

**INTERIM RESPONSE TO OVERTURES RE HUMAN SEXUALITY**  
**COMMITTEE ON CHURCH DOCTRINE**

(A&P 2016, p. 260–65, 26, 28)

**OVERTURE NOS. 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 26 and 31, 2015** (A&P 2015, p. 576–81, 582–87, 601–02, 605–06, 248–49, 16–17)  
**Re: Affirming the Statement on Human Sexuality (1994)**

**OVERTURE NOS. 14, 18, 19 and 21, 2015** (A&P 2015, p. 588–90, 591–95, 595–97, 248–49, 16–17)  
**Re: Study paper on Human Sexuality affirming the Statement on Human Sexuality (1994)**

**OVERTURE NOS. 4, 5, 24, 30 and 35, 2015** (A&P 2015, p. 573–76, 598–99, 603–05, 609–10)  
**Re: Full inclusion regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity**

**OVERTURE NOS. 15, 2015** (A&P 2015, p. 590, 268–73, 47)  
**Re: Calling the church to listen regarding human sexuality**

**OVERTURE NOS. 16, 2015** (A&P 2015, p. 590–91, 268–73, 47)  
**Re: Encouraging dialogue on marriage and sexuality**

**OVERTURE NO. 23, 2015** (A&P 2015, p. 598, 248, 16)  
**Re: Gay and lesbian candidates for ministry and same-sex marriages**

**OVERTURE NO. 29, 2015** (A&P 2015, p. 603, 248, 17)  
**Re: Review biblical texts that speak to homosexual relationships**

**OVERTURE NO. 32, 2015** (A&P 2015, p. 17, 606)  
**Re: Upholding marriage as between one man and one woman**

**OVERTURE NO. 33, 2015** (A&P 2015, p. 17, 607–08)  
**Re: Issues of human sexuality**

Immediately following the 2015 General Assembly, members of the Committee on Church Doctrine began to consider the diverse prayers and affirmations made in these 22 overtures. [A related Overture No. 4, 2015 was not referred to our Committee]. Our initial investigations focussed on seeking and considering some of the relevant scientific information available, looking at the biblical material cited in the overtures and other passages deemed important, theological themes and a concise bibliography.

When we met in October to share our initial findings some broad directions for our ongoing work emerged. As we examined the various biblical texts, reviewed different and often antithetical interpretations, recalled previous work pursued on these matters, the range of perspectives among us and some of the themes that had arisen, we agreed to develop a ‘Kingdom’ framework or perspective to root and guide our ongoing work. Some early parts of this document are shared below.

We also agreed to continue to ponder and reflect on the biblical texts noted above and other passages that would ‘naturally’ reflect a Kingdom perspective as we endeavour to assist our denomination ‘to seek first God’s Kingdom and God’s righteousness’. In addition we are carefully examining the various assertions in the overtures and their prayers to be able to respond directly to the requests based on the validity of the reasoning.

In our ongoing reflections, investigations and discussion we have been able to make interim decisions to present as recommendations. We also have become very aware that while some overtures are seeking quick action, the scope of the material to be considered, the reports of many who are still in the process of reflection, the large number of requests for additional time to do careful consideration and the importance of the decisions for The Presbyterian Church in Canada indicates that we be permitted to continue these initiatives and make further reports of our findings to the 2017 General Assembly.

As noted above we are developing material on a Kingdom perspective as a basis and guide for our work on these 22 overtures. Some of the foundational work has been completed and we offer this beginning piece to the church for consideration, encouragement and as a way to continue discussion and reflection embracing both grace and truth. Even though this initial part is a work in progress, it does provide some of the foundation for the recommendations which follow. It is entitled ‘The Way of God’s Reign’.

