

**PROPOSAL FOR A PROCESS OF DEALING WITH OVERTURES
REGARDING HUMAN SEXUALITY**

SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT

BACKGROUND

The Committee on Church Doctrine (CCD) and the Life and Mission Agency (LMA) worked together to determine how to address the many overtures regarding human sexuality that are before the court this year. It was agreed that the recommended process in considering these many overtures would broadly reference human sexuality and sexual orientation and seek to create a respectful place for listening and discerning.

The CCD and LMA are grateful to Prof. Patricia Dutcher-Walls, Dr. Kevin Livingston, and Principal Dale Woods who agreed to apply their skills in education, group dynamics and process in preparing this proposal. Their submission was endorsed by the CCD and the LMA and forwarded to the Clerks of Assembly and the Business Committee. The Clerks of Assembly have recommended to the Business Committee generous times on the agenda Saturday and Sunday to carry out this process. The Assembly will consider the joint report of the CCD and LMA (p. 5.1.1) beginning on Friday afternoon. Additional time to consider these joint recommendations on the floor of Assembly can be scheduled to follow the time of discernment.

The following proposal offers a plan to have small group processes at this General Assembly. In an effort to base the discernment of the court completely in listening to the church, as it is represented by the commissioners present, there is no proposal for any committee of the whole times nor discussion or debate, nor does it include any presentations. The resources suggested for reading and background are important for commissioners and the church in the year ahead. This proposal is based on the belief that the primary need right now is respectful listening.

The Committee on Church Doctrine and the Life and Mission Agency express their sincere thanks and appreciation to the planning committee for their rapid turnaround and thoughtful work put into the report.

Goals for the Process of Discussion on Human Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

1. A process that enables the capacity for respectful listening; a listening practice that would result in people afterwards saying, “that was a good discussion, everyone was heard”.
2. A process that establishes trust, where people can give up any need to dominate the discussion and instead seek to listen and be listened to.
3. A process that enables the capacity to remain who you are and stay connected, even when there are disagreements.
4. A process that gets to the inner fears and hopes of participants, that is, the larger and deeper issues than particular texts/doctrines/decisions.
5. A process that creates feedback for the larger church from the discussions of the table groups.
6. A process that itself might be a model for a process to be suggested to the larger church for the “year of conversation and discernment” that is one of the recommendations proposed.
7. A process that frames the whole discussion and discernment in prayer generated by and from the people themselves – “we are a praying people” who in humility surrender to God, listen for the Spirit of Jesus moving in our midst, and surround ourselves with prayer.
8. A process that builds on the leadership idea that “the answer is already in the room” and that gives permission and creates a space/time for participants to discern it.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FOR COMMISSIONERS

A joint recommended reading list was placed on the website and commended to the attention of Commissioners to Assembly. The following documents can be found at presbyterian.ca/sexuality/:

Reports from The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Report on Human Sexuality, Committee on Church Doctrine, A&P 1994, p. 251–74.

Interim Report of the Special Committee on Sexual Orientation, A&P 2000, p. 482–92.

Report of the Special Committee on Sexual Orientation, A&P 2003, p. 526–547.

“Confessing the Faith Today” prepared by the Church Doctrine Committee and adopted as a study document for the church by General Assembly (2003). This document discusses and acknowledges the implications of the idea of “a reformed church, always reforming according to the Word of God” as a way to frame possibilities of reformulating church doctrine within the Reformed tradition. This awareness is an important part of the church’s current discernment process.

Articles

Campolo, Peggy, and Tony Campolo. “*Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*” Institute for Welcoming Resources. From February 29, 1996. welcomingresources.org/campolo. This is the transcript of a discussion between Tony and Peggy Campolo (husband and wife).

Cavey, Bruxy. “Are We ‘Gay Friendly?’” The Meeting House, Teaching Resources. 2005; updated 2013. themeetinghouse.com/resources/tmh/teaching_resources/Gay_Friendly_Statement.pdf.

Gushee, David P. *Reconciling Evangelical Christianity with Our Sexual Minorities: Reframing the Biblical Discussion*. This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics, Chicago, January, 2015, 18 pages. The article is an abbreviated version of Gushee’s book, *Changing Our Mind*, www.ChangingOurMind.org David Gushee is the Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics, Director of the Center for Theology and Public Life, Mercer University, in Atlanta, Georgia. In this paper, Gushee lays out the biblical, and ethical reasons he has changed his mind and why he now supports full inclusion of men and women who are LGBT.

