



Homosexuality

Introduction

Along with much of the society in which it serves, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been engaged in a complex and rigorous discussion about homosexuality for much of the last thirty years. Men and women of deep faith and honest intelligence can and do differ on how they understand Scripture and hear the vibrant voice of the Holy Spirit on the subject of homosexuality and same-sex practice.

In 2010, the Committee on Church Orders and Ministry of the 219th General Assembly (2010) expressed for the church that “The PC(USA) has no consensus in the interpretation of Scripture on issues of same-sex practice” and made reference to “our long-standing Presbyterian commitment to freedom of conscience and mutual forbearance.”¹

Discussions about homosexuality and the PC(USA) generally fall into two areas: homosexuality in the church and society, and ordination and homosexuality.

Homosexuality in the church and society

The history of this discussion has its earliest expression in the report, “The Church and Homosexuality,” adopted by the 190th General Assembly (1978) of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America [an antecedent denomination to the current Presbyterian Church (U.S.A)]. This report affirmed its understanding that homosexuality was “not God’s wish for humanity,” yet opened doors for gays and lesbians to be members of the church, calling on the church to “reject ... the sin of homophobia” and to work for the passage of laws prohibiting discrimination.

In 1980, the 120th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States added:

*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 persons'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.*²

In 1987, the 199th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 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....”³

Ordination and homosexuality

One key recommendation of the 1978 report, which was affirmed in similar language by the Presbyterian Church in the United States [an antecedent denomination to the current Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)], concerned the ordination of teaching elders (ministers of the Word and Sacrament), ruling elders, and deacons.

While the General Assembly had not denied ordination of individuals based solely on sexual orientation, the assembly did provide the following definitive guidance of the ordination standards that were contained in the *Book of Order* (Part II of the PC(USA) Constitution): “*That unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination....*”

With this action, the 190th General Assembly (1978) took a stance against ordaining as teaching elders (ministers of the Word and Sacrament), ruling elders, and deacons those who engaged in “unrepentant homosexual practice.”

For the next three decades, much of the debate and theological reflection continued to focus on ordination. The 1978 stance, considered definitive guidance for the church on this subject, was formalized in the PC(USA) Constitution in 1997 when a majority of presbyteries approved an amendment to the *Book of Order* (G-6.0106b), commonly known as the “fidelity and chastity” clause. It stated:

*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. (G-6.0106b)*⁴

In 2008, the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) withdrew the original 1978 definitive guidance statement about ordination and all subsequent interpretations with the following action:

*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.*⁵

While this statement removed the interpretive statements made by the church in 1978, it did not remove the constitutional standard of “fidelity and chastity” in the *Book of Order* (G-6.0106b).

Current status regarding ordination: In 2010, the 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) took action to amend G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order* by replacing the “fidelity and chastity” language with the following:

Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (F-1.02). The council responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-2.0402; G-2.0607; G-3.0306) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates. (G-2.0104b)

A majority of presbyteries in the PC(USA) ratified this amendment, which became official on July 10, 2011. The language is now found in G-2.0104b of the *Book of Order*.

The effects of the current language:

- In keeping with our historic principles of church order, each session and presbytery will continue to determine the suitability of individuals seeking ordination within its bounds.
- Persons in a same-gender relationship may be considered for ordination and/or installation as deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders (ministers of the Word and Sacrament) within the PC(USA).
- All other churchwide standards for ordination remain unchanged.

Summary

By neither endorsing same-sex practice nor reaffirming the original convictions of the General Assembly in 1978, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) finds itself without consensus on homosexuality. Yet, actions of the General Assembly have led to conversations of discernment on congregational and presbytery levels, especially regarding the ordination of persons in same-gender relationships.

The PC(USA) is living into the experience of members of the General Assembly's Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, which they shared in their report to the 217th General Assembly (2006):

[We have found that] ...perspectives on questions of sexuality, ordination, and same-gender covenantal relationship are rich and complex, and our fellow task force members who hold these views are sincere, faithful, and guided by Scripture.... (lines 602-604)

¹Minutes of the 219th General Assembly (2010), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 455

²Minutes of the 120th General Assembly (1980), Presbyterian Church in the United States, p. 213

³Minutes of the 199th General Assembly (1987), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 776.

⁴Minutes of the 219th General Assembly (1997), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 686

⁵Minutes of the 218th General Assembly (2008), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 373