteries in favor, 129 against, 1 abstention.

That same year, 2001, the General Assembly appointed a Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church (PUP) to grapple with the issue of ordination standards as well as several other potentially divisive issues such as Christology, Biblical authority and interpretation and power dynamics in the church.

The PUP’s final report, to the 2006 Assembly, included an “authoritative interpretation” (AI) of G-6.0108 of the Book of Order, which affirmed the church’s standards for ordination but revived the 18th -century practice of allowing candidates for ordination to declare a “scruple” (conscientious objection) to any constitutional provision.

According the AI, it is the responsibility of the ordaining body (presbyteries for ministers, congregations for elders and deacons) to determine whether the declared scruple is a significant enough departure from “scriptural and constitutional standards for fitness for office” to be disqualifying.

Before adopting the PUP report, the Assembly added an additional qualification to the AI, requiring ordaining bodies to determine “Whether the examination and ordination and installation decision complies with the Constitution of the PC(USA).”

That's a brief backdrop to this whole ordination standard conversation. There is a paper written by the Office of the Stated Clerk, the Stated Clerk is our most significant ecclesiastical elected authority that provides additional background on this particular ordination standard and its practice and effect. That is at <http://www.pcusa.org/constitutionalservices/ad-op/note08.htm>

if you'd like to consult it.

Authoritative Interpretation on G-6.0108 (aka John Knox Pby overture, 05-12).

The General Assembly decided by a 53% to 47% vote to adopt an authoritative interpretation of G-6.0108a. The AI restores the intent of the PUP task force report from 2006 to allow someone who is being considered for ordination or installation as a deacon, elder, or minister to register a conscientious objection to the standards or beliefs of the church and ask the ordaining body to enter into a conversation with them to determine how serious their departure is. The ordaining body can exercise its judgment about whether their departure permissible or not.

Here is an attempt to explain this AI, please make it better and share it with the rest of us. Thanks goes to Dr. Mark Achtemeier (Dubuque Theological Seminary) for his willingness to help us explain this—THANKS MARK:

What does a church do when the rules it lives by become bitterly controversial?

Since 1978 the Presbyterian Church (USA) has had a rule barring sexually active gay and lesbian people from being ordained to church office. But times change, new ways of interpreting the Bible develop, and now a lot of people think the rule should be changed. This creates a dilemma for the church:

Keeping the rule in place offends a large group of members who believe it is unjust and unbiblical. Getting rid of it offends another large group who want to hold onto it because it is Biblical. Is there any way to solve the problem other than splitting the denomination?

Since 2006, the PC(USA) has been experimenting with an innovative way of handling its most controversial rules, using a system that dates all the way back to 1729. Under this system, if a candidate for ordination disagrees with any article of church teaching, he or she has the option to declare that disagreement publicly. When this happens, the local association of churches ("presbytery") which oversees the ordination responds by entering into a conversation with the candidate. The goal of this conversation is to make a judgment about how serious the departure is from church teaching. If the presbytery judges that a candidate's departure is not serious enough to

undermine essentials of the faith, the candidate's freedom of conscience may be respected and the ordination approved.

This system allows for a uniform set of rules governing ordinations that are approved by the national church. But it also provides some flexibility in the application of these rules by local presbyteries.

This system leaves everyone a little unhappy. Those who are in favor of the ban on gay and lesbian ordination are disappointed that the system allows exceptions. Those who wish to open up the church's practice are disappointed that the rule remains in place.

Despite unhappiness with the compromise, many Presbyterians are hoping that this system will allow them to stay together through times of deep disagreement, as a testimony to the oneness they share in Christ.

As an "Authoritative Interpretation" this action takes effect as of this assembly.

However, the G 6.0106b standard for ordination in the constitution is still in full effect, the standard is in place, and it cannot change until a majority of presbyteries think it should.

MEANING AND FRAMING

God is bigger than the General Assembly, God is bigger than the PCUSA, God is bigger than the church and yet God uses the church as an instrument of God's mission for the salvation of humankind, even today. As Gradye Parsons said during his nomination speech, "We need to go to another shore. Get in the boat. There WILL be a storm. You will not die." Instead you will find again, the Living One, Jesus Christ who came to bring eternal life.

It's clear that God is not done speaking with us about these issues. We need to listen to and speak with one another. That is one of the ways God speaks to us.

If we're really functioning as leaders we're looking around every corner for what there is to learn and chewing on it together. The experience we're in the midst of is the best possible case study one could imagine—write everyday—converse widely.

"Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It instigates to invention. It shocks us out of sheeplike passivity, and sets us at noting and contriving." John Dewey, 1930.

Part of the case study is to observe this modernist church body struggling with becoming post-modern and how well we can adapt with the reality of post-modernism. All of these actions are indicators of post-modernism in our

midst (presence of multiple narratives in one body—no unified grand narrative that explains everything).

Can modernists who assent to a coherent narrative that explains God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Scripture, theology, politics, ordination standards, etc. be part of a body that has other narratives AND NOT SEPARATE THEMSELVES FROM IT? On this front you may want to read the first and last essays in *The Church of the Perfect Storm* (2008) by Leonard Sweet.

Take a lesson from the Gospels how the early church seemed to swim pretty well with many narratives—aka 4 Gospels—but we so soon forget. If our spiritual ancestors needed one coherent story they would've pushed three out the door and elevated one. Make another run at *Acts*, read it like an action-adventure.

Gobble up *Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (2008) published posthumously by Edwin Friedman. It will describe precisely the context of reactivity that many of us will step into. Friedman also describes how our presence and functioning as leaders in the midst of the turmoil will restore our thoughtfulness and invite imaginative engagement.

Of course, Diana Butler Bass has the pulse on this kind of painful change process we're in the midst of—*Christianity for the Rest of Us* (2006) is worth the time.

In the middle of it, act with courage and calm, risk and confidence. Recognize that you are called for such a time as this. Don't shy from it, steer into the wind, run into the gale, and fly a kite! (poached from Leonard Sweet).

Cheers,

Corey Schlosser-Hall, EP
North Puget Sound Presbytery

Presbyterians and Conflict in Historical Perspective

James H. Moorhead

Presbyterians have been no strangers to theological controversy in recent years. All of you are well aware of these struggles, and my task this afternoon is not to rehash these recent battles, but to put them in the long perspective of history.

We may be tempted to assume that once there was a golden age for the church—a time when Presbyterians presented a common front to the world. We may wistfully hum a line from an old Lerner and Loewe musical and apply it to our church: “Never let it be forgot that once there was a spot called Camelot.”

Have we Presbyterians ever enjoyed an ecclesiastical Camelot? The historical facts testify that we have not. Diversity, dissensions, and sometimes nasty fights and splits have formed an important part of our story since the colonial era.

In part, Presbyterians have experienced conflict because we have tried to combine principles that sometimes grate against one another. More than fifty years ago, historian Lefferts Loetscher in his classic *The Broadening Church* (1954) argued that American Presbyterianism contained two elements: one stressing “precise theological formulation” and “orderly and authoritarian church government,” the other placing “more emphasis upon spontaneity, vital impulse, and adaptability.” “It has been the good fortune and the hardship of the Presbyterian Church,” Loetscher noted wryly, “to have had...these two elements in dialectical tension within itself from the beginning.”¹

The tension was apparent as American Presbyterians cobbled themselves together first in a presbytery (1706) and then a synod (1716). Initially, these bodies had no official creed, but by the 1720s, some were calling for mandatory subscription to the Westminster Confession. For example, John Thomson, pastor in Lewes, Delaware, asked pointedly: “Now a church without a confession, what is it like?” He replied that such a church was “in a very defenceless condition, as a city without walls” because it had “no bar provided to keep out of the ministry those who are corrupt in doctrinals.” Thomson believed that the danger was more than theoretical. The church found itself “surrounded by so many pernicious and dangerous corruptions in doctrine.... When Arminianism, Socinianism, Deism, Freethinking, &c, do like a deluge overflow even the reformed churches, both established and dissenting,...have we not reason to consult our own safety?” Thomson’s image of the church as a city open to conquest because it had no walls possibly reflected the church’s state in society, as well as the condition of its theology. Surviving church records suggest that sessions, presbyteries, and the synod itself were deeply preoccupied

¹ Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), 1.

with the establishment of moral order amid the sometimes ill-defined boundaries faced by a young church planting congregations in newly settled regions.²

By contrast, Jonathan Dickinson, the New England-born pastor of the Presbyterian church in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, fired off a salvo at the 1722 synod in a sermon investigating “the true boundaries of the church’s power.” He contended that the church could not go beyond Scripture in determining rules for doctrine or discipline. To do so would be “a bold invasion of Christ’s royal power.” When Thomson requested the synod to require subscription several years later, Dickinson stood in opposition, noting pointedly the “glaring contradiction” of requiring ministers to subscribe to a document that itself declared: “God alone is the Lord of the conscience.”³

In 1729, the Synod of Philadelphia sent Thomson’s proposal for subscription to committee. The committee was a balanced one, including both Thomson and Dickinson and others of their respective persuasions. The committee’s proposal, enacted by the synod, required ministerial subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith, but it did so with important concessions to those who had opposed this policy. Subsequently known as the Adopting Act, the synod’s policy was an artful blending of two different positions. Since its ambiguities are vital to understanding subsequent Presbyterian history, the act deserves to be quoted at length:

Although the Synod do not claim or pretend to any authority of imposing our faith upon other men’s consciences, but do profess our just dissatisfaction with and abhorrence of such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority in the church, being willing to receive one another, as Christ has received us to the glory of God, and admit to fellowship in sacred ordinances all such as we have grounds to believe Christ will at last admit to the Kingdom of Heaven; yet we are undoubtedly obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so handed down to our posterity. And do therefore agree, that all the ministers of this synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this synod, shall declare their agreement in and approbation of the Confession of Faith with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the assembly of divines at Westminster, as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine; and do also adopt the said confession and catechisms as the confession of our faith....And in case any minister of this synod or any candidate for the ministry shall have any scruple with respect to an

² Maurice W. Armstrong, Lefferts A. Loetscher, and Charles A. Anderson, eds., *The Presbyterian Enterprise: Sources of American Presbyterian History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 28, 29. On colonial Presbyterianism, see Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949); Marilyn J. Westerlind, *The Triumph of the Laity: Scots-Irish Piety and the Great Awakening, 1625-1760* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Patrick Griffin, *The People with No Name: Ireland’s Ulster Scots, America’s Scots Irish, and the Creation of a British Atlantic World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Ned C. Landsman, *Scotland and Its First American Colony, 1683-1765* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

³ Dickinson is quoted in Bryan F. Le Beau, *Jonathan Dickinson and the Formative Years of American Presbyterianism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 31, 36.

article or articles of said confession or catechism, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the presbytery or synod, who shall notwithstanding admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds and to ministerial communion if the synod or presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake only to be about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government.⁴

This remarkable document involved considerable equivocation. On the one hand, it echoed the anti-subscriptionists who exalted individual conscience over churchly authority and suggested a circumscribed role for ecclesiastical courts by disclaiming “all legislative power and authority.” On the other, the synod’s Adopting Act asserted that judicatories did have the responsibility to defend “the faith once delivered to the saints.” But what were the articles so basic or essential that everyone had to give assent? The Adopting Act did not say. The determination of the matter was left for church courts to decide on a case-by-case basis.

Already in 1729 one sees principles to which Presbyterianism would repeatedly return over the next several centuries. These included the right of the whole church to set standards of acceptable theology and practice, the necessity of enforcing these standards flexibly on a case-by-case basis, and a commitment to respect *both* individual conscience and the authority of church courts to establish norms of doctrine and polity. Keeping these commitments in a common orbit rather than on a collision course with one another has not always been easy. But after periods of controversy and recrimination, these principles have been ones to which the church recurred when it wished to recover its peace, unity, and purity.

Soon the denomination had a chance to test these principles. In the first round of the test, the church flunked. Questions about revivals, itinerancy of the clergy, and proper church order—issues that the excitement of the Great Awakening brought to fever pitch—produced schism in 1741. The disagreements between the two groups were exceedingly bitter. Gilbert Tennent, in one of the most famous advocates of the Great Awakening within the Presbyterian church, styled opponents of the revival as Pharisees, unconverted men. Lay people unfortunate enough to suffer under the ministry of such ministers should leave them to hear preachers who, their own hearts set right with God, preached a truly evangelical gospel. And if that should grieve the Pharisaic minister, said Tennent, “then he has good cause to grieve over his own rottenness and hypocrisy.” (Obviously, Tennent never read Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People!*)⁵

⁴ *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1706-1788*, ed. Guy S. Klett (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976), 103-04. In this citation and in note 7 below, I have taken the liberty to bring capitalization and spelling in accord with contemporary use.

⁵ Selections from Tennent’s sermon, “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry” may be found in Richard L. Bushman, ed., *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 87-93; Milton J. Coalter, Jr., *Gilbert Tennent, Son of Thunder: A Case Study of Continental Pietism’s Impact on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

This language only succeeded in convincing opponents that people such as Tennent were self-righteous fanatics. Thus, one critic observed that those who called for spiritual renewal had best be careful

lest we lose our charity, while we are seeking for piety; lest, while we look for true conversion, we be deceived by delusion; and lest, while we affect a free and unrestrained preaching of the Gospel, we bring on anarchy and confusion, and overthrow of all order and government.⁶

Yet, in due course passions cooled. When the Synods of Philadelphia and New York came back together in 1758 after these battles, the terms of agreement carefully balanced the powers of church courts against the conscience of minorities. While the majorities could make binding decisions, minorities might legitimately protest these decisions. If conscience did not permit them to concur or even to submit passively, they should “peaceably withdraw...without attempting to make any schism.” Yet, church courts were warned that they should press minorities to this extremity only on matters “the body shall judge indispensable in doctrine or Presbyterian government.” In a word, the right of both the majority to rule and the right of the minority to register conscientious dissent were to be exercised with restraint so that, if at all possible, neither side would push the other to the wall.⁷

The pattern repeated itself in the following century. In 1837, the Presbyterian church again tore itself into rival denominations, Old and New Schools. Once again, the level of hostility was incredibly high. “The necessity for the separation of the parties is urgent,” an Old School newspaper based here in Philadelphia had declared in June 1836. “They do not agree; they cannot agree. We can scarcely conceive of two parties more antagonistic in all the principles of their belief and practice; they receive not the same Gospel; they adopt not the same moral code, and the absence of all mutual affinities must oppose an insuperable barrier to their harmonious union. Truth on one side, error on the other; honesty on one side, artifice on the other....” The struggles were over a variety of issues. Presbyterians disputed the proper interpretation of the Westminster Confession on such matters as the nature of human agency in conversion. They also argued (again!) about the propriety of methods used to promote revivals, this time the so-called “new measures” that included protracted meetings, the use of the anxious bench, colloquial preaching, and allowing women to speak in a public meeting. Also, some felt that what we would call parachurch organizations were usurping the place of proper denominational agencies. Lurking behind these controversies—though often not explicitly named—was the matter of what, if anything, the church should say about the institution of slavery.⁸

⁶ Quoted in Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, eds., *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 126; capitalization brought into conformity with modern use.

⁷ *Minutes*, ed. Klett, 341.

⁸ “State of the Church,” *The Presbyterian* 6 (June 18, 1836), 2. On the schism of 1837-38, see George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) 59-87, and James H. Moorhead, “The ‘Restless Spirit of Radicalism’: Old School Fears and the Schism of 1837,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 78 (Spring 2000): 19-33.

Yet, by the end of the 1860s the rift was healed, at least for the northern segments of the two bodies. (The southern portions of the two separate churches created in 1837 had broken off from their northern counterparts in 1857 and 1861.) The reunion was accomplished on the basis, as it was popularly said at the time, of the Westminster standards “pure and simple”—that is, without effort to define in minute terms what this action meant.⁹

In the 1870s and later, a new set of disputes emerged among Presbyterians about the meaning of their confession and subscription to it. In at least two respects, however, these controversies differed in nature from the preceding ones. First, older conflicts often turned on matters that marked off differences between the Reformed or Presbyterian views from other confessional traditions. However, the new controversies concerned matters that challenged beliefs in many different traditions simultaneously. The so-called higher biblical criticism increasingly won a hearing among many Americans after the 1880s, and with it came a host of questions about the nature and extent of the Bible’s authority. A more self-consciously liberal theology began to emphasize the possibility of growth or change in theology, often gave priority to religious experience in the determination of doctrine, and implied that the essence of true faith was a life lived in a vital relationship with God and not a set of propositions about God. This modernism touted the virtue of self-conscious adaptation of the faith to the spirit of the age, whether measured by humanity’s allegedly improving consciousness or by advances in the sciences. Liberals also tended either to play down the supernatural elements of Christianity or to collapse transcendence into immanence. In such ways, they understood themselves to be making the essence of the Gospel understandable for their age. Their opponents, of course, saw matters differently; and often turned to the Westminster Confession as a way of refuting these liberal beliefs.¹⁰

In the wake of World War I and in the context of a sense of cultural crisis, some conservatives in the so-called fundamentalist-modernist controversy renewed the struggle to force liberals from the church. Although he was not their chief tactician, J. Gresham Machen, then an assistant professor at Princeton Seminary, was clearly the intellectual leader of this group. Contending in *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) that modernism or liberalism was an entirely different faith than historic Christianity, Machen insisted that liberals should, in intellectual honesty, withdraw from the Presbyterian church or, failing that outcome, be extruded. For a time it appeared that liberals might indeed be ousted; but events in 1925 changed the dynamics within the denomination. In that year, the General Assembly elected Machen’s Princeton colleague, Charles R. Erdman, as moderator. Although he was deeply conservative theologically, he believed that there was room for greater breadth of views within the denomination than did Machen. Erdman persuaded the assembly to authorize the appointment of a special commission to examine the causes of unrest in the church. The commission’s report, adopted by the assemblies of 1926 and

⁹ Marsden, *Evangelical Mind*, 212-229. Loetscher, *Broadening Church*, 1-8.