Books

Grenz, Stanley J. *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998. Grenz writes to examine the question of whether contemporary culture has provided such important new insights into homosexuality that the church’s historic understanding of the scripture must be revised. He concludes it has not. Overall, he advocates a church which welcomes all people without affirming all behaviours.

Rogers, Jack. *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*. 2nd ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009. This particular resource is important because it is specifically Presbyterian and represents an ethos close to The PCC. It was also a key resource that led the PC(USA) to decide to move from an understanding similar to our own to its current position in which sexual orientation no longer limits service in the denomination.

VanderWal-Gritter, Wendy. *Generous Spaciousness: Responding to Gay Christians in the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2014. VanderWal-Gritter is the director of New Direction ministries in Canada. This organization was part of the Exodus network, a prominent evangelical ex-gay movement in the USA. VanderWal-Gritter tells the story of a radical change in the approach of her ministry as she encountered LGBTQ people as human beings and observed harm done to them through Christian initiatives. The New Direction web site lists numerous resources.

Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (Convergent Books, 2014).

Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Zondervan, 2010)

FACILITATOR

The planning committee recommended, and the CCD and the LMA agreed, that the Moderator, the Rev. Karen Horst, serve as facilitator for the small group processes. In preparing for this process, the Moderator would be advised and assisted by Prof. Pat Dutcher-Walls.

OUTLINE OF PROCESSES

Saturday – “Listening Circles” in table groups

- Estimate of time: 1 hour and 45 minutes
- A guideline for group discussions is attached with this resource (p. 5.3.1–2) and will be reviewed by the facilitator to facilitate and support a respectful listening process and space.
- Questions have been prepared and are attached (p. 5.3.3); additional copies will also be available.

- Table groups will be formed with the hope that there will be a diversity of opinions and experiences represented.

Listening Group Process: Part 1: Listening Circles

- Participants will use the questions that have been provided with this resource.
- Ten to fifteen minutes is spent as individuals consider and jot personal notes/answers on the questions.
- Listening Circles: for each question, go around the table with each participant given the opportunity to speak or pass on the first go-round, with a second go round for any who passes the first time. Share responses to all the prepared questions in this way. A shell will be provided for the group to help participants visualize whose turn it is to speak.

Listening Group Process: Part 2: Gathering Voices

- Each group spends five minutes in silence for each participant to consider and jot notes on the question: What ideas/comments do we want to gather from our listening circles so that the variety of our comments are represented in order to share these with the church at large?
- As this same question is shared around the circle, one or more note takers capture the ideas.
- The group collectively ensures that the perspectives of all the members of the sharing circle at the table have been well represented. This feedback will be given to LMA and CCD and used during the year of conversation and discernment.

Listening Group Process: Part 3: Lifting Up Comments

- Table groups consider the following question: “What ideas/comments do we want to gather from our listening circles so that the variety of our comments is represented in order to share with General Assembly today?” The group selects a few (nor more than four or five) comments that capture the variety at the table.
- Newsprint sheet and markers are on each table so these comments can be printed in large print and posted for all to see in an appropriate spot.

Sunday “Praying Circles” in table groups

Join the table group you were in on Saturday afternoon.

- This group time is deliberately scheduled on Sunday morning as a way of continuing the listening and discernment in the context of Sabbath time together.
- Estimated time: one hour
- The facilitator reviews the guidelines for the group discussions to help facilitate a respectful listening process.
- Question for praying circles: “If you were to summarize the conversations held yesterday by your own and the other GA table groups as a one-sentence prayer in your own words, what would that prayer be?”
 - Eight to ten minutes of individual time to consider and jot personal notes/answers and write a prayer.
 - Listening Circle: each person reads their one sentence prayer to the group and briefly describes why they wrote what they did.
 - All the prayers are written and gathered. These prayers will be processed by the LMA and CCD so that a prayer booklet can be created and distributed to the church during the upcoming year.
 - Table groups consider the prayers the members have heard in the group and then considers this question: “What prayers do we want to gather from our listening circle so that the variety of our prayers is represented in order to share with General Assembly today?”
 - The group selects a few prayers to be written for immediate use of the General Assembly in a large Prayer Circle.
- The General Assembly is invited into a time of prayer during which persons named by the Moderator read the prayers that have been gathered from the table groups.
 - Before the prayers begin, one representative from each table brings forward the “listening shell” and places it in a baptismal font near the podium, to remind us of our baptism in Christ. During this time the prayers will be sorted to avoid obvious repetition.
 - The prayers are offered and the Moderator leads a closing prayer.

