

Triune God, Three-in-One,
Perfect Unity in Diversity,
Hold us together
in love.

Dear God, give us courage
to follow where you lead.

Dear God, please
help us to listen
to each other
and discern your will
by studying the scripture and
praying with compassion.

Lord, may hurts
be met by healing,
and fears
replaced by trust,
confidence and peace
through Jesus.

Body, Mind and Soul

We want
to do
your will.
Help us.

Dear God,
teach us
how to love
all your
children.

Thinking together about
human sexuality and
sexual orientation in
The Presbyterian Church in Canada

May we be open
to seeking, hearing,
understanding, and
following the leading
of the Holy Spirit.



Body, Mind and Soul

*Thinking together about human sexuality and sexual orientation
in The Presbyterian Church in Canada*

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A Note about this Study Guide

This study guide has been written for the church in order to help foster informed conversation on a difficult topic. The main document (from page 4 to page 78) provides

- tools for biblical study
- summaries of several theological categories that are central to our faith and the Reformed Tradition
- a survey of the recent tradition in the PCC on the topic of human sexuality and homosexuality
- a look into biological and psychological studies on this subject
- an opportunity for sharing experiences and theological reflection together

If groups choose to use the supplemental handouts (from page 79 to page 116), they can be printed or photocopied and distributed to group participants. In this case, the main document becomes a kind of leaders' guide. In every case, the supplemental handouts are meant to be used in conjunction with the main document and not as an independent document.

In order to make the supplemental handouts more cohesive, some portions of the main document (the Introduction, the Tradition chapter and the Glossary) have been replicated.

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Introduction

PRAYERS FROM THE 141ST GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Creating God, we pray that we will be the body of Christ: united and diverse; redeemed and transformed; broken but holy.

We pray that this will lead to a greater trust — trust in each other, trust in you, trust that the Spirit will guide us to make the decision you want us to make, and trust that we will move forward, united as your beloved children.

Gracious Lord, at the end of this process, when the decisions are made regarding how the church responds to humanity sexuality, whatever the decisions, may our church family come out stronger.

Sexuality is an essential part of who we are as human beings. In the past year, there has been renewed conversation and questions around human sexuality, sexual orientation and the church. The subject of human sexuality and sexual orientation was a significant focus for The Presbyterian Church in Canada's highest court, the General Assembly, when we met in June of 2015. As a result, the church has asked for a study guide to help us look at the biblical texts, think carefully, talk together, and prayerfully consider this important subject.

The story that follows is a first-person account of the writer's experience as a commissioner at the 141st General Assembly as a participant in the table discussions formed around sexual orientation and related matters. The Assembly gave commissioners a set of listening guidelines intended to help foster honest, forthcoming and authentic sharing within the groups (see guidelines on page 12). The General Assembly hopes that biblical and theological, honest and open conversation will continue to occur across our church so that we can better understand the Word of God and our brothers and sisters in Christ, and discern together the Holy Spirit at work in our midst. The guidelines are listed in full at the end of this introduction, with the hope that they will continue to be used in all conversations about human sexuality and sexual orientation in our church.

Beginnings: Presbyterians Gather for Conversation

At the 141st General Assembly, commissioners were divided into groups of eight people to discuss our experiences around the issues of human sexuality, sexual orientation and our church. The formation of the groups was a completely random process. As people headed to their numbered tables, they had no idea who they would meet and what the theological and experiential location of the various members of their group would be. As it turned out, my table had five women and three men. We had at least three different ethnic groups represented. We had three ministers and five elders. We covered an age span of about five decades. We came to that table with concerns about our brothers and sisters, our children and grandchildren, our neighbours, and our church.

At our table, some of us knew and stated that we were *against* the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons as ministers in our church and believed that marriage is only between one man and one woman. Some of us knew and stated that we were *in favour of* full inclusion of LGBTQ persons as ministers in our church and of redefining the definition of marriage to include same-sex marriage. Some of us felt conflicted – wanting to be welcoming, or maybe even affirming, yet unsure if our biblical interpretation and church doctrine could allow us to do so faithfully. Some of us found the courage to share hurtful experiences of sexual manipulation that made us fearful. Some of us had siblings or neighbours whom we knew to be part of the LGBTQ community and whom we felt a strong need to defend as full human beings, beloved children of God, who deserve the right to marry and are as capable of being called to ordained ministry as anyone else.

We came as strangers and left as friends. We listened to each other carefully. We respected the experiences that each expressed – sometimes with tears and deep empathy, sometimes with nods of agreement, sometimes with looks of deep puzzlement as we tried to understand what another was saying. We came with different, even opposite, opinions. We left with different, even opposite, opinions. But we were united in our love of God, our love of God's church in The Presbyterian Church in Canada and a renewed desire to love our neighbour. We left our table in a spirit of unity. This study guide is designed to create similar opportunities in congregations and presbyteries around Canada.

Intent of this Study Guide

This study guide is meant to promote biblical study, theological reflection and honest conversation on the subject of human sexuality and sexual orientation. It is not exhaustive and cannot be. Yet we cannot have a constructive conversation about human sexuality, inclusion or exclusion, biblical values, or what it means to be a Presbyterian Christian in Canada today without solid information, tools and reflection. This study guide is not designed to state a position on the issues before us, nor is it supposed to support one particular position or another.

Most certainly, this study guide is not a perfect document. One of the goals of this study guide is to attempt to outline, with integrity, various and even opposite perspectives on a complex and emotionally charged subject. Drawing attention to different ways of interpreting the scripture and understanding our theology is not intended to contribute to our polarization on this topic, but rather to bring us into conversation with each other. This study guide is not a response to the current overtures, but it is hoped that the conversations that it fosters may help prepare the church as a whole to formulate such a response.

The study guide will draw on the resources that are available both within our church and also outside of it, as already recommended by the Committee on Church Doctrine and the Justice Ministries (Life and Mission Agency). It is built upon previous reports to the General Assembly by the Committee on Church Doctrine and the Special Committee on Sexual Orientation (1994, 2000, 2003), as well as the study guides that have been produced for the church on this subject before (available online at presbyterian.ca/sexuality).

The Purpose of the Study Guide is

- to provide resources for members, adherents and leaders in the PCC so that we can effectively study the subject of human sexuality and sexual orientation
- to facilitate informed conversations in congregations, presbyteries and synods
- to invite the church to prayerful discernment for the way ahead regarding matters of human sexuality and Christ's church

In order to accomplish this threefold purpose, this study guide will

1. provide basic tools for biblical interpretation and study as well as engaging specific texts
2. review and explore some essential Reformed understanding of theological categories that are particularly relevant to the discussions about human sexuality
3. provide a summary statement of the current position of The Presbyterian Church in Canada as it has evolved through study and prayer over the last 45 years

4. consider and explore the role of biological and psychological studies in our deliberations as Christians on the topic of human sexuality and sexual orientation
5. offer a process for sharing personal experiences and perspectives regarding human sexuality, sexual orientation and faith in an atmosphere of honest and respectful listening
6. encourage congregations and presbyteries to share feedback with the Committee on Church Doctrine and the Justice Ministries Department of the Life and Mission Agency

In addition, an appendix to this document will provide a brief overview of other denominations' responses to the question of human sexuality. Understanding what our Canadian brothers and sisters have done in response to this subject may help us as we discern the work of the Holy Spirit in the PCC.

How to Use this Study Guide

- The study guide is meant to be used widely within The Presbyterian Church in Canada, including in congregations, presbyteries and synods.
- In the presbytery setting, where many congregations gather representing different theological perspectives, it could be used by table groups in Bible study, theological reflection, or sharing circles (similar to that of the Assembly and outlined in the Experience chapter of this guide).
- In congregations, this guide could be used *by sessions* (or adapted as session starters over a period of time), *in Bible studies or small groups*, or adapted for use in youth groups or as the focus of *an intergenerational gathering*.
- The study guide can be used as a whole study over the course of six to eight sessions, or it might be useful as independent sections.
- Particularly, if groups are pressed for time, users should feel free to use whatever parts of the guide are most helpful in their own contexts.
 - Some congregations and presbyteries may be struggling with biblical interpretation of particular texts and may find the Scripture chapter the most helpful in their situation.
 - Others may struggle with a way to share experiences in an honest and authentic way and might find the Experience chapter the most helpful.
- The language of the study guide is designed to help all of us use and understand theological vocabulary that all people of the church need to know and feel comfortable with. The Bible study within the guide is designed to give necessary background for all interpreters of the scriptures.
- If leaders discern that the document is too long or too detailed for the groups that are using the resource, a supplemental document has been prepared. Leaders can choose to reproduce just this document for participants in a

group and use the study guide itself as a leader's guide. The supplemental document includes

- the Introduction
- handout summaries of the Scripture, Theology, and Biological and Psychological Studies chapters
- the Tradition chapter
- Scripture and Theology charts (3)
- discussion questions for each chapter
- the Glossary of Terms

The supplemental document may also be helpful if congregations or other groups have limited time to use the resources.

A Note about the Acronym LGBTQ

On the whole, this study guide deals primarily with the issues of same-sex orientation, same-gender sexual relationships, and long-term, committed relationships between persons of the same sex. It also focuses on issues surrounding the question of gay and lesbian people and the office of minister of Word and Sacrament in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. In our society, persons who identify their sexuality as gay or lesbian are often described as LGBTQ. This acronym includes those who identify themselves as gay or lesbian, as well as those who identify as bisexual and transgender individuals. For full definitions of all of these terms please see the glossary included in this document (page 76). The overtures to the General Assembly that call upon the PCC to move toward full inclusion of all persons regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity are referring not only to gay and lesbian persons but to the whole LGBTQ community.

It is significant to note that conversation and study regarding persons who identify as bisexual or transgender are new additions to any official report of the PCC. The Church Doctrine Report on Human Sexuality (1994) and the Special Committee Report Re Sexual Orientation (2003) reflect on homosexual orientation and behaviour, but do not expand those categories to include a broader spectrum of sexuality, such as bisexual or transgender persons. Bisexual and transgender persons, along with heterosexual or homosexual persons, are capable of entering into committed, loving and mutual relationships with another human being. In this regard, the reflections here that explore the question of marriage pertain to all people. In the same way, reflections here on questions about ordination, on whether or not it is sinful for persons to act on their innate sexual attractions, and on appropriate sexual ethics for Christians pertain to all categories included in the LGBTQ acronym.