¹⁰ In this and the remaining paragraphs, I am heavily influenced by Loetscher, *Broadening Church*; and Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

1927, proposed a means for composing the differences. Rejecting the claim that there was widespread departure from the historic faith of the denomination, the commission argued, in effect, that the efforts of previous assemblies to define *a priori* essential articles of the Confession were unconstitutional. The constitution lodged the right of determining what was an essential or necessary article in each presbytery as it, on a case-by-case basis, examined ordinands or received ministers. While the General Assembly had power on an appellate basis to review these decisions, it had no constitutional authority to issue general or blanket statements about what was or was not essential in the confession. In effect, as Lefferts Loetscher argued, the commission proposed theological decentralization as the solution to the controversy, and the denomination largely accepted this solution. Henceforth, at least moderate liberalism would be secure within the Presbyterian church. As for the conservatives, most of them stayed within the denomination, although Machen and something under one per cent of the denomination, after a struggle over an independent board of missions, withdrew in 1936 to form the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.¹¹

Motivating the commission decision was something more than a narrow reading of the church's constitution. In the final paragraphs of its report to the assembly, the Special Commission pointed to the fact that the denomination had to find unity because of its great task to serve or influence the world beyond its borders:

If Christianity is not true it should be abandoned. But if it is true, as we know it to be true, without which the world cannot live, then this truth must be carried into every field of human life, into all types of human relationships for the righting of wrong and the achievement of good through the Kingdom of God.... Never was there a clearer or more commanding call that the Church advance in her organized corporate work at home and on foreign fields.... God has given our Church all the equipment she requires for the fulfillment of her task with respect to that purpose. Now let her rise and go forward.¹²

It seems to me that, at our best, we Presbyterians have tried to compose our differences—or at least to find a way to live with them—for precisely this reason. At such moments, we understand that we should not tear ourselves apart or rend the body of Christ, because there is a world out beyond our walls—a world to which we are sent in mission.

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¹¹ Loetscher, *Broadening Church*, 151; see also D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

¹² *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.*, third series, vol. 6., 1927 (Philadelphia: Office of the General Assembly, 1927), 85-86.

North Puget Sound Presbytery – Summary and Process

The Task Force on Amendments met on Monday October 20th, at Mt. Vernon Presbyterian Church, and began engaging in a simple exercise: each person present was asked to introduce himself or herself, declare where they stood on the Amendment, what they would like to see happen as the presbytery addressed the Amendment, and to offer anything else he or she thought the group needed to know. No time frame was suggested. No speaker was interrupted. The next speaker was chosen by invitation of the current speaker.

What followed was a Spirit filled revelation of persons, including a broadly diverse viewpoints and positions, that was received by the group with respect and awe. The very simply process of self declaration without interruption was profound, validated persons and led to an ethos of mutual respect even though those declarations were very different.

The following ideas and themes emerged:

- The process of debate and vote that has been used to deal with this topic has not helped the church find a consensus, and has served to harden positions, identify persons narrowly by positions, and has increased divisions within and among presbyteries. Any process that allows persons to persuade, argue or coerce others was deemed to be useless in terms of bring about any kind of growth, movement or change of anyone's position, and would likely be harmful rather than helpful.
- The Church will not likely arrive at a consensus concerning homosexuality as an orientation, lifestyle, or prohibition to ordination for a long time, therefore community building and preservation during a time of differences is perhaps more important than the vote, since differences will remain after any vote.
- That the discernment process must include responsible Biblical exegesis of relevant texts.
- The presbytery's process for considering the issue and voting (as required) must be "lifegiving" rather than "death-dealing,"
- By using the simple process of sharing, without interruption, one's journey regarding where and how they have arrived at their current position, people felt heard, validated and respected.
- There was a spirit of humility and awareness of our finitude and brokenness but that was not • The presbytery need *not* be about persuasion, but of building community, self revelation, and then just taking an action.
- There was a desire to recognize that this issue exists within a larger context of mission, that there is an urgency to focus on mission, to somehow deal with this issue without detracting from the presbytery's and Church's greater mission.
- The group wanted to share information across the spectrum of the issue, but struggled with how to do this without overwhelming people.
- We were reminded, with a deep sense of awe, humility, and trembling that what we are attempting to discern is for the Church, past, present, and future.

I. Summary: Outcomes Desired from Presbytery's Engagement:

- Life giving interaction about sexuality and ordination standards to self-define and deepen our connections, not to persuade.
- Gaining the “unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.” Hospitality and good will toward one another following the vote in February.
- Breakdown us vs. them in favor of “thriving together with this disagreement?”

II. How will we know if we've accomplished our desired outcomes?

- Each minister or elder commissioner has a chance to listen and be heard regarding how they arrived at wherever they are on this question.
- The “parking lot talk” after February is complimentary toward what was learned and the spirit of it—not the outcome. In other words the focus will be on process and not on content.
- Each person makes a conscientious choice that they will remain connected with one another, even if they disagree.

Report of this task force –

A. Establishment of an ethos of mutual respect and overview of problems with previous votes, and a vote on a the process to that would replace the normal debate and vote.

B. Worship, with a sermon on Romans 14-15 to foster a spirit of humility, respect, tolerance, and a willingness to set aside prejudices, fears, and the deep seated anxiety that prevent "a faith seeking understanding."

C. Simple conversations in facilitated small groups by mutual invitation similar to that experienced by the task force guided by the following questions:

Briefly describe your “personal relationship with Christ/faith walk/spiritual journey, etc.” Describe your current position on Amendment 08-B (which would replace G-6.0106b, which requires of ordained officers “fidelity within . . . marriage or chastity in singleness” with a new description of fidelity to ordination standards). Share how your reading and reflecting on the Scriptures and your faith walk have led you there.

Proposed Amendment 08-B Ordained Officers
On Amending G-6.0106b, G-14.0240, and G-14.0450

1. Shall the current text of G-6.0106b and insert new text to read as follows: [Text to be deleted is shown with a strike-through; text to be added or inserted is shown as italic.]

“G-6.0106b. 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 between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), 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. Those who are called to ordained service in the church, by their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003), pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions. In so doing, they declare their fidelity to the standards of the Church. Each governing body charged with examination for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240 and G-14.0450) establishes the candidate’s sincere efforts to adhere to these standards.

2. Shall G-14.0240 be amended as follows: [Text to be deleted is shown with a strike-through; text to be added or inserted is shown as italic.]

G-14.0240 “Preparation and Examination for Office

“When persons have been elected to the office of elder or deacon, the session shall confer with them as to their willingness to undertake the office. The session shall provide for a period of study and preparation, after which the session shall examine the officers-elect as to their personal faith; knowledge of the doctrine, government, and discipline contained in the Constitution of the church; and the duties of the office; *and readiness to assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation.* If the examination is approved, the session shall appoint a day for the service of ordination and installation (see W-4.4000). If the examination is not approved for one or more elected officers, the session shall report its action to the congregation’s nominating committee, which shall bring nomination(s) to a meeting of the congregation for any office(s) not filled.”

3. Shall G-14.0450 be amended by inserting a new paragraph “b.” and by re-lettering current paragraphs “b.” through “d.” as “c.” through “f.” The text shall read as follows: [Text to be deleted is shown with a strike-through; text to be added or inserted is shown as italic.]

“ G-14.0450 Final Assessment of Readiness to Begin Ordained Ministry “In the final year of

theological education or when a candidate has satisfied all of the requirements of this section, and before the candidate has received a call, the committee on preparation for ministry of the candidate's presbytery shall conduct a final assessment of the candidate's readiness to begin ordained ministry. A summary of this assessment shall be reported to the presbytery and shall be transmitted to a calling presbytery when requested. The committee on preparation for ministry shall report to the presbytery when it has certified a candidate ready for examination for ordination, pending a call. This consultation shall focus on the outcomes of inquiry and candidacy and shall include each of the following requirements of certification:

“a. demonstration of readiness to begin ministry of the Word and Sacrament as required to fulfill the candidacy phase of preparation;

“b. *demonstration of readiness to assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation;*

“ c. presentation of a transcript showing satisfactory grades at a regionally accredited college or university, together with a diploma;

“d. presentation of a transcript from a theological institution accredited by the Association of Theological Schools acceptable to the presbytery, the transcript showing satisfactory grades, and presentation of a plan to complete the theological degree including Hebrew and Greek and exegesis of the Old and New Testaments using Hebrew and Greek texts;

“e. presentation of satisfactory grades together with the examination papers in the five areas covered by the Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee on Examinations for Candidates.”

Background and Rationale

This amendment was proposed by the Presbytery of Boston and included this rationale:

“The opening paragraphs of the Form of Government are a powerful statement of the fundamental Christian and Reformed affirmation that Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church. In support of this primary affirmation, Chapter I of the Form of Government calls Christians to attend to the Scriptures, insofar as they set forth “Christ's will for the Church,” and Chapter II identifies the church's confessions as its guides, subordinate to the authority of Jesus Christ and to the witness of Scripture. Our church thus has bound itself to a hierarchy of authority in which we are to obey Jesus Christ its Head, and, additionally, to heed first the Scriptures and then the confessions, to the extent that they accurately bear witness to Christ's will. This fundamental hierarchy of authority is accurately and eloquently reflected in the first three of the constitutional questions, the assent to which is required of each candidate for ordination and/or installation.

Although the hierarchy of the church's authority is clear, it is subverted by the current language of G-6.0106b, which substitutes for our obedience to Christ two concepts that are foreign to Reformed understanding: "obedience" to Scripture and "conformity" to the confessions. The proposed amendment would remove this paragraph and substitute new language, which (1) reflects the church's understanding of where its authority is to be found, and (2) reaffirms the church's reliance on the examination of candidates by its governing bodies as the principal means by which to ensure the commitment of its ordained officers to the duties of faith. The amendment additionally would insert appropriate language to ensure that each such examination would include discussion of the constitutional questions and the governing body's determination of the candidate's readiness to accept their principles and live by them to the extent any of us is able.