This concludes the General Assembly process outside of any motions, etc that may be considered.

Listening Circles Group Guidelines

Adapted from “Vocation CARE:
A Social and Spiritual Process for Discerning Christian Vocation”
The Fund for Theological Education

1. Be fully present, extending and presuming welcome.

Set aside the usual distractions of things undone from yesterday, things to do tomorrow. Welcome others into this story space and presume you are welcome as well.

2. Listen Generously.

Listen intently to what is said; listen to the feelings beneath the words. As Quaker Douglas Steere writes, “To listen another’s soul into life, into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest gift we can offer to another.”

3. Author Your Story.

We all have a story. Some might say, “I don’t have a story” or “a story worth telling,” but you do and the world is in need of hearing it. You must claim authorship of your own story and learn to tell it to others so they might understand you, be inspired by you and discover what calls you to be who you are, to do what you do or to love what you love.

4. We come as equals.

We don’t have the same gifts, limits or experiences, but no person’s gifts, limits or experiences are more or less important than another’s.

5. It is never “share or die.”

You will be invited to share stories and comments in small groups. The invitation is exactly that. You will determine the extent to which you want to participate.

6. No fixing.

We are not here to set someone else straight, right a wrong, or provide therapy. We are here to witness God’s presence and movement in the sacred stories and comments we share.

7. Suspend judgment.

Set aside your judgments. By creating a space between judgments and reactions, we can listen to another person, and to ourselves, more fully.

8. Turn to wonder.

If you find yourself becoming judgmental or cynical, try turning to wonder: “I wonder why she shared that story or made those choices?” “I wonder what my reaction teaches me?” “I wonder what he’s feeling right now?”

9. Hold these stories and comments with care.

There are many people who will benefit from the stories and comments they hear during our time together. Imagine hearing another as you would listen to Scripture — attentively, mindfully and open to the Holy.

10. Be mindful and respectful of time.

We all have something important to share and the discipline of time invites us to focus and make particular choices about what to share and how much to share so that we might hear the deep longings of another's soul.

11. Practice confidentiality care.

We create a safe space by respecting the nature and content of the stories and comments heard. If anyone asks that a story or comment shared be kept in confidence, the group will honor that request.

12. Welcome discomfort and dislocation.

In the midst of new and uncomfortable places and the company of strangers, move against an instinct to construct a mental space of safety or to check out. In what causes unease, see another world to be discovered. Perhaps it already lives secretly within you.

13. Love the questions themselves.

Let your questions linger. Release the compulsion to answer them or to have them answered. Trust the questions to guide you toward loving first what you do not altogether understand. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke says, "Have patience with all that remains unsolved within your heart."

14. Believe that it is possible for us to emerge from our time together refreshed, surprised and less burdened than when we came.

Expect that our work together can provide renewal, refreshment and possibilities for what we can do together to create the future that is waiting to be born, and that seeds planted here will keep growing and flourish in the days ahead in service to God's church and renewing work in the world.

Saturday Listening Circles Small Group Discussion Format

Requirements: **A copy of this paper for each commissioner.
A shell that will be held by the speaker at each table and is shared
around the table in a timely manner.**

First, please answer all of the following questions on your own, in writing during a time of silence and prayer.

1. When you consider the issues around human sexuality and sexual orientation in the PCC, what do you most hope for?
2. When you consider the issues around human sexuality and sexual orientation in the PCC, what are your greatest fears?
3. What, for you, are the greatest issues/concerns around human sexuality and sexual orientation? How have these issues impacted or affected your own life and relationships, or conversations you have had? What feelings do you have about these impacts?
4. What qualities and values of the gospel should we try to express in considering the issues of human sexuality and sexual orientation in the PCC?

Now in your table group, please go around the circle taking one question at a time, and allowing each person to share their answer in turn. Please remember the “Covenants of Presence” guidelines, and practice open listening without interrupting or commenting on answers shared by others when it’s your turn to speak on each question.

Please make sure everyone has a chance to share in each go-round of the circle. No one is compelled to speak if they would rather pass on giving their answer to any of the questions in the first go-round on each question. Any person who initially passed on speaking should be given a time to speak after the first go-round.