However, it is also important to note that for some, there are additional questions that might be asked about people who identify as bisexual or transgender or as the broader category of queer. On the issue of gender, these questions include whether one's gender (male or female) is essential to a person's identity at birth or if gender is *both* a God-given understanding of the self *as well as* a socially constructed reality. On the issue of sexuality, these questions include whether sexual attraction is confined to one sex or the other, or if it is possible to be attracted to both sexes. All of these questions point to a larger question about whether sexuality and gender are fixed and

unchanging features of a person's identity or if sexuality and gender are more fluid and complex categories that are shaped by many factors.

In the interest of having and fostering honest conversation, it must be noted that this study guide does not take up these larger questions. Hopefully, many parts of the study guide that refer to gay and lesbian persons refer also to the broader LGBTQ community, and the conversation and questions can pertain to people who experience their sexuality in a diversity of ways.

Pastorally the church has been clear: homophobia and any anger, hatred and acts of denigration toward gay and lesbian people should not be tolerated within a congregation or the greater community.¹ (See Appendix B on page 74 for a Summary of statements approved by General Assembly on homosexuality.) These statements are unequivocally understood to refer to the whole of the LGBTQ community of persons. The church must affirm its commitment to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supporting community, a true church family where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported.² For LGBTQ persons who often face great struggle and sometimes harsh rejection from family and friends, the church has particular responsibility for compassionate, holistic pastoral care. This includes care for families of LGBTQ persons who may be struggling to understand or accept the sexual identity of one whom they love.

Methodology

The study guide is based loosely on a historical method of theological reflection often credited to the Methodist Reformer, John Wesley. As such, it has been called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral and invites Christians to examine issues of theological significance through the lenses of scripture, tradition, reason and experience. The 1994 Report on Human Sexuality used this framework as well.³ Examining a theological topic from these multiple perspectives is not meant to dissect the topic into separate, equal pieces. Rather, it is a recognition that we need all of these perspectives in order to faithfully understand any significant topic. One might liken the method to looking at a precious jewel. By turning the jewel around, you can see the cuts and angles of the stone and appreciate the whole even more. (This method has been adopted by the preaching community as a sermon model as well, known as the Jewel Sermon.) Perhaps it would be helpful to understand scripture itself as the jewel and the topics of theology, science and tradition as different ways of engaging and understanding the scripture. In order to emphasize that all these angles should not be read in isolation from one another, this document seeks to highlight where the perspectives “cross over” or overlap with each other.

It is important to note that this method did not originate with Wesley. Wesley's methodology is a faithful witness to scripture. Indeed, the very writing of scripture itself involved the elements of tradition, reason and experience as well as developing understandings of who God is and who humanity is in relation to God (theology).

1 (A&P 1985, p. 238–241, 31); (A&P 1994, p. 251–274, 56); (A&P 2003, p. 526–547, 26, 34, 37–41, 43–45).

2 (A&P 1994, p. 251–274, 56).

3 (A&P 1994, p. 251–254).

In this way, theology precedes scripture and also flows out of scripture. Categories of theology, such as creation and sin for example, have been employed in all our discussions about sexual orientation up to this point. For this reason, we are adding theology as its own separate category of consideration. As such, it is regarded as one more perspective in the discussion as a whole as we seek to understand human sexuality and sexual orientation in light of our faith in Jesus Christ. In addition, the Wesleyan model has been adapted to include the specific category of biological and psychological sciences instead of the more general category of reason. Generally reason points to areas of critical thought and reflection from disciplines outside of biblical scholarship and theology. In this study, the more narrow focus on biological and psychological studies more adequately reflects the work that has been done previously on this topic in the PCC.

An Invitation to Prayer

Finally, this study guide is an invitation to prayer. Sometimes Presbyterians are the butt of jokes for being too “cerebral,” too much in our heads. Our pictures of John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, have carried over into the reputation of Presbyterians as stodgy, stern and serious. We joke, even among ourselves, that Presbyterians aren’t often “moved by the Spirit,” at least when it comes to demonstrative emotion, enthusiastic worship or spontaneous prayer. Of course, this is a stereotype, and like any stereotype, it is both true and a distortion of the truth.

The truth is that Presbyterians do value education, the life of the mind and decency and order. These are indeed God-given gifts. And at the same time, John Calvin and those who have followed in his thinking understand that all of those intellectual matters are also spiritual endeavors. That is, they require trust in the Holy Spirit and openness to movement of the Spirit. Presbyterians believe that study, critical thinking and informed conversation are not only important to the life of faith but are part of the practice of prayer.

When we pray, we listen for God and talk to God, and sometimes wrestle with God. We seek God’s will. We crave God’s wisdom. We search for the right path. In the PCC’s *A Catechism for Today*, prayer is described as “openness to the presence of God” (Question 127).

When we study, we are doing those exact same things.

In 1972, Fred Kaan wrote a hymn, which is #555 (Worship the Lord) in the Book of Praise. At the end of each verse, he includes the line, “worship and work must be one.” Study is hard work. Study is also crucial to mission. We study human sexuality and sexual orientation so that we can be the church of God – in word and action – as faithfully as possible. Prayer and study, worship and work go hand in hand.

It is our hope that this study guide will invite the church into prayerful consideration about how we can best be faithful when it comes to questions of human sexuality and sexual orientation. This study guide isn’t about an issue. It is about real people, real lives and a desire to be open to God’s presence and God’s calling to us as a church of Jesus Christ. Study and pray, pray and study. Let’s do both together and trust that in so doing, we will hear the voice of God.

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 honour 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.

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Scripture

PRAYERS FROM THE 141ST GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Creator God, and Lord of all possibilities, open us to the leading of your Holy Spirit, providing us with wisdom and discernment as we absorb your Word, patience as we wait and listen for your revealing, and may we follow the ultimate example of love you have given us in the gift of your only Son, Jesus.

Good Shepherd of all who travel on hard and unknown paths, help us to trust in your grace, to rest in knowing the church's future is in your hands, and to leave our fears with you.

Fear and Love

People throughout our denomination are wondering if there is a conflict between loving and affirming LGBTQ persons and being faithful to the Bible. Numerous commissioners at the 141st General Assembly expressed this struggle. Many have friends, neighbours, children or grandchildren who are gay or lesbian whom they love. They also believe that the Bible is “the standard of all doctrine,” the foundation of our ethics and the Word of God. Some faithful Christians aren't even sure exactly what the Bible says or how to understand it. Some of the concerns that people have include the following:

- Do people who already support the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons as ordained clergy and affirm same-sex marriage fail to regard the Bible as authoritative?
- If I come out as gay or lesbian or bisexual and reveal my sexual identity by living in a loving partnership with another man or woman, how can I still follow the call that God has given me to lead the church as a minister of Word and Sacrament?

The Bible has been given to us
by the inspiration of God
to be the rule of faith and life.
It is the standard of all doctrine
by which we must test any word that comes to us
from church, world, or inner experience.
We subject to its judgment
all we believe and do.
Through the Scriptures
the church is bound only to Jesus Christ its King
and Head.
He is the living Word of God
to whom the written word bears witness.

(Living Faith 5.1)

- How do I continue to love and support someone who is lesbian or gay or bisexual when I believe their partnership with someone of the same gender isn't a faithful way of following Jesus?
- If the church fully affirms the sexual identity of LGBTQ persons as God-given and expands the definition of marriage to include same-sex relationships, are we giving in to a moral relativism that undermines the Bible's ability to speak to sexual ethics at all?

One of the most frequently expressed concerns of Presbyterians in the conversation about sexual orientation and the Bible is the fear that those who affirm same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ people don't care about the Bible. Another fear is that *if* the church affirms that the sexuality of LGBTQ persons is not inherently sinful, then not only will the church stand in violation of the Bible but the Bible will lose its authority for moral teaching on all matters of sexuality, marriage and family structure. At the heart of this conversation are questions about how we read the Bible for our time and place. That is where we begin.

How Do We Read the Bible?

For Presbyterians, as we consider the issues of human sexuality before us at this time, the most important question is how we read the Bible. That is true for people on all sides of this debate and conversation. We are Protestant Reformed Christians and we are defined by the Reformed principle that the Bible is the basis of all doctrine in the Presbyterian Church. This understanding automatically and necessarily raises another set of questions about the Bible:

- How do we read the Bible?
- How do we interpret it for our daily living?
- How do we understand the Bible within its own context?
- How do we interpret what it says for *our* context?

The Holy Spirit gives us inner testimony to the unique authority of the Bible and is the source of its power. The Bible, written by human hands, is nonetheless the word of God as no other word ever written. To it no other writings are to be added. The Scriptures are necessary, sufficient, and reliable, revealing Jesus Christ, the living Word.

(Living Faith 5.2)

Reading the Bible and the Holy Spirit

As Christians of the Reformed tradition, we believe that it is only by the illumination of the Holy Spirit that we can read the scriptures at all. The Holy Spirit is our teacher and the One who enables us to understand what we read. We do not rely on plain sense or on common sense alone. Nor do we rely solely on the literal sense of the words on the page, nor a figurative reading that discards the literal. Rather, we rely on

the Holy Spirit to help us interpret what we read as the Word of God.¹ It involves what is literally written. It involves common sense. It involves understanding figurative speech, such as poetry and parable. But understanding what the Bible says is not simply a sum of these parts. The Holy Spirit must also be involved.

At the same time, while we charge the ministers of Word and Sacrament in the church with special responsibilities for interpreting the Bible, as Reformed Christians we do not rely solely on clergy and theologians to do this work. In fact, we believe that *all people* can and must receive this inward testimony of the Holy Spirit and read and understand the scriptures for themselves. That is why we include a “prayer for illumination” or “prayer for understanding” in a Reformed service of worship before the scripture is read and the sermon is preached.

Educated Clergy and Laity

However, as Reformed Christians, we also understand that reading the ancient biblical texts requires education. We must be equipped in order to read and understand. We are guided by the principle of the Reformation: “Reformed and always to be Reformed” according to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit as we interpret the Word of God. Christians value and cultivate the life of the mind and believe that education is an important conduit of the Holy Spirit’s work. Since the church is both reformed and always to be reformed, we are also *always* learning, studying, faithfully interpreting and re-imagining God’s Word, which is a living and dynamic Word.

Finally, we also understand that the Bible is best, and most faithfully, read and interpreted within the community of faith. It is the community, in reliance on the Holy

Ordination Vow in the PCC:

“Do you accept the subordinate standards of this church, promising to uphold its doctrine under the continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the scriptures?”

Such acceptance reflects the church’s understanding that the Holy Spirit’s leading can lead to a change in the way we read or interpret the scriptures.