## THE WAY OF GOD'S REIGN

### Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace

There is no simple solution that slices the Gordian knot in which we have tied ourselves regarding sexuality and marriage, gender and faithfulness, discipleship and mission within The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Indeed, the issues are so complex and fraught that we find that most of our discussion concerns only a piece of all that needs to be discussed – and that piece is the question of whether The Presbyterian Church in Canada should affirm same-sex relationships.<sup>1</sup> It is unlikely that a clear way through the tangle of our differences will appear with more conversation about how we interpret scripture. While The Presbyterian Church in Canada has not officially argued about same-sex relationships for a number of decades, we would be ignorant not to acknowledge that many Christians, both within and outside of our denomination, have been making nuanced and subtle exegetical and theological arguments on the matter. Still, no agreement on the path forward has become manifest. Any new path will likely not come about with more conversation regarding our understandings of theological anthropology, Christology, or justice. While we are Reformed and there is profound agreement about the core of our faith and our subordinate standards, there is also a breadth within the tradition in terms of opinion and practice. At the same time, it is also not likely that a constructive way ahead will come about merely with more scientific research: science can add to our understanding of God and one another, but does not necessarily determine it.

We argue that a way forward can only emerge if we start in a different place than we have in the past. Turning away from our favoured arguments to such a different place will take courage because we all have a stake in the prayers of the overtures around same-sex relationships. Given that we do not have agreement on many issues, the question becomes how can we have unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? Our answer is, “within the Kingdom of God”. As we have examined the theological lens of “the Kingdom of God” we have become convinced that it offers a better option because it so profoundly points to the unity within diversity of the church and where we are called to go as disciples. The conversation we should be having first is about the nature of the church and then about human sexuality.

Our argument proceeds in three parts. First, we trace how the coming Reign of God is conveyed in the larger themes of scripture. Second, we point to an ethic for us as servants within the Kingdom that finds its centre at the Lord's Table. This ethic includes a posture of humility before each other and God as we work together towards a common Kingdom – diverse but unified. Third, we explore how faithful unity in diversity might begin to be lived out within The Presbyterian Church in Canada in the light of the characteristics of God's reign.

### Contours of the Kingdom of God

As we speak about the reality of God's coming gracious rule, we will use the terms “Kingdom of God” and “Reign of God” interchangeably. This use of language highlights some of the paradoxical truths about the great hope that God offers to the world, as Christians proclaim it. We declare that the hope God offers has appeared with the coming of Jesus Christ, with his life, death and resurrection; but we also proclaim that the completion of that hope has not yet happened, as the universe does not yet exhibit the peace and holiness which God intends. Alongside this, we declare that God has sovereignty over all that is, was and will be, now and forever, beyond the beginning and the end of time. We trust in these things, but have only a limited understanding of them. Thus, the term “Kingdom” implies a static political boundary that has a punctiliar nature – that is, it happens at a particular point in time – and so can refer to the hope inaugurated by Jesus as well as the final fulfilment of that hope. The term “Reign” implies a dynamic political action that has an ongoing nature, and underlines the constant work of God in the world. The Kingdom of God is all of this: present and effective today, a time we long for, and the ongoing action of God's ruling providence that stretches backward and forward in time. Faithful followers of Christ have always witnessed to the tensions between these while still affirming all three, and the situation is no different for us today.

As we trace the Reign of God theme in scripture we recognize the Kingdom as:

**A Metaphor Appropriate to Describe God's Intentions for Creation.** The Bible regularly resorts to parable, a way of telling something slant, and poetic imagery to stake the contours of the Kingdom. For example, in Isaiah's prophetic vision of redemption, people “are inscribed on the palms of God's hands” while ruins are rebuilt (Isaiah 49:16–17); in Matthew's account the Kingdom is said to be like a mustard seed which grows into an impossible tree (Matthew 13:31–32).<sup>2</sup> Following scripture, our speech about the Reign of God must be humble. To speak of the thing itself as if we know it entirely is to fall into idolatry. Humility does not imply apophaticism or appeals to the “ineffable mystery” of God. Rather, it is to suggest

that God in God's action in the world disturbs our normal discursive ways of encountering God so that we must rely on God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ for our knowledge.