"In order to be able to rely on Jesus Christ as its Head and as its chief guide in all of life, the church must shed any subordinate source of authority that would bind its ability to follow where he leads. The overture therefore also calls for the rescission of past interpretive statements that have had the effect of limiting Christ's freedom to use his servants as he would choose.

ADVICE FROM THE Advisory Committee on the Constitution

Advice was provided to the 218th General Assembly.

The Advisory Committee on the Constitution advises the 218th General Assembly (2008) regarding Item 05-09 with the following comment.

This proposed amendment seeks to delete G-6.0106b from the Form of Government, and to substitute a new provision in its place. Approval would modify the church's position on ordination standards.

The proposed language for G-6.0106b substitutes a standard of obedience to Jesus Christ for the current provisions of G-6.0106b. Governing bodies would be given discretion in the application of this standard to particular candidates through the examination process. The proposed language is clear and not inconsistent with any other provision of the Book of Order.

H-4

General Assembly Statements on Homosexuality-through 2004

Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy – PCUSA Introduction

The Presbyterian General Assemblies have addressed the issue of homosexuality in three broad categories: (1) the legal rights of gay men and lesbians in society; (2) homosexuals in the church; and (3) the ordination of homosexuals as deacons, elders, or ministers. The major statements on homosexuality in 1978 (UPCUSA) and 1979 (PCUS) addressed all of these points. Since that time many other statements have been adopted which were, for the most part, more specific.

1976 Statement – UPCUSA, 1976, pp. 111-112

We affirm once again that every person, without limitation, is the object of God's gracious love in Jesus Christ. Only by approaching the subject of homosexuality with love, compassion, prayer and honesty, can our church continue in its great Reformed tradition.

Because God continues to reveal more of himself and his will in each succeeding age, we do not believe that a position taken in any one period sets forth the final understanding of his Word to the church. We know that there is always more light to break forth from the Bible through the work of Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." (John 16:12-13)

Nevertheless, in the life of the church today it is necessary, as in past ages, to declare a present understanding of God's will for the guidance of his people in the real issues they face.

. . . This raises new a perplexing problems for our church. We recognize that many expressions of homosexuality are without question sinful in the eyes of God. We are cautious in our judgment, at this time in the history of our church, because a person who is an avowed homosexual but who is otherwise well qualified has asked to be ordained to the professional ministry of the gospel. . . .

Therefore the 188th General Assembly (1976) calls to the attention of our church that, according to our most recent statement, we "reaffirm our adherence to the moral law of God . . . that . . . the practice of homosexuality is sin. . . .

Also we affirm that any self-righteous attitude of others who would condemn persons who have so sinned is also sin." (*Minutes* , 1970, Part I, page 469.) The 188th General Assembly (1976) declares again its commitment to this statement. Therefore, on broad Scriptural and confessional grounds, it appears that it would at the present time be injudicious, if not improper, for a presbytery to ordain to the professional ministry of the gospel a person who is an avowed practicing homosexual.

However, humbly remembering the way past General Assembly positions sometimes have changed as further light has been given, the 188th General Assembly (1976) directs that a task force be established, . . . [t]he focus of this study will center in Christian approaches to homosexuality, with special reference to the ordination of avowed practicing homosexuals.

1978 Statement – UPCUSA, pp. 261-262

The Church and Homosexuality

Homosexuality Within a Theological Context

We conclude that homosexuality is not God's wish for humanity. This we affirm, despite the fact that some of its forms may be deeply rooted in an individual's personality structure. Some persons are exclusively homosexual in orientation. In many cases homosexuality is more a sign of the brokenness of God's world than of willful rebellion. In other cases homosexual behavior is freely chosen or learned in environments where normal development is thwarted. Even where the homosexual orientation has not been consciously sought or chosen, it is neither a gift from God nor a state nor a condition like race; it is a result of our living in a fallen world.

1980 Statement – PCUS, p. 213

Homosexuality presents a particular problem for the church. It seems to be contrary to the teaching of scripture. It seems to repudiate the heterosexual process which gave us life. Further, many believe that such an orientation can be changed simply by personal decision or by the creation of healthy environments for the young. The church though should be aware of the partial nature of our knowledge of homosexuality. For instance, whether or not sexual

orientation is something unchosen and unchangeable for most people is a matter of crucial significance which continues to be unsettled among scientists or ethicists. The church should be sensitive to the difficulty of rejecting a person's sexual orientation without rejecting the person. It should be open to more light on what goes into shaping one's sexual preferences and reexamine its life and teaching in relation to people who are seeking affirmation and needing acceptance and who are apparently not free to change their orientations.

1994 Statement – PC(USA), p. 488

[The 206 th General Assembly (1994) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) directs the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly to send the following proposed amendment to the presbyteries for their affirmation or negative votes:]

Should W-4.9001 be amended by adding the following sentence at the end of the section: *"Therefore, ministers are prohibited from participating in the blessing of same-sex unions."*

[The proposed amendment failed to achieve enough affirmation notes.]

2000 Statement – PC(USA), pp. 59, 394

[The 212th General Assembly (2000) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) direct[s] the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly to send the following proposed amendment to the *Book of Order* presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes:]

Shall "W-4.9007" be added to the *Book of Order* to read as follows: [Text to be added is shown in italic.]

"W-4.9007 "Scripture and our Confessions teach that God's intention for all people is to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or in chastity in singleness. Church property shall not be used for, and church officers shall not take part in conducting, any ceremony or event that pronounces blessing or gives approval of the church or invokes the blessing of God upon any relationship that is inconsistent with God's intention as expressed in the preceding sentence."

2001 Statement – PC(USA), pp. 51-52

[The 213th General Assembly (2001) voted to]:

1. Direct the Stated Clerk to send the following proposed amendments to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes:

a. Shall G-6.0106b be stricken.

b. Shall G-6.0106a be amended by adding a new sentence to the end of the paragraph to read as follows: [Text to be added is shown as italic.]

Their suitability to hold office is determined by the governing body where the examination for ordination or installation takes place, guided by scriptural and constitutional standards, under the authority and Lordship of Jesus Christ.

2. Approve the following authoritative interpretation:

"Interpretive statements concerning ordained service by homosexual persons by the 190th General Assembly (1978) of The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the 119th General Assembly (1979) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and all subsequent denominational affirmations thereof, shall be given no further force or effect; and Section G-6.0106a of the Form of Government, together with the other prerequisites for ordination expressly stated in our Book of Order, hereby are affirmed as the sole and exclusive standards for ordination by ordaining bodies acting in prayerful discernment of the leading of Almighty God, pending the approval of the related proposed amendment."

3. Direct the Moderator of the 213th General Assembly (2001) to send a pastoral letter to the presbyteries and sessions interpreting the assembly's action.

2002 Statement – PC(USA), pp. 73-74, 575

On Affirming Civil Rights and Nondiscrimination for All Persons, Regardless of Sexual Orientation.

That the 214th General Assembly (2002) direct the Stated Clerk to communicate the following action to all clergy, congregations, and seminaries:

The General Assembly reaffirms these resolutions adopted by the 190th General Assembly (1978) of the UPCUSA-

1. Calls upon Presbyterians to work for the passage of laws that prohibit discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, and public accommodations based on the sexual orientation of a person.

2. Calls upon Presbyterians, as previously expressed by the 182nd General Assembly (1970), to work for the decriminalization of private homosexual acts between consenting adults, and calls for an end to the discriminatory enforcement of other criminal laws against homosexual persons.
3. Calls upon seminaries to apply the same standards to persons applying for admission regardless of sexual orientation.
4. Calls upon the media to continue to work to end the use of harmful stereotypes of homosexual persons, and encourages divisions and committees of the General Assembly, synods, presbyteries, and congregations to develop strategies to ensure the end of such abuse.
5. Calls upon Presbyterians to reject in their own lives, and challenge in others, the sins of harassment, abuse, and hate towards homosexual persons, which drives any person away from Christ and his Church.
6. Calls upon seminaries, governing bodies, and churches to initiate courses on sexuality, providing officers and members with a balanced understanding of the diverse views regarding the dynamics of human sexuality as understood within the context of Christian ethics.

2004 Statement – PC(USA), p. 59

The 216th General Assembly (2004) approved the following:

In response to this recommendation, the 216th General Assembly (2004) approved the following resolution:

Recognize Civil Rights for Same-Gender Couples

That the 216th General Assembly (2004) affirm the following statement and request the Office of the General Assembly to communicate this action to all middle and lower governing bodies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), as well as to the president of the United States of America and to all members of the Congress of the United States of America.

Statement

The 216th General Assembly (2004) does the following:

- Offers prayerful thanks for the Scriptures informing us that all persons are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27).
- Affirms the Presbyterian Church's historic definition of the meaning of marriage as a "civil contract between a woman and a man." (W-4.9001, as quoted in a resolution of the 208th General Assembly (1996), Minutes, 1996, Part I, p. 122.)
- Declares that all persons are entitled to equal treatment under the law (Constitution of the United States of America); therefore
- Urges state legislations to change state laws to include the right of same-gender persons to civil union and, thereby, to extend to them all the benefits, privileges, and responsibilities of civil union, and urges all persons to support such changes in state laws.
- Urges the Congress of the United States of America to recognize those state laws that allow same-gender union and to change federal laws to recognize all civil unions licensed and solemnized under state law to apply in all federal laws that provide benefits, privileges, and/or responsibilities to married persons.