Tenets of the Reformed Tradition for Reading the Bible

- Jesus Christ is the Living Word, to whom the written word bears witness.
- The scriptures are the basis of all church doctrine.
- The Holy Spirit is needed to illumine the scriptures.
- All people have access to and can read and interpret the scriptures by the teaching of the Holy Spirit.
- The life of the mind is of high importance and value in Christian faith, which leads to a focus on educated clergy and educated laity.
- The community of faith is necessary for interpretation.
- The Holy Spirit’s guidance can lead to a change in the way we read or interpret the scriptures.

¹ James V. Brownson, *Bible Gender Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 10. Brownson notes that the “leading of the Spirit” is not a voice from nowhere, but instead involves “history, experience, wisdom, debate and judicious assessment of a variety of forms of evidence, stories and experiences.” The Holy Spirit works hand in hand with and through the complex processes of human discernment.

Spirit, that tests various interpretations of the text. Preaching students are often advised that when they come up with a “fringe” interpretation of a biblical text or parable that they would be wise to test their theory against the trusted biblical scholarship available. If their interpretation stands in contradiction to every other reading of the text, they might want to think about it again!

So then, how do we read the Bible, and in this case especially the texts that specifically mention sexual activity between people of the same sex? This chapter of the study guide will have three sections:

1. Tools for biblical reading and interpretation
2. The specific texts and what they say:
seven texts mention same-gender sexual activity
3. The Bible, sexual norms and family structures

The Bible is to be understood in the light of the revelation of God’s work in Christ. The writing of the Bible was conditioned by the language, thought, and setting of its time. The Bible must be read in its historical context. We interpret Scripture as we compare passages, seeing the two Testaments in light of each other, and listening to commentators past and present. Relying on the Holy Spirit, we seek the application of God’s word for our time.

(Living Faith 5.4)

1

Tools for Biblical Reading and Interpretation

“Minding the Gap”

In places like London, England, when you ride on the “tube,” or in Toronto, Ontario, when you ride the subway, you may well see the sign, “Mind the Gap.” It is posted on the doors of the trains as well as in the train stations. The sign is meant to advise all passengers that the door of the train will not exactly meet the platform. There is a gap that you need to navigate in order to board or exit the train safely.

When you read the Bible, you must “mind the gap.” There is always some distance between the original context and culture in which the Bible was written and our own. Sometimes the gap is significant and it takes many tools and education to understand a particular text for our current time and place. Other times, the gap is so narrow it is

almost imperceptible – the text seems timeless. When you are reading the Bible devotionally, sometimes the words seem to speak directly to you, with no sense of distance at all. Thank God for those moments! But in most cases, a certain amount of work needs to be done in order for us to interpret the Bible faithfully. We must not only “mind the gap” but respect the gap.

The distance between us and the Bible is multi-layered. The gap includes:

- Time – there are at least 1800 years between us and the last contribution to the Divine Canon that we call scripture.
- Language – none of the Bible was originally written in English or French or Korean or Hungarian or Arabic! What we read is always a translation from a different language.
- Geographical place – we live in North America, which no one who wrote the Bible knew existed!
- Culture – cultural norms and values shift over time.
- Historical location – this includes social, economic, intellectual, technological and other knowledge and experience that is available to us, but wasn’t to the writers of scripture (and vice versa)!

It is also important to remember the gaps that exist within the Bible itself. Although it reflects a much older oral tradition, Leviticus was probably written 600–800 years before the birth of Christ and in a different language (Hebrew) than the gospels or the letters of Paul (Koine Greek).

Biblical scholars, clergy and lay people alike often marvel at the wonder and mystery that documents written by so many human hands so long ago can still speak so clearly. For even as we mind the gap, we bear witness to the liveliness of the Spirit, in whom the Word is always fresh and new.

In order to understand the texts that address same-sex relationships and activity, there are a few essential tools that we only have time and space to briefly address here. It is significant to note that volumes of biblical and extra-biblical scholarship have been dedicated to all of these areas.

Historical Context

Historical Location and Reading the Bible Through Our Experience

First, we all read the Bible based on who we are and what our place in the world is. For example, an Aboriginal Canadian living in a rural part of the country will read the Bible differently than a business person living in a condo in an urban centre. A single mother or father may interpret the Bible differently than a senior who never had children. A Christian living in 1880 would have read the Bible differently than a Christian in 1980 or one living in 2015. How we understand the Bible includes educational, economic, cultural and social factors.

We often think that using the lens of scripture and using the lens of experience to analyze and wrestle with a theological issue are at odds with one another. Those who

claim the power of experience are often regarded as less reliable than those who claim the defence of scripture. This division is overly simplistic and needs to be corrected to a certain extent. The history of interplay between scripture and experience is long and complex; however, it is essential to note that whenever we read the Bible we do so experientially.²

Reading experientially is what allows us to connect to the scriptures in meaningful and personal ways. It is a good thing. God speaks to us when the Word of God intersects with our experience. However, along with that reality comes a necessary bias. The ways that we think about how to get along in society in the 21st century in North America are different from the way people understood life in the biblical worldview. The values that society placed on certain genders, classes and stations in life are not permanent, but shift with time and culture. In reading biblical texts that have to do with sexuality, gender and family structures, it is vital that we have some understanding of the norms that were operative at the time these texts were written. This brief section cannot cover all the cultural dynamics at play; however, what follows are two important historical factors.

Gender Roles and Understandings

It goes without saying that gender roles in society shift over time. Gender roles are different now in comparison to fifty years ago, let alone fifteen hundred years ago. It is also the case that gender expectations differ greatly across cultures – a reality that we can see in our world quite readily today.

In the ancient context, the household or family, rather than the individual, was the basic unit of society.³ The male head of the family had the most honour and garnered the most respect. In addition, the male head of the household represented the family in the larger society and in relation to other families.⁴ Women were considered the property of fathers and husbands without the power of choice or consent⁵; however, women in families also had significant economic and social roles within the family itself. Within the household, all the members had roles to play that were of economic and social value. These were often substantial roles and sometimes were shared between married couples in a household.⁶

In addition, in the biblical context, gender roles were more strictly adhered to and well-entrenched. At the same time, it is important to note that there are examples in both the Hebrew and Greek contexts where these boundaries are pushed and women take on more independent roles. In the New Testament, there is a greater push for mutuality between the genders in marriage, both by Jesus and Paul.

2 Eugene W. March, *Biblical Interpretation 101* (www.TheThoughtfulChristian, 2007), Sessions 1 and 3. This brief and helpful study is available for download through The Thoughtful Christian. Congregations who wish to explore how we read the Bible may want to consider this study, which includes a leader's guide.

3 Patricia Dutcher-Walls, *Reading the Historical Books: A Student's Guide to Engaging the Biblical Text* (Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 28.

4 Dutcher-Walls, 29.

5 The 1994 Report on Human Sexuality acknowledges this cultural context, particularly in relation to the Judges 19 text. (A&P 1994, p. 251–274).

6 Dutcher-Walls, 30.

Codes for Living

As in every culture, there are spoken and unspoken rules for how people live their lives. In addition, there are spoken and unspoken codes that determine who can play what roles in society. For example, we use the term “glass ceiling” to refer to obstacles to advancement in a profession, especially in relation to women and members of minorities. In Western society, while socio-economic mobility is a given and a goal for both male and female, realities like the “glass ceiling” temper what is actually happening. The “glass ceiling” represents one of the codes operative in our society, spoken or unspoken.

In ancient societies, there are also codes for living embedded in the culture. We have discovered these codes over time. Many ancient societies, including those of ancient Israel and the Greco-Roman culture of the first century when Paul was writing his letters, were based on codes of honour and shame. There are still honour based cultures in our world today, in various forms.

In an honour based society, one could inherit honour, through family means and position. One could also acquire honour through relationships and social interaction, although socio-economic mobility was more severely limited than it is in our own context.⁷ The more honour an individual had, the higher his status would be in society. The higher a person’s status, the more honour was due to that person. A person could also lose honour or status, by certain behaviours or by associating with those of a less honourable status, or by assuming roles that were beneath one’s own status.

The honour/shame code has to do with what is considered the most valuable in the society. In considering these categories, as with any code of conduct or living, there are exceptions to these general rules.

More value is assigned to those who are:	Less value is placed on those who are:
Male	Female
Free	Slave
Citizen	Non-citizen
Educated	Labourer
Rich	Poor

In addition to status, certain behavioural norms accompanied this social structure in the Greco-Roman society. In our society, in general, the lines between genders are somewhat fluid. In Greco-Roman society, males and females tended to operate in different spheres of society and, generally speaking, certain characteristics were associated with each gender. Rationality, strength and self-control were associated mostly with males, as the dominant gender in the society. Females were more often expected to be more emotional, weaker and guided by their passions, as the passive gender.

What is honourable and what is shameful is experienced differently in different societies. Jesus challenged the honour-shame codes of his own day in terms of whom he

⁷ Brownson, 205–206.

associated with and touched. While the concepts of honour and shame are still operative in our current context, the concepts are often tied to different social categories and norms. Honour-shame codes, along with other codes of living (spoken or unspoken) that are embedded in our daily lives, require ongoing critique and revision based on our understanding of the gospel, the life of Christ and our current cultural context.⁸

The Texture and Movement of Scripture

1. Scripture Interprets Scripture

It has long been understood in the church that scripture interprets scripture and that interpreters should use and carefully consider the whole breadth of the Old and New Testaments.⁹ The diversity of scripture leads to texts, ideas and themes that, at first glance, seem at odds with one another. For example, some parts of the Bible understand God as ruler, judge and king.¹⁰ Others understand God as a tender parent, cheek to cheek with an infant and helping a toddler learn to walk.¹¹ In this case, and in other cases, putting such images side by side allows us to gain a wider perspective than would be possible with any single text.

Sometimes, though, there are texts that are truly contradictory. They say very different, even opposite things. For example, in Deuteronomy 5:9–10 it says, “...for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.” In Ezekiel 18:20, it says, “A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own.”

In Mark 9:40, Jesus says, “Whoever is not against us is for us.” In Matthew 12:30, Jesus says, “Whoever is not with me is against me...” The point here is not to resolve these texts, but to point out that differences exist.

In addition, it has long been a practice of biblical interpreters, both scholars and lay people, to use other scriptures to help interpret and understand a more difficult passages or subject (for example, Matthew 7:7–8 and James 4:2–3, or Ephesians 2:8–9 and James 2:14–17).

This is particularly true when it comes to interpreting the two testaments of the scriptures.

In the Reformed tradition, we hold that both the Old and the New Testaments are of equal authority for Christians. We read them within their own contexts and also in relation to one another. There are times when something in the Old Testament makes it possible for us to understand something in the New Testament. There are other times when something in the New Testament makes it possible for us to understand something in the Old Testament.