**Centred on Jesus Christ, Servant King.** Scripture proclaims the Reign as coming near in the presence of Jesus (Matthew 4:17). While King, Jesus reigns like no other. Christ reverses worldly conceptions of power by means of a righteous grace, a holy love and, ultimately, a powerful self-giving on the cross. With Christ's ascension to the right hand of God the Father, the Kingdom of God continues until that final day when every knee shall bow in submission and worship before the throne. The Reformed tradition recognizes this as an integral part of the offices of Christ by naming him King. The Reign of God is therefore personal (found in relationship to a person not a concept) and when we encounter Jesus Christ, we encounter God.

**Upheld by Jesus Christ, Lord of Time.** Because Jesus Christ was and is and ever shall be, the Kingdom of God is found within the witness of all scripture, within our everyday lived experience, and within time as yet to come. Christ's presence is made known through God's Holy Spirit, even as all creation exists through that providential accompanying, sustaining, and creating Spirit. To privilege either protology or eschatology (theology of creation and of end-times, respectively), or to dwell on matters of chronology is to deny the reality of the Reign of God.

**Proclaimed by the Son of Mary, Son of God.** God sent Jesus as a human man, a Jew, a student and interpreter of the law, teaching and ministering in a particular time and place. Christians are bound to follow this Jew, this Galilean of a different faith than our own. The Kingdom is not Docetic, a purely 'spiritual' reality. Thus, the Kingdom of God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth looks to the redemption of all our ordinary moments, the transfiguration of us as creatures in all our particularities and differences, and not in the abolition of those particularities and differences.

**The Law Fulfilled in Jesus Christ.** Jesus Christ did not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it in his person. Like all kingdoms, God's Reign has a law but a different one from the normal human legal systems. Following Deuteronomy and Leviticus, Jesus Christ sided with those interpreters who defined the heart and essence of the law as the love of God and neighbour (Matthew 22:37–40). Consistently and thoroughly, Jesus challenged and reinterpreted any understandings of God's covenant with humanity which strayed from justice, love and holiness. The Law of the Kingdom is Jesus Christ. For instance, Jesus reminds listeners that Sabbath is a time of mercy (Matthew 12:7) rather than a time for prideful neglect of the needs of others. In the Reign of God, the law will be/is written upon human hearts rather than carved in stone (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

**A Prophetic Call to Faithfulness.** Jesus as Prophet calls all of humanity to lives that are consonant with his reign as Servant King. Earlier prophets, such as Isaiah, called God's people to covenantal faithfulness all the while pointing to an eschatological vision of God's Kingdom that encompasses all of creation (Isaiah 62:6–12; 65:17–25). When Jesus uses Isaiah to declare the Reign coming, he declares that the Kingdom is at work right now as the world becomes a place of abundance, freedom, healing and justice for the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed (Luke 4:16–22).

**Inviting and Requiring Obedience.** Through Jesus Christ, who is the fulfilment of God's covenantal faithfulness with and for humanity, God reveals how we should act as citizens of the Reign of God. Our duty is not onerous or based on a set of laws or principles. Rather, we submit to Jesus Christ through the way of the cross. This obedience will result in a unity of action and belief. God's reign is lived out by seeking mercy and justice through humility before God (Micah 6:8; Matthew 6:33). Christians are those who call on Jesus as Lord and seek to do God's will as God's Kingdom comes.

**Creating a Community.** No king reigns without citizens. We should not conflate "church" and "Kingdom", for some once considered unclean or excluded find a place in the eschatological vision of the reign of God (e.g. eunuchs, foreigners, the blind, the lame; see Isaiah 56:1–8, Matthew 11:5, 20:1–16 for examples) and in the end God chooses who stands within God's Reign. One of the hallmarks of a Kingdom community is a concern for those who are "lost" (Luke 15:3–10). The Kingdom belongs to those such as children, although some, such as the rich, may find obedience too high a price to pay (Mark 10:13–16, 23).

**Restoring Creation through Reconciliation.** The power of sin that leads to death has been abolished by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. On the cross, Jesus is called King and he demonstrates his lordship over all by conquering death. In the empty tomb found in a garden, God reveals God's saving action to restore the natural world and heal fractured relationships (Isaiah 11:6–9; Matthew 13:31–32), leading creation to the full reconciliation of all things (Colossians 1:20).