The Rights of Lesbians and Gay Men in Society

ACSWP Introduction

The UPCUSA General Assembly addressed the legal rights of homosexuals in its statement on "Sexuality and the Human Community." In this statement, the church asserted ". . . that laws which make a felony of homosexual acts privately committed by consenting adults are morally insupportable, contribute nothing to the public welfare, and inhibit rather than permit changes in behavior by homosexual persons . . ." The General Assembly also urged United Presbyterians to work for elimination of these laws (UPCUSA, 1970, p. 907).

In 1977, the PCUS General Assembly expressed ". . . the need for the Church to stand for just treatment of homosexual persons in our society in regard to their civil liberties, equal rights, and protection under the law from social and economic discrimination which is due all citizens . . ." (PCUS, 1977, p. 174). The PCUS General Assembly reaffirmed that decision in 1978 and in

1979 (PCUS, 1978, p. 190; PCUS, 1979, p. 208). In 1978, the UPCUSA declared that ". . . there is no legal, social, or moral justification for denying homosexual persons access to the basic requirements of human social existence . . ." (UPCUSA, 1978, p. 264). In 1987, the General Assembly called ". . . for the elimination . . . of laws governing the private sexual behavior between consenting adults [and the passage] of laws forbidding discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, housing, and public accommodations . . ." (PC(USA), 1987, p. 776)

On the basis of the previous policy statements, the 204th General Assembly (1992) declared ". . . its support for the New Jersey Law Against Discrimination, as amended in January 1992," which ". . . added the criteria of 'affectional or sexual orientation' to the New Jersey Law . . ." The Assembly further directed ". . . the Stated Clerk to explore possibilities for filing a 'friend of the court' brief in support of this law," which was challenged by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (PC(USA), 1992, p. 918).

The 205th General Assembly (1993) took two actions with regard to the legal rights of homosexuals: The first action was a resolution in response to an overture urging condemnation of the discriminatory legislation in Colorado's Amendment Two which repealed laws protecting against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In the resolution, the Assembly noted its previous position on homosexuals and society, and ". . . unequivocally condemn[ed] all discriminatory legislation, such as [Amendment 2 of the Colorado Constitution]. . ." (PC(USA), 1993, p. 119). The second action this General Assembly took was to adopt a *Commissioners' Resolution* which affirmed its commitment to end discrimination based on sexual orientation and encouraged the United States military to do the same, saying: that it ". . . commend[s] [the] Stated Clerk . . . for joining with other national religious leaders in urging an end to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the U.S. military . . ." (PC(USA), 1993, p. 946).

1978 Statement – UPCUSA, 1978, pp. 265-266

The Church and Homosexuality

Decriminalization and Civil Rights

There is no legal, social, or moral justification for denying homosexual persons access to the basic requirements of human social existence. Society does have a legitimate role in regulating some sexual conduct, for criminal law properly functions to preserve public order and decency and to protect citizens from public offense, personal injury, and exploitation. Thus, criminal law properly prohibits homosexual and heterosexual acts that involve rape, coercion, corruption of minors, mercenary exploitation, or public display. However, homosexual and heterosexual acts in private between consenting adults involve none of these legitimate interests of society. Sexual conduct in private between consenting adults is a matter of private morality to be instructed by religious precept or ethical example and persuasion, rather than by legal coercion.

Vigilance must be exercised to oppose federal, state, and local legislation that discriminates against persons on the basis of sexual orientation and to initiate and support federal, state, or local legislation that prohibits discrimination against persons on the basis of sexual orientation in employment, housing, and public accommodations. This provision would not affect the church's employment policies. . . .

Conclusions

II. Recommendations

Consistent with this policy statement and conclusions, the 190th General Assembly (1978):

7. Calls upon the media to continue to work to end the use of harmful stereotypes of homosexual persons; and encourages agencies of the General Assembly, presbyteries, and congregations to develop strategies to insure the end of such abuse.
12. Reaffirms the need, as expressed by the 182nd General Assembly (1970) for United Presbyterians to work for the decriminalization of private homosexual acts between consenting adults, and calls for an end to the discriminatory enforcement of other criminal laws against homosexual persons.
13. Calls upon United Presbyterians to work for the passage of laws that prohibit discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, and public accommodations based on the sexual orientation of a person.

1979 Statement – PCUS, 1979, pp. 208-209

Decriminalization and Civil Rights

The 117th and 118th General Assemblies asserted "the need for the church to stand for just treatment of homosexual persons in our society in regard to their civil liberties, equal rights and protection under the law from social and economic discrimination which is due all its citizens." This stand is affirmed.

1993 Statement – PC(USA), pp. 118-119

Whereas, current church policy clearly states that as Presbyterians, we are to stand for just treatment of homosexual persons, including working toward protection under the law from discrimination; and

Whereas, the state of Colorado passed a state constitutional amendment . . . which abrogates all laws that protect people against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation; and

Whereas, political action groups in various states are using . . . [this] as a model for discriminatory laws, therefore, be it

Resolved , That the 205th General Assembly (1993) unequivocally condemns all discriminatory legislation . . . and calls for the repeal of Amendment 2 of the Colorado Constitution. The 205th General Assembly (1993) further instructs the Stated Clerk to communicate with presbytery and synod councils, requesting them to notify the office of the Stated Clerk of proposed or pending legislation in their states or communities regarding similar discriminatory measures . . . [**R**]

1993 Statement – PC(USA), p. 946

Resolved , That the 205th General Assembly (1993) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

1. commend [the] Stated Clerk . . . for joining with other national religious leaders in urging an end to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the U.S. military . . .

2. direct [the] Stated Clerk to urge [the president] and the Congress of the United States to move to end all discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the U.S. military . . .

Homosexuals in the Church

ACSWP Introduction

In 1970, the UPCUSA Assembly stated its relationship as it ". . . adherence to the moral law of God as revealed in the Old and New Testaments, that ` . . . the practice of homosexuality is sin" (UPCUSA, 1970, p. 889). The General Assembly also admonished itself, ". . . [t]he ethical reflections and personal attitudes of the Christian community should be such that homosexual persons will not be made to feel that their sexual preference is in irresolvable conflict with their membership in the Christian fellowship . . ." (UPCUSA, 1970, p. 905).

In 1978, the UPCUSA Assembly concluded that ". . . there can be no place within the Christian faith for the response to homosexual persons of mingled contempt, hatred, and fear that is called homophobia," and ". . . the church must turn from its fear and hatred to move toward the homosexual community in love and to welcome homosexual inquirers to its congregations . . . homosexual persons . . . should not be excluded from membership" (UPCUSA, 1978, p. 263). In 1979, the PCUS adopted similar language with regard to homosexuality and church membership (see PCUS, 1979, p. 1028). In 1980, the PCUS adopted The Nature and Purpose of Human Sexuality, which did not deal with homosexuality at length but did say, ". . . [h]omosexuality presents a particular problem for the church . . ." (PCUS, 1980, p. 213). Subsequent General Assemblies have reaffirmed these two major policy statements, including the sections on church membership.

The 203rd General Assembly (1991) adopted a policy on religious ceremonies for same-sex couples. It said that religious ceremonies celebrating same sex unions which are the same as

marriage ceremonies are not appropriate and should not be permitted by sessions or performed by pastors (PC(USA), 1991, p. 395).

In response to three overtures, the 211th General Assembly (1999) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted a resolution dealing with "conversion" therapies designed to change a person's sexual orientation. The Assembly recognized that the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics do not consider homosexuality to be a disease. Further, they cited American Psychological Association findings that no scientific evidence supports the effectiveness of any conversion therapy to change sexual orientation. Thus, the 1999 Assembly affirmed existing policies of inclusiveness and welcome, and affirmed that no church should ever insist that homosexual persons need therapy to change their sexual orientation.

1978 Statement – UPCUSA, 1978, pp. 263-264

Church Membership

Persons who manifest homosexual behavior must be treated with the profound respect and pastoral tenderness due all people of God. There can be no place within the Christian faith for the response to homosexual persons of mingled contempt, hatred, and fear that is called homophobia.

Homosexual persons are encompassed by the searching love of Christ. The church must turn from its fear and hatred to move toward the homosexual community in love and to welcome homosexual inquirers to its congregations. It should free them to be candid about their identity and convictions, and it should also share honestly and humbly with them in seeking the vision of God's intention for the sexual dimensions of their lives. . . .

Ministry and Mission

The Christian community can neither condone nor participate in the widespread contempt for homosexual persons that prevails in our general culture. Indeed, beyond this, it must do everything in its power to prevent society from continuing to hate, harass, and oppress them. The failure of the church to demonstrate grace in its life has contributed to the forcing of homosexual persons into isolated communities. This failure has served to reinforce the homosexual way of life and to heighten alienation from both church and society. The church should be a spiritual and moral vanguard leading society in response to homosexual persons.

1979 Statement – PCUS, 1979, pp. 207-208

Diversity and Unity in the Church

We of the 119th General Assembly (1979) realize that not all members of the Presbyterian Church in the United States can in conscience agree with our conclusions. Some are persuaded that there are forms of homosexual behavior that are not sinful and that persons who practice these forms can legitimately be ordained.

We are concerned not to stifle these diverging opinions and to encourage those who hold them to remain with the church. As Paul clearly teaches in Eph. 4:1-16, as members of Christ's body we desperately need one another. None of us is perfect. No opinion or decision is irreformable. Nor do we mean to close further study of homosexuality among the presbyteries and congregations.