⁸ Brownson, 214.

⁹ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1.9 states, “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”

¹⁰ Psalm 98, for example.

¹¹ Hosea 11:3–4, for example.

2. The Canon of Scripture Is Not Flat

Within the Bible itself there is movement between cultures (from ancient Israel to first century Palestine) and genres (from poetry to wisdom literature to historical account to letter). For Christian readers, there is also a trajectory through the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings of the Old Testament toward the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and beyond to the early church.¹² In addition, there is the movement of the unfolding kingdom of God. In the scriptures, there is always a “time that is coming” and that indeed breaks in occasionally in the time that is.¹³ Our hope in that future informs and shapes how we understand the world today.

For example, we believe that mutual, equal, loving relationships, free from fear, violence and grief are what God intends for human beings in the coming reign of God. In Revelation, the author paints a picture for us of God dwelling with mortals and wiping away every tear from their eyes (Revelation 21). As we interpret the Bible and our lives through the struggles of faith, the difficulty of relationships, the conflict among human beings, and the pain of death, we read and interpret with this future vision in mind. Such a vision gives substance to our hope and enables us to endure current circumstances as we work toward the kingdom of God.

3. The Interpretive Principle of Love

As we read the Bible, we will come across many episodes of violence, harm, tyranny of kings and judges, and unjust judgment. We will encounter social practices that the Bible supports but that we no longer understand as just practices of Christian living, such as slavery. We will read about cultural contexts that reject groups of people based on purity laws or status. How do we read such texts, without endorsing violence or unjust practices?

People have struggled with this question for as long as they have been guided by scripture. The interpretive principle of love has long been offered as an appropriate response. It begins with Jesus, who when questioned about the greatest commandment, answers with two:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”¹⁴

In John’s gospel account, Jesus renews this commandment at the Last Supper: *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”¹⁵* The discourse that follows is Jesus’ call to his disciples to obey and keep this commandment, which will set them apart as disciples.

¹² Brownson, 51 “one must consider the progressive and unfolding nature of the canon when sorting through questions of cultural rootedness and transcendence. The canon, in this sense, is not flat; it comes to its divinely intended end and goal in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, to which the New Testament bears witness.”

¹³ Brownson, p. 51 “So, it is not only the diversity of the canonical witness that alerts us to the presence of cultural particularity; it is also, more specifically, the movement of scriptural revelation that discloses the most important and powerful underlying forms of moral logic that transcend culture and place, but are instead rooted in the gospel, the deepest embodiment of the heart of God’s self-revelation.”

¹⁴ Matthew 22:35–40.

¹⁵ John 13:34–35 and following dialogue in John 14:15, 21–23. See also 1 John 4:21–5:4.

Any interpretation of the Bible that does not lead to love and to the building up of the body of Christ should be critically re-evaluated. Speaking the truth in love is not always easy or even “nice,” but the core value of God as love and the mandate to love both God and neighbour is a measure for every interpretation of the scripture.

One of the early church fathers, St. Augustine, on whose work the Reformers greatly relied, took this a step further to say, “whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up the twofold love of God and our neighbour, does not yet understand them as he ought.”¹⁶ Interpreting for the sake of love and for the purpose of building up the body of Christ is, on at least some level, never a wrong way to interpret the scriptures.

Discussion Questions

1. Name one idea in this section that you found helpful. Why? What did you find most challenging. Why?
2. What does the phrase “faithful interpretation of the Bible” mean for you?
3. Share an example of a time when you read a scripture passage that seemed to be speaking directly to you.
4. Share an example of a time when a Bible study or sermon helped you understand a passage of scripture in a new way. What helped you understand it differently?

2

The Specific Texts and What They Say: seven texts mention same-gender sexual activity

There are many verses, stories and sections of the Bible that inform our relationships with one another and form Christian ethics. All of our relationships have many dimensions to them. In addition, people have multiple kinds of relationships that involve different levels of intimacy. A study guide on human sexuality must keep whole persons in mind, not just focus on sexual activity. However, having said that, same-sex friendships and even same-sex attraction are not the contentious issues in the church today. One of the central questions that the church is wrestling with is whether acting upon same-sex attraction in the context of marriage is a faithful expression of human

¹⁶ Augustine, *On Church Doctrine*, Book 1 Chapter 36. Translation provided by www.newadvent.org/fathers/12021.htm

love. Another is whether that same person in a committed same-sex relationship can serve The Presbyterian Church in Canada as a minister of Word and Sacraments.

There are seven specific texts that reference same-gender sexual activity. Of the seven, only one makes reference to female same-sex activity (Romans 1). All of the others refer to male same-sex activity. Undoubtedly, there are other texts throughout the scriptures that are relevant to this conversation. The most notable of these are the creation stories of Genesis 1–2, which this study guide will examine in the next chapter (Theology). Arguably, the Leviticus texts and the Romans text are the most significant of the seven. In fact, most sources¹⁷ recognize that the passage in Romans 1 is at the heart of the scriptural debate about homosexuality and is the most significant of the specific texts for our current context.

Genesis 19:4–8 and Judges 19 – An Ultimate Crime Against Hospitality

Summary

Genesis 19 tells the story of Lot in the city of Sodom. Two angels come to the city and Lot invites them to stay in his home. That night, the men of the city come to Lot’s door and demand that he send the two men (angels) out so that they can “know them.” This language is a biblical euphemism for sexual intercourse. They are seeking to violently gang rape the two men because they are strangers in the city. Lot refuses to send them out, and offers his two virgin daughters to the men instead to “do to them as they please.” The angels intervene and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed. In Judges 19, a similar situation occurs with a man staying in the foreign city of Gibeah. The men of that city also demand that the guest be sent out so that they can rape him. The host refuses, but sends the man’s concubine out to them instead. They rape and assault her throughout the night.

Both of these stories, and particularly the story from Judges, are texts of violence. The sexual activity that they refer to – both in terms of what is demanded and what is carried out – is violent, abusive, misogynist and morally abhorrent. Scholars on both sides of the debate around full inclusion of homosexual persons agree that there can be no direct parallels drawn between the kind of sexual activity referred to there and the committed love between two persons of the same gender in our modern context.¹⁸ In addition to this, most biblical scholars have argued that the primary evil in these two stories is that of violence, inhospitality and injustice.¹⁹ In many countries today, however, the imagery and language of Sodom and Gomorrah is still invoked against those who identify as LGBTQ persons.

¹⁷ Including the work of Brownson, Campolo, Grenz and Gushee (see annotated bibliography (resource list) provided in the Committee on Church Doctrine Report, A&P 2015, p. 269–273).

¹⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 40. Grenz says that the evil that is “depicted and condemned in these texts is violent homosexual rape.”

¹⁹ Gushee goes so far as to state that these particular texts are irrelevant to the discussion. Tony Campolo does not mention them in his arguments against same-sex sexual activity. The 2003 Report of the Special Committee Re Sexual Orientation acknowledges that “the Genesis and Judges texts are not really germane to our subject as they have to do with violent criminal behaviour, with homosexual rape.” (A&P 2003, p. 526–47)

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 – The Levitical Law

The Holiness Code

The reference to same-sex sexual activity in Leviticus is part of the Holiness Code. The Holiness Code is a term given to Leviticus 17–26, which is a comprehensive set of laws regarding every aspect of life. The holiness code divides all things into two groups – what is holy and what is common, or profane. The division between the spheres of holy and profane is sharp and not easily crossed.²⁰ The laws are meant to allow people of faith to live holy lives of purity and cleanliness, in proper relationship to God, one another and the earth. The law covers regulations for how to properly slaughter animals, appropriate sexual relations, rituals for worship and the action of priests, the calendar of religious festivals, and the consequences of obedience and disobedience of these laws. What is holy is generally what was clean, pure and whole. What was profane included anything unclean (polluted), mixed (or mixed-up) or confused.²¹

It is important to remember that in ancient Israel, and in Judaism still today, the law is understood as a gift from God. It is not merely a set of rigid rules. Rather, the law is meant to help the people in their quest to live lives of obedience and gratitude to God.

The Holiness Code clearly has to do with ritual purity, a concept that was meant to set the nation of Israel apart from other nations, and particularly from pagan worship practices and lifestyles, so that Israel could be holy as God is holy (Leviticus 19:2). On the whole, most scholars agree that through Jesus Christ the purity laws were set aside and are no longer considered binding on Christians.²² There is disagreement, however, about whether the sexual matters properly belong to the purity laws (and therefore are more culturally bound) or to a code of ethics that is more enduring and more transcendent across cultures. The fact that Paul echoes the taboo against the same-sex sexual activity described in Leviticus has caused some scholars to question whether these laws are strictly rules regarding ritual purity or not.

True: The rules about sexual purity are placed in the same category and alongside other purity laws that are no longer relevant to us in the 21st century, such as the prohibition against mixing fabrics (cotton-polyester blends), consuming the blood of animals, and touching dead pig's skin (a football, for example).

In the conversations about which Levitical laws apply to contemporary Christians, people often cite these other laws, which many of us not only regularly disobey but find somewhat ridiculous in 21st century culture. All of these laws in the Holiness Code have to do with purity and cleanliness.

False: Modern Christians and Christian traditions have uniformly understood that all the laws in this section of the Holiness Code except the one regarding same-sex sexual activity are no longer applicable to Christian living today.

Within the Holiness Code there are laws that contemporary Christians continue to abide by right alongside laws that modern Christians believe are no longer applicable

20 Stephen Farris, "The New Testament, the Holy and Reformed Identity," *Encounter*, 57:4 (Autumn 1996), 313–325.

21 *Listening Study Guide*, prepared by members of the General Assembly Committee on Sexual Orientation of the PCC, 2002.

22 Campolo, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour?*, 3.

in our current context. For example, the Holiness Code contains laws against incest and bestiality (sexual relations with animals), which modern Christians maintain are both immoral and unlawful. But at the same time, there are prohibitions regarding menstrual blood and tattoos, which most contemporary Christians understand to be culturally bound. The laws are mixed together, leaving Christians with the task of discerning what laws are still applicable in the 21st century.

Paul and the Levitical Law

In three places in the New Testament letters,²³ Paul echoes the prohibitions that occur in the Holiness Code. For this reason, some Christians argue that these laws belong to a different category than the purity laws. This argument asserts that the laws concerning same-gender sexual relations, along with laws like the Ten Commandments, transcend culturally bound purity laws. Because Paul makes reference to these laws, they maintain a higher degree of significance and relevance for Christian living than other laws found in the Holiness Code.