**A Concrete Reality.** Contrary to popular conceptions of “heaven”, the Kingdom is not ephemeral or some sort of parallel universe. Rather, both in the here-and-now and in the time-to-come, the Kingdom is tangibly manifest. Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully divine, and as the fulfilment of the Kingdom, demonstrates that both flesh and spirit are constitutive parts of being a creature. The Reign of God includes a new temple (Priest), new Jerusalem (King), and a new earth (Prophet) (Ezekial 40:1–47; Revelation 21:1–4).

**A Feast whose Promise is Embodied in the Lord's Supper.** On the night of his arrest, condemned in part by the political charge of treason, Jesus gave a banquet for his disciples. Contrary to images of grandeur and opulence, Jesus gathered his friends (including those who betrayed, abandoned and denied him) around a table to inaugurate a new community. As often as we, faithful servants and sinners, eat the bread and drink the wine we do so with Christ the King presiding. Each communion is a prophetic revelation, an anticipation of the final feast hosted by God (Isaiah 25:6–10a; Luke 14:15–24).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the majority of this paper addresses same-sex relationships within The Presbyterian Church in Canada. We suggest that the Kingdom/Reign of God lens that we use may also help to address questions of lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender, intersex and queer identities and belonging but have only hinted at that further conversation here. That said, we acknowledge that the challenges facing LGBTQ would be in no way ended by an ecclesiastical agreement over same-sex relationships. We admit, neither for the first nor the last time, that much more work needs to be done.

<sup>2</sup> See also Isaiah 60:1–61:11; Jeremiah 31:10–14; Ezekial 34:11–31; Micah 4:1–4; Matthew 14:44–53; 25:31–46; Luke 1:46–55, 68–79; 13:20–21; Revelation 22:2, among many others.

The 2015 General Assembly also instructed our committee to confer with the Life and Mission Agency Committee (Justice Ministries) throughout the coming year as each continues the work of responding to the overtures referred to them. (The joint preparation of the study guide was a separate initiative mandated by last year's Assembly.) We have attempted to do so by sharing draft reports and also relevant material approved by our committee for reporting to the 2016 General Assembly. These documents were normally sent to Stephen Allen, Associate Secretary, Justice Ministries. One of our sub-committee's conveners also spoke with him during the preparation of their draft report. Throughout the course of the year some responses sent to the Committee on Church Doctrine were also shared with Stephen Allen and vice-versa. Most responses from our church, however, were distributed directly to both groups. As well a number of conversations and emails between the convener and Life and Mission Agency staff have taken place.

Unfortunately, the decision of the 2015 General Assembly to make available the notes of the conversations during the facilitated process to the Committee on Church Doctrine and the Life and Mission Agency Committee (Justice Ministries) to assist our committees as we prepared our responses for this year's Assembly wasn't completed. We did have the prayers accessible and many of them were incorporated into the study guide.

### **Recommendation No. 2** (adopted, p. 26)

That The Presbyterian Church in Canada seek the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace in light of the Reign of God, in a response to the overtures named above and, in particular, the prayer of Overture No. 16, 2015 re encouraging dialogue on marriage and sexuality.

### **Recommendation No. 3** (amended and adopted, p. 28)

That all courts of the church be urged to deal with people in same-sex relationships with tender pastoral care.

**Recommendation No. 4** (adopted, p. 28)

That the Committee on Church Doctrine in consultation with the Life and Mission Agency continue to reflect on the nature of Christian marriage in relation to LGBTQ and intersex people and report back to the 2017 General Assembly.

**Recommendation No. 5** (adopted, p. 28)

That the Life and Mission Agency in consultation with the Committee on Church Doctrine continue to reflect theologically on the spiritual needs of transgender and intersex people, and report back to the 2017 General Assembly.

**Recommendation No. 6**, as amended (p. 39), was adopted as follows:

That the General Assembly receive the above report as an interim response to the prayers of Overture Nos. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33 and 35, 2015; and grant permission to report on the response to these overtures to the 2017 General Assembly.