Ministry and Mission

Through direct challenge and support the church should encourage the public media -- television, film, the arts and literature -- to portray in a wholesome manner robust, fully human life expressing the finer qualities of the human spirit. It should call upon its members and agencies to work to eliminate prejudicial and stereotypical images of homosexual persons in the public media.

1991 Statement – PC(USA), p. 395

Inasmuch as the session is responsible and accountable for determination of the appropriate use of the church buildings and facilities (G-10.0102n), it should not allow the use of the church facilities for a same sex union ceremony that the session determines to be the same as a marriage ceremony.

Likewise, since a Christian marriage performed in accordance with the Directory for Worship can only involve a covenant between a woman and a man, it would not be proper for a minister of the Word and Sacrament to perform a same sex union ceremony that the minister determines to be the same as a marriage ceremony.

1999 Statement – PC(USA), p. 80

The 211th General Assembly (1999) affirms that the existing policy of inclusiveness welcomes all into membership of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as we confess our sin and our need for repentance and God's grace. In order to be consistent with this policy, no church should insist that gay and lesbian people need therapy to change to a heterosexual orientation, nor should it inhibit or discourage those individuals who are unhappy with or confused about their sexual orientation from seeking therapy they believe would be helpful. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirms that medical treatment, psychological therapy, and pastoral counseling should be in conformity with recognized professional standards.

The 211th General Assembly (1999) directs the Stated Clerk to communicate this decision in a pastoral letter to all ministers of the Word and Sacrament, clerks of session, and presbytery and synod stated clerks, and to national and international ecumenical bodies of which the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is committed in covenantal relationship through the formula of agreement, and with COCU.

2000 Statement – PC(USA), p. 41

The 212th General Assembly (2000) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) directs the General Assembly Council to have the Congregational Ministries Division and the National Ministries Division:

1. Survey congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to elicit stories that will identify
 - a. ministries of outreach and evangelism that have been effective in reaching gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members of their communities;
 - b. specific congregational programs ministering with and to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons, their families, and friends;
 - c. approaches of pastoral care that are sensitive to the particular needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons, their families, and friends; and
 - d. lessons learned from successes and failures.
2. Consult with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members, as well as formerly gay, lesbian, and bisexual members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in the development of the survey and the resources which are in conformity with recognized professional standards as directed by the 211th General Assembly (1999).
3. Use the survey responses in the development of resources and tools to assist congregations in ministries of evangelism, programming and pastoral care with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons, their families, and friends.
4. Make the resources available to all congregations, presbytery and synod resource centers, and committees on ministry who request these materials.
5. Consult Scripture and the Confessions of our denomination.
6. Report its progress to the General Assembly Council prior to the 214th General Assembly (2002).

2003 Statement – PC(USA), pp. 43-44, 401

On Appointing a Pastoral Group Whose Primary Concern Would Be Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Members and Their Families in Our Local Churches

The 215th General Assembly (2003) approved the following recommendations:

1. Encourage presbyteries to equip pastors and sessions to provide pastoral care and nurture to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members and their families.
2. Encourage presbyteries, sessions, and pastors to seek out pastoral care resources presently available in their own communities for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members and their families.
3. Request the General Assembly Council, Congregational Ministries Division, to:
 - a. Identify and post on the appropriate pages of the Congregational Ministries Division Web site existing resources and models consistent with current General Assembly policies to assist presbyteries, pastors, and sessions in their pastoral ministries to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members and their families; and
 - b. Recommend to the next General Assembly the production of additional resources if the Congregational Ministries Division determines a need for such resources.

The Ordination of Homosexuals

ACSWP Introduction

The specific issue of homosexuality first arose as several presbyteries requested guidance from the General Assembly on ordaining avowed practicing homosexuals. In 1976, the UPCUSA General Assembly said, ". . . it would at the present time be injudicious, if not improper, for a presbytery to ordain to the professional ministry of the gospel a person who is an avowed practicing homosexual . . ." This particular General Assembly also ". . . direct[ed] that a task force be established . . . to study these issues . . ." (UPCUSA, 1976, p. 112). The 1978 UPCUSA General Assembly received the report of this task force and declared in its definitive guidance: "That unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination set forth in Form of Government, Chapter VII, Section 3 (37.03) . . ." (UPCUSA, 1978, p. 265). In 1979, the PCUS adopted largely the same document and conclusions (PCUS, 1979, pp. 207-208).

During the eighties and early nineties, the General Assembly was periodically requested to either reaffirm or clarify its position on the ordination of homosexuals. In 1985 the Permanent Judicial Commission decreed that 'definitive guidance' was indeed the law of the church, and individual churches or presbyteries could not follow or ignore it as they wished. Subsequent General Assemblies attempted to make this position clearer. In 1989, as an example of the nature of the discussion, the Assembly first voted not to reaffirm the position of the previous General Assemblies on ordination, as they were told this was a moot point. Later, during the same Assembly, at the urging of a former moderator who was concerned that it appeared as if the General Assembly was retreating from its previous position on the ordination of homosexuals, it reconsidered and said, ". . . the 201st General Assembly (1989) reaffirm[s] and celebrate[s] that [it] is an ecclesial body that places high value on doing things in good order, and we do recognize that we are bound by previous decisions until they are changed . . ." (PC(USA), 1989, p. 89). The 199th General Assembly (1987) asked the moderator to appoint a special task force to study the whole issue of human sexuality. Until it reported in 1991, all overtures on the ordination of homosexuals were referred to this task force. The 1991 General Assembly did not adopt the report of the Special Task Force on Human Sexuality, as mentioned above in the section on [Sexuality](#), but did adopt a pastoral letter and a series of recommendations, one of which stated ". . . We continue to abide by the position of the General Assemblies of 1978 and 1979 regarding homosexuality." (PC(USA), 1991, p. 56).

The 205th General Assembly (1993) continued to clarify the church's position on homosexuality and ordination, adopting as "authoritative interpretation" the response of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution to the many overtures offered by presbyteries (*see below*).

1978 Statement – UPCUSA, 1978, pp. 264

Ordination

To be an ordained officer is to be a human instrument, touched by divine powers but still an earthen vessel. As portrayed in Scripture, the officers set before the church and community an example of piety, love, service, and moral integrity. Officers are not free from repeated expressions of sin. Neither are members and officers free to adopt a lifestyle of conscious, continuing, and unresisted sin in any area of their lives. For the church to ordain a self-affirming, practicing homosexual person to ministry would be to act in contradiction to its character and calling in Scripture, setting in motion both within the church and society serious contradictions to the will of Christ. . . .

We believe that Jesus Christ intends the ordination of officers to be a sign of hope to the church and the world. Therefore our present understanding of God's will precludes the ordination of persons who do not repent of homosexual practice.

1978 Statement – UPCUSA, 1978, pp. 265-266

Conclusions

I. Response to Overture 9 (1976)

Therefore, the 190th General Assembly (1978) of The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America offers the presbyteries the following definitive guidance:

That unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination set forth in Form of Government, Chapter VII, Section 3 . . .

In relation to candidates for the ordained ministry, the committees should be informed by the above guidance.

II. Recommendations

. . . the 190th General Assembly (1978):

6. Urges candidates committees, personnel committees, nominating committees, and judicatories to conduct their examination of candidates for ordained office with discretion and sensitivity, recognizing that it would be a hindrance to God's grace to make a specific inquiry into the sexual orientation or practice of candidates for ordained office . . .

14. Declares that these actions shall not be used to affect negatively the ordination rights of any United Presbyterian deacon, elder, or minister who has been ordained prior to this date.

1979 Statement – PCUS, 1979, pp. 207-208

Ordination

To be an ordained officer is to be a human instrument, touched by divine power but still an earthen vessel. As portrayed in scripture, the officers set before the church and community an example of piety, love, service and moral integrity. Officers are not free from repeated expressions of sin. Neither are members and officers free to adopt a lifestyle of conscious, continuing and unresisted sin in any area of their lives. For the church to ordain a self-affirming practicing homosexual person to ministry would be to act in contradiction of its charter and calling in scripture, setting motion both within the church and in society serious contradictions to the will of Christ.

The repentant homosexual person who finds the power of Christ redirecting his or her sexual desires toward a married heterosexual commitment, or finds God's power to control his or her desires and to adopt a celibate lifestyle, can certainly be ordained, all other qualifications being met.

1982 Statement – UPCUSA, p. 111

[The General Assembly] reaffirms that the guidance of the 190th General Assembly (1978) shall be carefully and prayerfully considered by all judicatories and that within the explicit requirements of the *Book of Order* the responsibility for deciding on the ordination of any particular member of the church rests with the responsible judicatory on the basis of the definitive guidance given to the church as a whole by the 190th General Assembly (1978) and other Assemblies.

1993 Statement – PC(USA), p. 322

It is the opinion of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution that the General Assembly statements of 1978, 1979, and subsequent years concerning the ordination of self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons and related recommendations adopted by the General Assemblies have been considered by the judicial commissions of the church. They currently carry the weight of "authoritative interpretations."

Therefore, the Advisory Committee on the Constitution finds that

a. Current constitutional law in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is that self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons may not be ordained as ministers of the Word and Sacrament, elders, or deacons.

b. Any changes to or interpretations of the constitutional law of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) under the present *Book of Order* must follow the change process . . .