Other Christians argue that Paul's understanding of same-sex relationships remains culturally bound, similar to other laws in the Holiness Code. Both the Hebrew culture, in which the laws were first understood, and the Greco-Roman culture, in which Paul was living, were patriarchal societies that were structured to some extent around social codes of honour and shame (see Codes for Living on page 20). As a result, males who assumed roles that were thought to belong only to females (including any effeminate qualities, as well as the passive and submissive partner in sexual relations) were subject to shame and rejection. Such roles threatened the established ideology that male and female roles are not interchangeable or equally honourable. The laws and social norms around same-gender sexual relationships could be construed as protecting these cultural assumptions.

Jesus and the Torah

It is important to note that Jesus never mentions homosexuality nor makes reference to same-sex sexual activity. However, Jesus does speak about the law, or the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, in which the law is given). Jesus asserts several things about the Torah and himself.

1. Jesus says that he comes not to abolish the law but to fulfill the law.²⁴ What Jesus means by fulfilling the law involves many things. According to Matthew's gospel, Jesus' very life, as well as his actions and words, fulfill the law. In addition, Jesus is a teacher of the Torah. He comes to reveal the true meaning and original intent of the Torah.²⁵
2. Jesus claims authority to interpret the Torah by declaring himself equal to the Torah. Some scholars assert that Jesus also declares himself greater to the Torah, and thus having higher authority than the Torah.²⁶

23 Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, 1 Timothy 1:9–10.

24 Matthew 5:17.

25 Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, 187.

26 See Johnson, 188–89 on Matthew 12.

3. There is not a one-size-fits-all answer to how Jesus interprets the law. The Sermon on the Mount is one of the lengthiest discourses of Jesus regarding the law. In some cases, he demands that the intent of the law has to do with one's motivation and one's inner character. In some cases, Jesus calls for absolute adherence to the law. In other cases, Jesus demands a response that goes beyond the letter of the law.²⁷ In other places, including when Jesus interprets laws regarding the Sabbath, he rejects interpretations of the law that stand in the way of a person's healing, well-being and restoration to an abundant life.²⁸
4. Jesus' treatment of the law is neither systematic nor comprehensive. The only place that Jesus addresses the whole of the law is when he is asked which is the greatest commandment. While Jesus cannot choose just one, he does choose two: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*" This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "*You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*"²⁹ And in so choosing, Jesus says that "*on these two commandments hang all the law and prophets.*"³⁰
5. In the New Testament, the division established in the Old Testament between what is holy and what is profane becomes more porous. Through Jesus Christ, holiness is no longer contained in the "Holy of Holies" inner sanctum of the Temple. Illustrated by Jesus' incarnation and life and symbolized by the tearing of the temple curtain after Jesus is crucified,³¹ God, in effect, enters the profane, and the profane or common takes on holiness.³² The Christian community becomes the place where God chooses to dwell. God's holiness is not diminished by having entered the realm of the common and God chooses to call the community of faith holy.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you understand the law (such as the Holiness Code in Leviticus 17–20) in connection with your own Christian faith?
2. After examining these Old Testament texts that speak to same-gender sexual activity, what is your dominant impression? What is clarifying? What is challenging? What is distressing?

²⁷ See the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:17–48. The different ways that Jesus deals with different sections of the law are outlined by Johnson's treatment of the Sermon on the Mount, 189.

²⁸ Luke 6:1–10, for example.

²⁹ Matthew 22:35–39.

³⁰ Matthew 22: 40.

³¹ Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38, Luke 23:45.

³² Farris, "The New Testament, the Holy and Reformed Identity," 320, 324.

1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10

Tricky Translations

It is clear throughout the letter of 1 Corinthians that there have been some issues of conflict and sexual immorality in the Corinthian community. Paul devotes several chapters of the letter to matters of sexuality and marriage (chapters 5–7).

1 Corinthians 6:9–10 includes *arsenokoitēs* (literally “male” and “bed”) and *malakos* (literally “soft”) in a list of those sexual offenders who will “not inherit the kingdom of God.” *Arsenokoitēs* is a compound of two words found in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.³³

1 Timothy 1:10 refers to a similar list, including the word *arsenokoitēs* and also related words *pornos* (male prostitute) and *andropodistēs*. The word *andropodistēs* means “slave-trader” or “kidnapper” and refers to the practice of sexual slavery.

There is particular difficulty translating *arsenokoitēs* into English, mostly because it is a very rare word. It does not appear in other contexts within the Bible or in contemporary texts outside of the Bible. *Malakos*, on the other hand, is a widely used word and refers to a broad category of things such as laziness, decadence, lack of courage, weakness, and in general anything feminine.³⁴ In several translations (including for example the NIV and the Good News Bible), these words are rendered as “men who have sex with men” or “homosexual perverts.” However, other translations (including the KJV and the NRSV) rend these words as “effeminate males” or “male prostitutes.” Many think that the terms are related to the Greek practice of pedistry, which is the sexual use or abuse of younger boys (perhaps called *malakos*) by older men (perhaps called *arsenokoitēs*.)

There is considerable disagreement about these particular words and their meanings. All agree, however, that the terms are ambiguous and are difficult to translate accurately. Many would agree that they cannot be applied *in a direct or wholesale manner* to consensual, committed same-sex unions of today’s culture. Even with this common ground, however, there are at least two schools of interpretation regarding the meanings of the words in these two passages.

One school of biblical scholars argues that all of these terms refer in some way to abusive and exploitative practices or the idea of associating culturally negative female characteristics with expected and positive male characteristics (see Codes for Living on page 20). In addition, these same scholars would point out that the modern understanding of a mutual, committed, long-term relationship between persons of the same sex (along with the modern concept of sexual orientation) did not exist in the ancient culture. Therefore, they would argue that translating these words to reflect a general reference to homosexual persons is misleading for readers in contemporary Canada.

Another school of biblical interpreters argues that these are general terms referring to the general practice of same-sex sexual activity among males. In addition, these same scholars would counter the arguments about modern conceptions of

33 Susan R. Garrett, *The Bible and Homosexuality* (www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com, 2011).

34 Dale B. Martin, “*Arsenokoitēs* and *Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences” in *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality*, Robert L. Brawley, ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

homosexuality, citing a first century general familiarity with same-sex sexual activity and practices. The condemnation of these practices is not, from this point of view, culturally bound.

Romans 1:26–27 – A Debate about Natural vs. Unnatural

Most sources from both the traditional and revisionist perspectives, including Tony Campolo, Stanley Grenz, David Gushee and James Brownson recognize that the passage in Romans 1 is at the heart of the scriptural debate about homosexuality and is the most significant of the specific texts for our current context.

Literary Context

The first chapter of the letter to the Romans begins Paul’s long argument that human beings are sinful in the eyes of God. Paul systematically addresses the sinful behaviours of pagans and Jews, Gentiles and Christians throughout the first three chapters of his most theological treatise until he comes to the conclusion, “*For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*”³⁵ From there, he begins to make his case for salvation by grace through the Lord Jesus Christ, which is not based on any human’s good work, including obedience to the law.

The first group that Paul addresses are the idolators³⁶ – those who worship multiple gods or gods other than the one true God of Israel. Within this context, he speaks of those who exchanged “the truth of God for a lie” and those who “worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” The consequence of this action is that God “gave them up in the lust of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies.” It is at this point where the text regarding same-sex sexual activity occurs. It is the only place where women are included in this discussion.

“For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”

(Romans 1:26–27)

³⁵ Romans 3:22-23.

³⁶ Romans 1:18-32.

Romans 1:26–27

The chart that follows is a synopsis of how people with different understandings of human sexuality and sexual orientation tend to interpret this text in Romans.³⁷ While certainly these categories are oversimplified, they seek to fairly represent a continuum of perspectives while highlighting the differences of interpretation. In an effort to name the two groups, those who think that same-gender relationships and sexual activity are prohibited by the Bible are called “traditionalists” and those who are in favour of full inclusion of LGBTQ persons and expanding the definition of marriage to include same-sex union are called “progressives.”³⁸ Within these two poles is a range of perspectives, which will be nuanced differently by different readers.

Users can read this chart in several ways. It might be helpful to think of it as an eye chart at the optometrist’s office. You can cover the right side of the chart and read down the rows. In doing so, you can see how a person who reads this text as a prohibition of same-sex relations interprets Romans 1. Then you can cover the left side of the chart and see how a person who has revisited the text in favour of same-sex relations interprets Romans 1. In addition, you can use the key words or themes on the far left side to help you understand how the different understandings compare on particular sections of Romans 1.

Key words or phrases	A Traditionalist Reading	A Progressive Reading
<p>natural and unnatural</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Paul’s context, what is “natural” is aligned with God’s created intention for man and woman in sexual relationships. • “Natural” and “unnatural” in this passage are predominantly biological terms. “Natural” is in keeping with the will or intentions of God. “Unnatural” goes against the divine standard. Heterosexuality is understood as the natural sexual inclination of all human beings, as created by God. • In this reading, what is “natural” refers to God’s original design. What is “unnatural” goes against the creative intentions of God. • These categories are unchanging. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Paul’s context, what is “natural” is aligned with what is divine and true. Anything “unnatural” is aligned with idolatry, lies and uncontrolled lust. This is larger than sexual norms, yet includes them. • What is “natural” also includes social well-being and cultural norms. Something that is natural is “conventional.” Conventional includes sexual relationships, gender ideologies and how men and women conduct themselves in society, all of which are very different today than they were for Paul.³⁹ • Progressives note that Paul does not always use the notion of what is “natural” to mean what is good. In other places (such as Ephesians 2), what comes naturally is a negative thing.⁴⁰ “Natural” is not a term that is synonymous with “the will of God.” • The categories of “natural” and “unnatural” are not fixed. Our understanding of how God’s will is shown to humanity within the natural order changes, grows and deepens over time.⁴¹

chart continues on next page

37 The two main sources for these different readings are Stanley Grenz and James Brownson.

38 It is difficult to know what language is best in this context. Susan Garrett’s work uses the terms “affirmers” (those who affirm same-sex unions) and “prohibitionists” (those who would prohibit same-sex unions). Others use “revisionists” versus “traditionalists.” All of these terms are somewhat problematic, and carry some negative connotations.

39 Brownson, 234–237.

40 Brownson, 227.

41 Brownson, 247.

Romans 1 chart continued

Key words or phrases	A Traditionalist Reading	A Progressive Reading
inner disposition	Paul does not have individuals in mind in this text. Therefore, his argument is not against people going against “their” natural sexual functioning, but rather against “the” natural sexual functioning. ⁴² His argument is wider in scope than a person’s natural tendencies. “Natural” and “unnatural” are not relative terms, but part of the created order.	By looking at various biblical usages of the word, “natural,” one can argue that “naturally” can refer to “one’s own individual nature.” Paul could be interpreted then to be arguing that one’s God-given identity includes what “comes naturally” to an individual. In our current context, we now understand that a person’s sexual orientation is something that “comes naturally” to them. While Paul might not have had this modern understanding of sexuality as an individual’s natural disposition, the concept of nature as inner disposition is present in Paul’s use of the word and concept and can be applied in a new way to a different understanding of sexuality than what was available to Paul himself.
degrading	The use of words and phrases such as degrading or dishonourable, “consumed with passion” and shameless emphasize the strength of Paul’s convictions on this subject.	The word “degrading” can also be translated as “dishonourable.” In this case, rationality (associated with male gender roles) is taken over by passions (associated with a less honourable disposition and with a female gender role). A male who behaves in a way that does not conform to the societal norms of his gender (rational, dominant, honourable and moderate) is behaving in a degrading way.
consumed with passion	Someone who is “consumed with passion” indicates a person whose sexual appetite is not satisfied with accepted male-female relationships. These individuals have an undisciplined sex drive and seek to satisfy their desires through sexual perversion (anything outside of “natural” male-female sexual relations).	Passion in the first century context, as opposed to the 21st century is more often negative than positive. It is something that stands in contrast to moderation and rationality. Uncontrolled passion is associated with excess, lust, lack of control and self-centredness. While we in the 21st century have a different usage and positive understanding of the word “passion,” Christian sexual ethics for both heterosexuals and homosexuals would guard against these same characteristics (excess, lust, lack of control and self-centredness).
women	The fact that women are included in this specific passage of scripture in the context of same-sex sexual activity puts lesbian sexual activity on par with gay sexual activity. While there is acknowledgment that Paul does not specifically define the term “natural intercourse,” it can be rightfully be assumed that this is a straight-forward reference to heterosexual activity. Therefore, “unnatural intercourse” in this context points to the opposite, which is same-sex sexual activity.	Understanding women’s role in sexual relationships in Paul’s cultural context is crucial to interpreting the text that says women exchanged “natural intercourse for unnatural.” Any engagement in sexual activity that was not procreative or in which the woman took a dominant role would be considered “unnatural” in Paul’s cultural context. While “unnatural” is a term that could be used in the ancient world for same-gender sexual activity, it also could refer to a much wider number of sexual behaviours. ⁴³ In addition, many of the roles we consider appropriate for women in sexual relationships, as well as society in general (including education and leadership) would contradict what was deemed “natural” for women of the first century.

42 Grenz, 49.

43 Brownson , 225.

Conclusions Regarding Romans 1

Traditionalists read this text in Romans as an echo of both the creation story, where they understand that heterosexual relationships are divinely established as the only acceptable sexual relationships, and the Levitical law, which pronounces male homosexuality an abomination. For these readers, there is little ambiguity that the words “natural” and “unnatural” refer to heterosexual versus homosexual sexual activity.⁴⁴

Progressives emphasize the context of Paul’s writing, which is the worship of idols and graven images. This example of sexual relations is likely a reference to either pagan worship rituals or, at least, sexual activity that goes beyond societal norms, which we in the 21st century no longer share. For these readers, the sin referred to in this text is more about excess (passion), insatiable lust, lack of self-control and a contradiction of cultural norms. They would argue that Paul’s focus was not on loving, committed same-sex unions – an idea that Paul would not have been familiar with – but on the dangers of idolatry and how it can lead to excess passion, insatiable lust, lack of self-control and self-delusion.

Discussion Questions

1. After reading the summary of the traditionalist interpretation of Romans 1, what is clarifying? What is challenging?
2. After reading the summary of the progressive interpretation of Romans 1, what is clarifying? What is challenging?
3. What common ground, if any, do you see in these two perspectives?
4. How does having some background regarding the seven texts that reference same-gender sexual activity help your understanding of our church’s conversation about this matter?

⁴⁴ Garrett, *The Bible and Homosexuality*, www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com, 2011.

3

The Bible, Sexual Norms and Family Structures

Family Structures

The Bible presents many kinds of family structures, including polygamous households, blended family structures (particularly in the interest of carrying on a family line through a man's widow or a slave of the household), sibling-run households, extended family households, houses run by a female in the family, etc. These family structures were all accepted by society at certain historical points. Family structure and values are not uniform throughout the Bible. In addition, the Bible does not say just one thing only about marriage. Biblical interpretation is complex. The Bible itself contains many different perspectives, requires translation and is culturally conditioned in many respects. Because of this, it may be helpful to distinguish what is “normal” and what is “normative” in the Bible.⁴⁵

“**Normal**” is *descriptive* of a practice in a particular time and place, such as first century Palestinian culture or 21st century Canadian culture. “**Normative**” is *prescriptive* and therefore is meant to apply a practice in a more universal way for all times and all places. Trying to discern, through the Holy Spirit, what is normal practice in the Bible and what is normative for all Christians today is a significant part of our work in matters related to human sexuality and sexual orientation.

Marriage

It is entirely fair to say that marriage between a man and woman is **normal** in the Bible. References to marriage, on the whole, are generally positive. Marriage is encouraged and often expected across many of the cultures within the biblical texts. This is due in part to the understanding that marriage represents an economic, social and religious covenant between families. The idea of marrying for love and by the sole choice of individuals is a relatively modern idea. This is particularly true for women. In both the ancient Hebrew cultures of the Bible and in the Roman context of the New Testament, a daughter stayed under the power, jurisdiction and care of her father until she was married. If she became widowed, she became the responsibility of her husband's brother or another male relative. Women who did not have the protection and provision of a man were in particular danger, which is the motive behind the repeated biblical mandate to care for widows and children.

It is probably not the case, however, to say that marriage is **normative** in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament. Jesus speaks of marriage between a man and

⁴⁵ Brownson uses this distinction throughout his book *Bible Gender Sexuality*. This helpful distinction and good explanation of it is on page 51–52. Study groups might find it very helpful to read and review this section together.

woman in positive ways and has particularly strict rules around divorce (in Matthew, only the grounds of unchastity are cited as reason for divorce and in Mark and Luke, Jesus speaks of no grounds for divorce).⁴⁶ However, Jesus himself remains unmarried. In some places, Jesus commends those who leave behind family for the sake of the gospel.⁴⁷ Jesus also argues for the acceptance of eunuchs (both by birth and by choice) who serve the kingdom of heaven.⁴⁸ Paul, himself unmarried, raises some significant questions about whether marriage is normative. In some places, he encourages those who are unmarried to remain single and celibate in order that they can devoted in a single-hearted way to God.⁴⁹

We can conclude, then, that marriage is a gift from God. It is neither normative nor required. Marriage is not essential to Christian faith. A person is not more complete when married, rather than single. Like other God-given gifts, marriage is intended for the building up of the body of Christ and for the purpose of making the world a more loving, more just place.

God's purpose for us can be realized
in both single and married life.
Marriage is not God's will for everyone.
Fullness of life is offered to all,
both single and married.

(Living Faith 8.2.2)

Celibacy

In the church's current position, homosexual orientation is not a sin, but homosexual activity is a sin. This necessarily translates to a call for celibacy for an entire group of people who experience same-sex attraction for complex reasons that are largely beyond their control or choosing. Throughout the history of the church, there have been homosexual people who have struggled against their feelings of same-sex attraction and understood celibacy as the only faithful choice for a gay Christian.⁵⁰ Some have found satisfaction in the call to set aside what they and the church have regarded as "broken sexuality" and practice celibacy for the sake of the gospel, even as they acknowledge struggle, temptation and profound loneliness. Others believe that the universal call to celibacy for all gay and lesbian people is not only unfair, but has significant and damaging consequences for those who experience same-sex attraction.

Celibacy in Paul's Writings

In a discussion around marriage, sexual desire and the call to serve God, Paul promotes celibacy for all those who are unmarried and holds up the celibate lifestyle as preferable for all, but not possible for all.⁵¹ He recognizes that the call to a celibate lifestyle is a gift from God, in the same way that other spiritual gifts are given to some and not others.⁵²

⁴⁶ Matthew 5 and 19; Mark 10; Luke 16.

⁴⁷ Luke 14:26.

⁴⁸ Matthew 19:12.

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 7.

⁵⁰ Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010). Hill is a gay Christian who believes that the only way to live according to the gospel is through celibacy. This book is about his struggles to be faithful to this interpretation of Christian living.

⁵¹ 1 Corinthians 7.

⁵² Brownson, p. 140.

Celibacy in Church Tradition

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, John Calvin and other Reformers re-examined the imposition of mandatory celibacy on priests and those who felt called to ordained leadership in the church. The Reformers, to be clear, continued to call for a ban on same-sex activity. However, they lifted the ban on celibacy for clergy. In so doing, the Reformers also rejected the idea that the celibate lifestyle is a purer or higher moral good.

Celibacy and Abstinence

Some scholars have drawn the distinction between celibacy and abstinence.⁵³ Abstinence is refraining from sexual activity. Celibacy is more than a call to repress sexual desires, but is also a commitment to set aside sexual desire entirely as an important component of a fulfilled and satisfying life.⁵⁴ The church traditionally calls all single people, homosexual and heterosexual, to abstinence outside of marriage. Since there is no option for non-heterosexual persons to marry in the traditional understanding of the church, the call to abstinence for homosexual persons is both long term and permanent.

Traditionalists argue that this ideal of abstinence is certainly difficult for all persons, but just because it is more difficult for some than others does not make it less of a gospel ideal.⁵⁵ Traditionalists also argue that the call to abstinence is not synonymous with the call to celibacy, and that LGBTQ persons as well as single heterosexual persons can pray for the gift of celibacy or for strength to abstain as they work out their own sexuality.

Affirmers of same-sex marriage tend not to draw a distinction between abstinence and celibacy, arguing that the call to long-term or permanent abstinence is an imposition of celibacy. Affirmers put emphasis on celibacy as a spiritual gift. It is a gift to be embraced and exercised. Spiritual gifts are given and cannot be imposed on whole groups of people. In addition, mandatory celibacy for a whole class of people, and for any person serving as a minister of Word and Sacraments, seems out of keeping with the Protestant understanding of sexuality and service to the church.⁵⁶

These perspectives are drawn here in broad strokes for the purpose of engaging different interpretations in conversation. All of these interpretations will have bearing on the questions before us regarding same-sex marriage. In addition, the topics of celibacy and abstinence are important considerations of the current positions of the PCC regarding ordination standards and LGBTQ people. (See Flow Chart: Tracing Different Pathways on page 45.)