ACSWP Commentary

The 208th General Assembly (1996) once again took up the issue of homosexuality and ordination, responding to the mandate of the 205th General Assembly (1993) to engage in a three-year period of dialogue and study for the whole church. The Assembly Committee on Ordination and Human Sexuality, responding to dozens of overtures from presbyteries, proposed an amendment to the *Book of Order* that dealt specifically with ordination standards. The Assembly Committee asserted 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 (U.S.A.)" (PC(USA), 1996, p. 78).

The committee suggested wording that would be added to G-6.0106 of the *Book of Order*. The 208th General Assembly (1996) was also concerned about the pain that this action would cause many of our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) members. In response to that concern, a resolution was approved that called for a time of prayer and silence after the vote, recognizing that sincere Presbyterians would be deeply hurt by the results. Further, they approved resolutions that attempted to address the hurt felt by those in the larger church. Finally, they stated their concern that during the three-year period of dialogue and study, only 19% of congregations responded to queries about whether or not such dialogue and study had taken place.

1996 Statement – PC(USA), p. 77-80

[The 208th General Assembly (1996) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) directs the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly to send the following proposed amendment to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes:]

[Shall G-6.0106 be amended by designating the existing paragraph as a, and adding a new paragraph b, as follows:]

b. 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 woman (W-4.9001), 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 208th General Assembly (1996) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) prayerfully declares that this Assembly now commits itself and urges its presbyteries, sessions, congregations, ministers, elders, and members to ministries of compassion and healing for those whose sexual practices bring alienation and pain to many parts of the church and compassion and healing for those who feel alienation and pain by the actions of their church.

The 208th General Assembly (1996) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) requests the congregations, sessions, and presbyteries of our denomination to:

- a. continue study of the issue of ordination and human sexuality as we consider the overture relating to the goal of seeking more clarity in discerning God's will as found in Scripture and our historic confessions;
- b. open themselves to the leading of God's Spirit, especially in those spaces between our differences where a more complete understanding of God's Truth is being sought.
- c. place a special emphasis on dialog in which there is a "climate . . . that is open and non-discriminating, and that would not result in jeopardizing the reputation or standing of any partner in dialog"

Advisory Opinion #22
Actions of the 218th General Assembly related to G-6.0106b & G-6.0108

Recent actions by the 218th General Assembly regarding G-6.0106b and G-6.0108 in the *Book of Order* are raising questions in sessions and presbyteries about the effect of those actions on the work of these ordaining bodies. This is a synopsis of some of those actions and their effects.

- I. The 218th General Assembly voted (Item 05-09) to send a proposed constitutional amendment that asks the presbyteries to delete the current text of G-6.0106b¹ and insert new text² in its place.

Until a majority of the presbyteries vote to approve that amendment, the standards contained in the current G-6.0106b remain among the standards to be applied in examinations for ordination and installation.

- II. The 218th General Assembly adopted (Item 05-09) a new Authoritative Interpretation, which is now in effect:

Interpretive statements concerning ordained service of homosexual church members by the 190th General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the 119th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and all subsequent affirmations thereof, have no further force or effect.

What this means is that this identical wording from those 1978 and 1979 predecessor bodies is no longer in effect: “For the church to ordain a self-affirming, practicing homosexual person to ministry would be to act in contradiction to its charter and calling in Scripture, setting in motion both within the church and society serious contradictions to the will of Christ” (Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1979, 201; United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1978, 261).

The subsequent affirmations that are also negated include these words from the 1993 General Assembly *Minutes*, p. 76:

...we concur with the opinion of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution that ‘the General Assembly statements of 1978, 1979, and subsequent years

¹ 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 between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), 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.

² Those who are called to ordained service in the church, by their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003), pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions. In so doing, they declare their fidelity to the standards of the Church. Each governing body charged with examination for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240 and G=14.0450) establishes the candidate’s sincere efforts to adhere to these standards.

concerning the ordination of self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons and the related recommendations adopted by the General Assemblies have been considered by the judicial commissions of the church . . . [and] currently carry the weight of authoritative interpretations.'

Authoritative Interpretations relying on the following General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission cases (GAPJC) are now no longer in effect:

- *Union Presbyterian Church of Blasdell v. Presbytery of Western New York*, (1985, Part I, p. 121)
- *LeTourneau v. Presbytery of Twin Cities* (1993, 163, 11.044)
- *Sallade, et al. v. Presbytery of Genesee Valley* (1993, 166, 11.045)
- *Hope Presbyterian Church v. Central Presbyterian Church* (1994, 142, 11.086)

The GAPJC cases that responded to the current wording in G-6.0106b continue to have effect:

- *Wier v. Second Presbyterian Church* (1999, 831, 12.077)
- *Sheldon, et al. v. Presbytery of West Jersey* (2000, 589, 12.205)
- *Benton, et al. v. Presbytery of Hudson River* (2000, 586, 12.169)
- *Londonderry v. Presbytery of Northern New England* (2001, 577, 12.1028)
- *Wier v. Second Presbyterian Church, Ft. Lauderdale* (2002, 339, #214-5)
- *Hart, Presbytery of San Joaquin et al. v. Presbytery of Redwoods* (2003, 277, #215-8)
- *McKittrick v. West End Presbyterian Church* (2003, 272, #215-5)
- *Stewart v. Mission Presbytery* (2008, #218-04)

III. The 218th General Assembly also adopted (Item 05-12) a new Authoritative Interpretation of G-6.0108:

...the requirements of G-6.0108 ... apply equally to all ordination standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Section G-6.0108 requires examining bodies to give prayerful and careful consideration, on an individual, case-by-case basis, to any departure from an ordination standard in matters of belief or practice that a candidate may declare during examination. However, the examining body is not required to accept a departure from standards and cannot excuse a candidate's inability to perform the constitutional functions unique to his or her office (such as administration of the sacraments).

We believe this modifies the 2008 GAPJC decision of *Bush v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh*, in that the scrupling of either belief or practice is now allowed. The effect of this action is to remind ordaining bodies that they bear the responsibility for determining whether any particular standard (including those described in G-6.0106b) will be a bar to that particular candidate's ordination/installation. This Authoritative Interpretation preserves the historic right of sessions and presbyteries to determine their membership; all these decisions, however, continue to be subject to review by a higher governing body.

The 218th General Assembly left in place the prohibition in *Bush* which told ordaining bodies: “Restatements of the *Book of Order*, in whatever form they are adopted, are themselves an obstruction to the same standard of constitutional governance no less than attempts to depart from mandatory provisions.”

Other decisions by the 218th General Assembly:

IV. The assembly declined to propose an amendment to W-4.9001³, thus continuing the PC(USA) constitutional provisions reserving marriage for relationships between a man and a woman.

V. The assembly agreed to the appointment of a Special Committee of Fifteen to study the accuracy of the current translation of the Heidelberg Catechism. One of five areas of concern is Question 87⁴ dealing with those who will be saved. The special committee will be appointed by the Moderator of the 218th General Assembly to study the recommendation and bring back a proposal to the 219th General Assembly (2010). If that assembly approves the proposal, it will be sent to the presbyteries for approval. If two-thirds of the presbyteries vote to adopt the amendments to the catechism, it will return to the 220th General Assembly (2012). If that assembly approves the changes, then the corrected Heidelberg Catechism will replace the current version in *The Book of Confessions*.

³ Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith.

⁴ “Can those who do not turn to God from their ungrateful, impenitent life be saved?” The current text of the answer reads: “Certainly not! Scripture says, ‘Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolater, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexual perversion, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or swindlers, will possess the kingdom of God.’ ”

An observation of GA actions by Graham Hart, EP for Peace River Presbytery:

The first action, by a 380-325 vote, the GA is sending a proposed amendment to the denomination's 173 presbyteries that would delete the current paragraph G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order* and add the following: *"Those who are called to ordained service in the church, by their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003), pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions. In so doing, they declare their fidelity to the standards of the Church. Each governing body charged with examination for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240 and G-14.0450) establishes the candidate's sincere efforts to adhere to these standards."* As with all changes to the Book of Order, a majority of the presbyteries must vote to approve this change to the Book of Order before the 2010 General Assembly.

In the same action, the Assembly issued a new authoritative interpretation of the *Book of Order* declaring that interpretive statements related to sexual standards for ordination that predate the adoption of G-6.0106b in 1996 "have no further force or effect."

The second action is a new "authoritative interpretation" adopted for *Book of Order* G-6.0106b, the "fidelity and chastity" passage. This will permit governing bodies to ordain a candidate who declares a "scruple" or reservation about a specific item of polity or doctrine, such as G-6.0106b. If a candidate declares his or her conscience does not allow agreement with part of our polity or confessions, the governing body will have the authority and responsibility to decide whether or not such a person should be ordained. Presbyteries will be responsible for evaluating each candidate's entire fitness and readiness for ordination as a minister in light of any declared scruple. Similarly, congregations will need to make judgments for elders and deacons.

Outgoing Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick and Assembly Committee on Church Orders and Ministries moderator Rev. Dan Holloway both emphasized in a news conference directly following the floor vote that "the (PCUSA) Constitution has not changed" and that we will move forward with discussions that are "gracious and kind and welcoming."

For more information about these actions, go to <http://www.pcusa.org/ga218/news/ga08131.htm>.

So what does it mean for us?

This is not the first time in church history when there have been differences of understanding and interpretation. So how do we move through this time?