⁵³ Grenz, 125–128.

⁵⁴ Brownson, 141.

⁵⁵ Grenz, 126.

⁵⁶ Paul Achtemeier (pres-outlook.org/2009/12/achtemeiers-journey-to-accept-homosexual-marriage-ordination) is an Old Testament scholar from the conservative, evangelical position who re-examined his stance on same-sex relationships. He was interviewed by *The Presbyterian Outlook* in 2009. "Marriage is given to us, not just in a form that responds to our need, but also in a way that is positively sanctifying and life-giving and permeated by grace," [Paul] Achtemeier said. "If, as Calvin insists, it is foolish and rash for individuals to turn their backs on this divine gift and calling, how much more so when an entire church acts to withhold this gift from a whole class of human beings?"

Diversity of Interpretation

Consider this quotation from Wendy VanderWal-Gritter in her book *Generous Spaciousness*:

“If individuals of differing perspectives are to find a way to listen well, extend respect, and embody the priority of peace-making over proselytizing, we will need to recognize the potential within our interpretive lenses for diversity. And we will need to refrain from automatically assuming that someone whose perspective differs from our own is failing to honor the authority of Scripture or submit to the lordship of Christ. Generous spaciousness humbly acknowledges our limitations and intentionally chooses a posture of listening and learning. It recognizes that among those who identify as followers of Jesus and have a high regard for Scripture, there are diverse perspectives on many different questions (including but not limited to the matter of same-sex sexuality) in regard to how to live as a faithful disciple of Christ. Despite those differences, generous spaciousness makes room for us to join in conversations together in a shared quest for a deeper and more robust relationship with Christ.”⁵⁷

As we seek to interpret the scriptures, we will have to face the reality that we will not all agree on how they are best understood. We will continue to hold different, even opposite, opinions. The real question for us is whether we can offer those differing opinions to God, respect one another as each seeking to be faithful to Christ, and continue to be a community of disciples together in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Fear and Love

Human beings are sexual beings. Within Canada in the 21st century we have addressed the facts that some people are innately attracted to people of the opposite sex and some are innately attracted to people of the same sex. For others, such as transgender or bisexual people, questions of gender and sexuality are even more complicated. It is undeniable that our 21st century awareness of different sexual categories and the spectrum of sexual and gender identification is broader than it used to be. New questions are raised about God’s intention for humanity in sexual expression and relationships. In turn, all of this means that questions of sexual ethics and Christian faith are more complex. This complexity, along with a highly sexualized post-modern culture, also means that the call for Christian sexual ethics is as important now as at any other time in human history, perhaps even more so.

In addition, understanding what the Bible says about sexual attraction and activity is multi-layered. Everything in the Bible requires translation, in terms of both language

⁵⁷ VanderWal-Gritter, Wendy. *Generous Spaciousness: Responding to Gay Christians in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014), 167–168.

and culture, as we seek God’s will for our lives. This means that faithful interpretation is hard work. Considering different sexual norms of various cultures is also crucial to understanding the Bible on the subject of sexual ethics.

All agree that the Bible does have significant things to say about sexual ethics, intimate relationships between human beings and healthy and life-giving understandings of sexuality within faith communities. We still disagree on what those specifically are, and perhaps we always will. Perhaps it is time for us to recognize that both traditionalists and progressives in The Presbyterian Church in Canada recognize the authority of the Bible and are seeking to be faithful to God’s will for humanity across centuries of time, culture and language. In a spirit of generous spaciousness, we need not fear that our Presbyterian brothers and sisters in faith are either “sticking with the Bible” or “rejecting the Bible.” We are all wrestling with how to read the Bible faithfully, even if we come to different conclusions. Perhaps if we can set this fear aside and listen to each other’s perspectives, we can live together in love and not fear.

Discussion Questions

1. Understandings of family structures, including marriage and celibacy, have differed and shifted through time and between different cultures. What are some of our understandings of family structure today in Canada? What are some of the strengths and the challenges that come with different kinds of family structures in our society?
2. How can we as Presbyterians disagree about how we interpret the scriptures and still remain together as a unified church? What other subjects can you think of where we disagree on how to interpret scripture across our denomination?
3. What other biblical texts or stories, beyond those that specifically mention same-sex sexual activity, should we consider when discussing the issues of human sexuality, sexual orientation and sexual ethics (in relation to both marriage and ordination standards) that are before us as a church? (For example: Luke 15:11–32, 1 John 4:16–21, 1 Corinthians 5–7, Galatians 3. You might want to use these as a beginning and come up with your own as well.)

Theology

PRAYERS FROM THE 141ST GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Lord, help us to embrace discomfort together, follow your will rather than our own, accept those around us, appreciate our diversity in opinion and know that we are unified in our love for you.

Give us courage to be open to the guiding of your Spirit that we might embody the nature of Christ as we seek to discern your will for us and your creation.

The following is based on a true story of a Presbyterian family's experience.

Life and Faith Get Complicated

Katherine and Tim are people of faith. They are white, middle-class Christians and members of a Presbyterian church. Katherine is an elder and Tim has volunteered with the youth group and was a member of the outreach committee. They are the parents of three children who were baptized and raised in the church. All three were active in the youth group and were confirmed as teenagers. Though they haven't really talked about it too much, they assumed that their children would likely grow up, marry and have children of their own. Like all Christian parents, they hope and pray that their kids will live their adult lives as faithful Christians. Katherine and Tim have tried to model open-mindedness as well as Christian ethics for their children.

When the kids got to a dating age, they started an ongoing conversation within the family that would pop up every once in a while over many years.

"Mom," one of the daughters would say, "what if I brought home a boy of another race, who didn't speak much English, and said we were getting married."

"We would be happy to call him a son," came the response. After all, the church teaches that God's community of faith is a multicultural community of all races, ethnicities and languages.

“Dad,” the son would say, “what if I brought home a girl who was Muslim and wore a hijab (a head covering) and said we were in love?”

“Well, we would welcome her and try to get to know her and appreciate her perspective,” came the response. After all, the Bible says that in Christ there is no longer male and female, Jew or Greek, slave or free (Galatians 3).

Sometimes it took Katherine or Tim a little longer to respond than others, but they almost always came down on the side of openness and welcome, even if considerable conversation came first. The different scenarios, over the years, were sometimes so elaborate that they became like a silly little game.

One of the children, the middle girl, struggled for years with her sexual identity, feeling of attraction and sense of belonging. She would sometimes look in the mirror and practice the “game” with her parents. But it didn’t feel like a game anymore. “Mom and Dad, I am in love with a girl. What do I do? Can I bring *her* home to meet you? What does it mean to be gay and Christian?”

One Christmas, the family is gathered for the holiday and all of the “kids” are under one roof again. By this time, one is married. Another is single and working in a nearby city and the youngest is finishing university. They are all sitting down at the table for a meal, before heading to the Christmas Eve service at their church. The middle child, a girl, shifts a little uncomfortably in her seat and finally finds the courage to speak up. She glances at her brother first. Then she speaks, “Mom, Dad... what if I brought home another girl and told you that we were in love and wanted to get married?” There is silence at the table.

Katherine and Tim feel torn. On the one hand, they have always been taught that the Bible is against homosexuality. They want to be faithful to the Word of God and how it calls Christians to live. On the other hand, they believe that God created their daughter and loves her unconditionally. They also love their daughter unconditionally and want to make sure that their response reflects their love and acceptance. They have read studies and heard in the news that sexual orientation has genetic as well as environmental factors. It is not simply a “choice.”

It is Christmas Eve, and they are about to celebrate the God who chooses to come and live among us in human flesh and likeness, to offer forgiveness and bring abundant life. The child that is born tonight is Emmanuel, God with us. What does that mean? What do all these things mean now that their daughter has shared this information about this part of her identity? Life and faith just got more complicated. What will they say to this scenario? The journey ahead requires theological reflection. What does *that* mean?

Discussion Questions

1. How do you respond to the story of Katherine and Tim?
2. Why do questions about our sexual identity sometimes feel different or more difficult than other aspects of our identity?
3. How do you think this story ends? What are some possible faithful responses and outcomes of this story for the daughter? For Katherine and Tim? For the other siblings in the story?

What is Theology?

As Christians have read and interpreted scripture, we have found overarching themes or categories that allow us to understand better who God is and who we are. This kind of theological reflection allows us to understand the scriptures faithfully outside of fixating on one or two verses of text. Theology is a kind of bridge from the scriptures and their ancient contexts to the church of the 21st century and our context. Theology allows us to read specific texts of the Bible as well as reading the Bible as a whole. Reading the Bible as a whole involves taking into consideration the ways biblical texts interact with each other as well as the movement of the biblical witness as God's revelation through Jesus Christ unfolds. Reading the Bible as a whole also allows us to get a broader picture of the character of God.

What follows, in brief, are some of the theological concepts that are important to any discussion on human sexuality and sexual orientation. This is by no means a comprehensive study of these theological ideas. Instead what is intended here are some brief definitions and an overview of each theological concept and how it might relate specifically to matters of human sexuality and sexual orientation.

Creation

The creation texts found in Genesis 1–2 play a foundational role in understanding God's relationship to human beings and how humans relate to each other. Included in these foundational texts are understandings of gender and sexuality. Both genders of male and female are included in the account of creation. "*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them*" (Genesis 1:27). So, too, the intention that humans engage in intimate relationship with each other is embedded in the creation stories. Genesis 2 ends with the statement that "*Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh*" (Genesis 2:24).

While the genre of the creation stories in Genesis 1–2 is still a matter of debate, most mainline Protestant Christians no longer understand these texts (which themselves comprise two differing and even contradicting accounts of the creation) as historical or scientific accounts of the creation of the world. Rather, they are meant to teach us enduring truths about God and human beings, and about our relationships to each other and to the rest of the created world.

Genesis 1 and 2

The chart that follows is a synopsis of how people with different understandings of human sexuality and sexual orientation tend to think about the theology of creation. While certainly these categories are oversimplified, they seek to fairly represent a continuum of perspectives while highlighting the differences of interpretation. In an effort to name the two groups, those who are in favour of full inclusion of LGBTQ persons and expanding the definition of marriage to include same-sex union are called “progressives” and those who think that same-gender relationships and sexual activity are prohibited by the Bible are called “traditionalists.”¹ Within these two poles is a range of perspectives, which will be nuanced differently by different readers.