The first "Assembly" of the church is recorded in Acts 15 when leaders from the New Testament Church gathered in Jerusalem to debate whether the purity laws of the Old Testament were applicable to Gentiles. It was messy, yet even though the Apostles disagreed, they kept their eyes on Jesus and continued giving witness to the resurrection of Jesus. They continued to ask what it means for us to carry out the mission of God here and now, which is what I invite us to do as well.

Page two – Graham Hart

In the gospel of Luke there is the story of the disciples in the middle of a storm. Jesus was asleep, the boat seemed like it was going to sink and they were going to [perish](#). They panicked and cried out: “Master, Master, don’t you care? We are perishing! And he woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was calm.”

He said to them: “Be not afraid... Where is your faith?” And they were amazed.

This is what I know and believe.

We are in this boat called the PCUSA; and good people of deep faith who have differing views are in the boat, too. Some in the boat may be angry, some feel like we are perishing, some may be grateful, some confused; but Jesus is still the Lord of the winds and the waves... Jesus still can still calm the storm that is in us!

For almost two generations, people of faith in the PCUSA have come to different conclusions regarding the ordination of gay and lesbian people. There are those who believe that allowing the ordination of those who are homosexual is a matter of justice (i.e., that homosexuality is not a life-style choice but a condition of biology); and there are those who in good conscience feel it is about moral choices and is sin.

As Presbyterian leaders in Peace River, I believe this is a time to reach down into our spiritual center and do what we as Presbyterians do best:

- pray
- engage in careful and caring reflection,
- be in conversation with one another and with those who may not agree with us,
- listen, and seek the Spirit’s guidance,
- [and keep our eyes on Jesus.](#)

In the months to come, we will:

- have opportunity to talk about these issues,
- make our own ordination decisions in spite of what other Presbyteries may or may not do,
- continue to connect and support one another as we seek to make disciples, love our neighbors, and do the work of Christ,

A Personal Word - On the last night of the Assembly, over 70 Presbytery executives and stated clerks spontaneously gathered for prayer. I have to say that for me it was deeply moving. In the 7 years of being your General Presbyter, I have gathered with other EPs and GPs for worship, study, planning and prayer, but never as we did that Friday night. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we surrendered ourselves and this church to our Lord. We confessed our concerns and fears. We know that this action of GA may define some of our work for the next year; but we prayed that we each would:

Page three – Graham Hart

- seek to humbly walk with our God
- pray for each other as we serve the church at this time,
- keep our eyes on Jesus, even as we know that Christ is still the Lord of wind and waves and this church, and Jesus is with us all.

In the next year I look forward to discovering with you, all over again, the Jesus who is in the boat with us, calms troubled seas, stills the storms, and can bring new life, resurrection life, into the world as well as into our hearts, congregations, Presbytery and the PCUSA.

Thanks be to God;

Graham Hart

AUTHORITATIVE INTERPRETATIONS
Constitutional Musing #15

1. What is an authoritative interpretation?

An authoritative interpretation is an interpretation of a section of the *Book of Order*. An interpretation may be approved by a meeting of the General Assembly. At the Assembly the Advisory Committee on the Constitution gives advice on any overture or other action that proposes an authoritative interpretation. An Authoritative Interpretation may come from the General Assembly's Permanent Judicial Commission when that body interprets a *Book of Order* provision while deciding a case before it.¹

2. What authority do authoritative interpretations have?

Authoritative interpretations are constitutionally binding on all Presbyterians and Presbyterian governing bodies and their subgroups. The most recent interpretation of a provision of the *Book of Order* is binding.

3. Where did the idea of authoritative interpretations come from?

Our modern day practice of the use of authoritative interpretations first came into use by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission in 1985 when it recognized the "definitive guidance" provided by previous General Assemblies as authoritative interpretations.² The General Assembly itself subsequently concurred with this understanding, finding that definitive guidance adopted by previous General Assemblies carried "the weight of 'authoritative interpretations.'"³

In 1987 the General Assembly and the presbyteries codified the practice when they adopted the current wording in the *Book of Order* at G-13.0103r.⁴

Authoritative Interpretations are in effect until changed or revoked by a subsequent General Assembly or modified by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission.

Issued September 27, 2008

¹ G-13.0103r

² *Blasdell, et al. v. Pby of Western NY*, Remedial Case No. 197-9, 11.071

³ 1993 General Assembly *Minutes*, 318ff, 21.040-.049A

⁴ The General Assembly "has the responsibility and power to provide authoritative interpretation of the *Book of Order* which shall be binding on the governing bodies of the church when rendered in accord with G-13.0112 or through a decision of the Permanent Judicial Commission in a remedial or disciplinary case. The most recent interpretation of a provision of the *Book of Order* shall be binding;"

Advisory Opinion #21
Ordination Standards and Examinations
Essentials, Reformed Faith and Polity

In 2006, the 217th General Assembly adopted an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) of G-6.0108¹ that clarified the relative powers of the governing bodies within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This AI was affirmed and clarified by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission in February of 2008 in the opinions found in three cases.^{2 3 4}

The 2006 General Assembly AI provides that *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government of the *Book of Order* set forth the scriptural and constitutional standards for ordination and installation.⁵ Section 5b of the Authoritative Interpretation states that “these standards are determined by the whole church, after the careful study of Scripture and theology, solely by the constitutional process of approval by the General Assembly with the approval of the presbyteries. These standards may be interpreted by the General Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission.”⁶ (See at G-13.0103r.)

The GAPJC, in the three February 2008 cases, found the following:

1) Authoritative Interpretations may not change an ordination standard.

The GAPJC affirmed the General Assembly’s Authoritative Interpretation adopted from the Peace, Unity and Purity Report and Recommendations and found that “the GA Authoritative Interpretation did not (and constitutionally could not) change any ordination standard found in *The Book of Confessions* or the *Book of Order*.”⁷

2) Governing bodies may not restate, augment, diminish or define ordination standards.

The GAPJC found that attempts by other governing bodies to adopt resolutions, statements or policies that paraphrase or restate provisions of the *Book of Order* and/or declare them as “essentials of Reformed faith and polity” are confusing and unnecessary and are in violation of the constitution. Such declarations are obstructions to the requirement that a governing body must examine candidates for ordination. (See at G-10.0102 l and G-11.0103n.) “... [N]o lower governing body can constitutionally define, diminish, augment or modify standards for ordination and installation of church officers.”⁸ “Governing bodies do not have the authority to restate or define these standards.”⁹

¹ GA *Minutes* 2006, 28-29, 523, Item 06-01, especially Recommendation 5

² GAPJC 2008, 218-09, Buescher, et al v. Presbytery of Olympia

³ GAPJC 2008, 218-10, Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh

⁴ GAPJC 2008, 218-15, Session of 1st Presbyterian Church of Washington et al v. Presbytery of Washington

⁵ The GAPJC noted that since the 2006 AI, some of the standards for ordination and installation have been moved from the Form of Government (in Chapter 14) to the Directory for Worship using the constitutional process.

⁶ GA *Minutes* 2006, 28-29, 523, Item 06-01, especially Recommendation 5

⁷ GAPJC 2008, 218-09, Buescher, et al v. Presbytery of Olympia; GAPJC 2008, 218-10, Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ GAPJC 2008, 218-10, Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh

3) Governing bodies may not waive the G-6.0106b ordination standard.

Specifically, the GAPJC reiterated that “[t]he examining body is best suited to make decisions about the candidate’s fitness for office and in this determination they may not permit departure from the ‘fidelity and chastity’ requirement found in G-6.0106b.”¹⁰ In determining whether a candidate is in compliance with the constitutional standards, the examining governing body may allow a candidate to exercise their freedom of conscience with respect to interpretation of Scripture under G-6.0108 “to the extent that it is not a serious departure from the essential standards of Reformed faith and polity, does not infringe on the rights and views of others, and does not obstruct the constitutional governance of the church.”¹¹ An examining governing body may not allow a candidate to exercise their freedom of conscience if that “ignore[s] or waive[s] a specific standard of behavior that has been adopted by the whole church such as the ‘fidelity and chastity’ portion of G-6.0106b or any other similarly specific provision.”¹²

4) A candidate’s actions must conform to the ordination standards.

“...[T]he church has required those who aspire to ordained office to conform their actions, though not necessarily their beliefs or opinions, to certain standards in those contexts in which the church has deemed conformity to be necessary or essential. G-6.0106b contains a provision where conformity is required by church officers....”¹³ The responsibility for determination of failure to repent of any “practice which the confessions call sin”¹⁴ is first placed on the candidate and then on the examining governing body to determine whether a departure is a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.

5) “The ordaining body must examine the candidate individually.”¹⁵

The GAPJC also emphasized that each candidate must be examined individually by the examining governing body. Only in this way can the body determine whether any potential departure is a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.

In order to obtain a complete understanding of these decisions, we recommend that readers study all three of the cases, which may be found online at <http://www.pcusa.org/gapjc/decisions/pjc21809.pdf> (Buescher et al v. Pby of Olympia) <http://www.pcusa.org/gapjc/decisions/pjc21810.pdf> (Bush et al v. Pby of Pittsburgh) <http://www.pcusa.org/gapjc/decisions/pjc21815withconcurrences.pdf> (First Presbyterian Church session of Washington v. Pby of Washington)

¹⁰ GAPJC 2008, 218-10, Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh

¹¹ GAPJC 2008, 218-09, Buescher, et al v. Presbytery of Olympia; GAPJC 2008, 218-10, Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh

¹² GAPJC 2008, 218-10, Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ G-6.0106b

¹⁵ Ibid.