Users can read this chart in several ways. It might be helpful to think of it as an eye chart at the optometrist’s office. You can cover the right side of the chart and read down the rows. In doing so, you can see how a person who advocates for the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons understands the creation story. Then you can cover the left side of the chart and see how a person who reads the text in a traditional way understands the creation story. In addition, you can use the subject headings on the far left side to help you understand how the different understandings compare on particular sections of Genesis 1 and 2.

Key words or phrases	A Progressive Reading	A Traditionalist Reading
<p>The creation of human beings Genesis 1:27 Genesis 2:7, 22</p>	<p>Progressives tend to read the creation stories with an understanding that God created male and female simultaneously in the first account of creation (as in Genesis 1:27). In the second account of creation (Genesis 2:7), God created the first human being out of the earth, not as a person specifically of the male gender, but as a creature of the earth. The Hebrew word translated “man” in Genesis 1 is “<i>adam</i>” and the Hebrew word for earth or dust is “<i>adama</i>.”² So “<i>adam</i>” is literally an earthling, not a particular gender.³</p>	<p>Traditionalists understand that in chapter 1 God created both male and female in God’s image. Chapter 2 expands that story with the understanding that man was formed first and then humanity was completed with the forming of woman.</p>
<p>“It is not good that the man should be alone.” Genesis 2:18</p>	<p>God realized that it was not good for the creature of the earth, made in God’s image, to be alone. None of the animals that God had made were sufficient to be a companion for the human being. So God created another human being from the first, for companionship, as a life mate, who shares the same flesh and bone. The terms “man” (<i>ish</i>) and “woman” (<i>isha</i>) are then introduced into the text. The two human beings do not complete one another, in the sense that the male needs the female to be whole, or vice versa. They are equally made in the image of God independently of one another.</p>	<p>In the chapter 2 expansion, the good of 1:27 is tempered by the “not good for the man to be alone.” Nothing yet created was sufficient to satisfy this aloneness. So, from the man, God created woman to be the man’s helper or partner in a way that no other creature could. The female as “helper” or partner is a divine gift. Male and female, while understood by many traditionalists as equal, are often regarded as different reflections of the divine image.</p>

chart continues on next page

- 1 It is difficult to know what language is best in this context. Susan Garrett’s work uses the terms “affirmers” (those who affirm same-sex unions) and “prohibitionists” (those who would prohibit same-sex unions). Others use “revisionists” versus “traditionalists.” All of these terms are somewhat problematic, carrying negative connotations for some over others.
- 2 Genesis 1:26, 27; 2:7, 20.
- 3 Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 149–152. Taylor interprets the Hebrew text here and refers to “*adam*” as an earthling, a mud-baby, a dirt-person, a dust-creature, whom God breathed into and it became a living being. God created earth and earthlings to tend the earth. In examining the spiritual practice of physical labour that brings human beings back into relationship with the stuff of earth, Taylor invokes this imagery saying, “Welcome home, you beloved dirt-person of God.”

Genesis 1 and 2 chart continued

Key words or phrases	A Progressive Reading	A Traditionalist Reading
<p>“cling to each other and become one flesh” Genesis 2:24</p>	<p>Human beings have an intense need to be in meaningful relationship with one another. This quest is in response to a feeling of loneliness. While this idea of becoming “one flesh” has been used to express the commitment of a marriage between one man and one woman, this language primarily refers to a new primary kinship bond.⁴ This kind of lifelong kinship bond could extend to other relationships beyond one man and one woman in marriage and still remain faithful to the intentions of God’s creation and human beings’ need for one another in intimate and kindred relationships.</p>	<p>For Traditionalists, this language speaks specifically to a sexual union between a man and a woman. It is applied primarily to the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman. The quest of the man for a woman, and vice versa, is understood by some traditionalists as the quest for completeness. It is often also expanded to speak of the bonding of two persons in “heart and soul” so that each not only becomes more whole or complete in relationship with the other, but by mutual self-giving they become one.</p>
<p>Gender Complementarity Genesis 1:27 Genesis 2:23</p>	<p>Progressives believe that the idea of gender complementarity is not inherent in the creation stories, but is a later idea added into the text.⁵ The bonding of the male and female is a covenantal, unitive kinship, linking two families and creating a new family. In addition, the Genesis accounts do not emphasize the <i>difference</i> between the man and woman so much as the <i>similarity</i> between them.⁶ The male finds in the woman someone similar to himself (unlike anything else in creation), which enables an intimate relationship that involves sexual union. This is not to say that male and female do <i>not</i> complement each other. However, it also does not rule out the possibility that two different people of the same sex have complementary aspects.</p>	<p>Traditionalists understand the accounts of creation in chapters 1 and 2 to present a divine design of gender complementarity. This view emphasizes that there are inherent and intended differences in man and woman, though both reflect the divine image. Genesis teaches that the similarity of the human being with God is only found in the association of the man and the woman and not in each one taken separately. As such, they are able to complete one another (fit together to form one flesh) in ways no other creature can. This can be understood in anatomical or biological terms as well as in social and spiritual terms. For many traditionalists, this concept of gender complementarity involves the roles that men and women play in society, the church and particularly in family structures. Furthermore, some of these traditionalists assert that these gender roles, while both valuable, ought to remain distinct from one another.</p>
<p>Procreation Genesis 1:28</p>	<p>God gives the blessings of procreation, “Be fruitful and multiply,” not only to the human beings of creation, but to all the creatures of creation. Procreation is one of many purposes for human marriage and the mandate for a lifelong kinship bond. However, procreation is neither the sole purpose nor an essential component of marriage. The primary reason for marriage is faithful love and care for two partners in unitive, intimate relationship to one another and for the greater good of society.</p>	<p>Procreation and the responsibility to nurture children is understood as one of the primary reasons for marriage. Marriage, as an exclusive bond between a man and a woman, is often celebrated by sexual intercourse that leaves open the possibility for new life. This creation mandate is often developed with other parts of scripture with regard to sexual intercourse within marriage and family life in general.</p>
<p>Genesis in relation to the rest of the canon of scripture</p>	<p>Progressives understand the creation stories as setting the stage for the relationship between God and humanity and between human beings. All of the relationships cited in these stories grow, change and deepen in a variety of ways throughout the canon of scripture, as God interacts with the covenant community of Israel, individuals and the church.</p>	<p>Traditionalists see Genesis 1 and 2 as God’s design of a “sexual-ethical paradigm” for all times and places. As such, it is a divine pattern that is enduring for humanity. This design understands sexuality as “consistently gendered, complementarian, procreative and marital.”</p>

4 Brownson, 86. For example, Ruth clings to Naomi, her mother-in-law, thus forming a new primary kinship bond (Ruth 1:14).

5 Garrett.

6 Brownson, 30.

Discussion Questions

1. After reading the summary of the traditionalist interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2, what is clarifying? What is challenging?
2. After reading the summary of the progressive interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2, what is clarifying? What is challenging?
3. What are some key ideas that are important to you in your understanding of creation in relationship to human sexuality?

Covenant

Christians understand God as a God of covenant. A covenant can be understood as a promise within the context of a relationship. While God makes a covenant with Noah, the first place where covenant is outlined in detail is in the relationship that God has with Abraham and Sarah. God says to Abraham, “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (Genesis 17:7). The covenant involves the promise of land and offspring. And as the generations pass, the covenant is further defined when God speaks to Moses at the burning bush saying, “I will take you as my people and I will be your God” (Exodus 6:7). Throughout the exodus from Egypt, the formation of the people as a nation, and the journey toward the Promised Land, the language of covenant is invoked to refer to the promises that God makes to the people and that the people in turn make to God. It is within this understanding of covenant that the law comes into being. The covenant governs the intentions and actions of those who are part of it. The covenant can be broken or confirmed.

Covenants can be renewed and re-imagined, as in the days of the prophet Jeremiah. “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33). Jesus refers to the covenant at the Last Supper with his disciples when he offers them the cup saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). The early church understands itself as descendants of the covenant that God first established with Abraham, transformed and renewed through the life, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God establishes the covenant with human beings and in turn, human beings also make covenants with one another. As Christians, we understand that God is the keeper of covenants. God is trustworthy and steadfast. While human beings break covenant (with God and each other) regularly, this stands in stark contrast to the character and actions of God. As people of faith, we seek to model our relationships on the relationship that God has established with us.

Discussion Questions

1. In contemporary Canada, how does the understanding and practice of marriage:
 - a. reflect the covenantal promise and relationship with God outlined above?
 - b. differ from the concepts of covenant outlined above?
2. How, if at all, would an affirmation of same-sex marriage affect your understanding of marriage as a covenant?
3. Covenant life in the church and legal life in society are not always identical. As a result, how, if at all, should the understanding and practice of marriage in the PCC be different from that of society in general?

Sin and Grace

Sin might best be described as that condition which separates or alienates us from each other and from God. When we try to define sin, we can begin at the beginning and continue our reading of the Genesis accounts of creation. Traditionalists understand Genesis 3 as a profound disruption of the sexual-ethical paradigm established in Genesis 1 and 2. Progressives tend to see Genesis 3 more broadly in terms of painting a picture of what kinds of things happen when people sin. For both traditionalists and progressives, sin can be understood as a broken covenant with God and with other human beings. Sin might be described as a lack of harmony between human beings, between humans and God, or even the conflict that often goes on within our own hearts. Lack of harmony between human beings and even the creation itself could also be included in the broad definitions of sin. All of these aspects of sinfulness are depicted in Genesis 3 and all across the journey of God's people from that point forward.

It might be helpful to consider a few definitions of sin from various biblical or theological scholars in the church. One biblical scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, offers this definition of sin as “the disposition that strives to establish one’s own existence and value apart from the claims of God.”⁷ In other words, we sin by trying to live our lives apart from God and by denying the fact that we belong to God, by virtue of creation, baptism and through the love of Jesus Christ (which always precedes our ability to love). Twentieth century ethicist and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr asserted that sin is pervasive in every aspect of human society, history and being. It is within each individual and within the structure of society; it is within the self and within the enemy; it is in the past and will continue in the human future. For us that means it is everywhere – all human structures, institutions and relationships.

Personal sin – what individuals do or do not do – is a significant part of sin. It is, however, one part of a larger understanding of sin. Sin is not a list of mistakes we have made. Sometimes mistakes are manifestations of sin. Sometimes mistakes are just plain mistakes. Theologian Paul Tillich advocates that we ought not to use the plural of the

⁷ Johnson, 322.

word sin. Talking about “sins” can lead people to make lists of wrongdoing and moral failures, which in turn tempt human beings to compare “my” sin with “your” sin or “our” sins with “their” sins. Tillich suggests that we should talk about sin rather than sins. Sin, he argues, is a condition – an overarching, human condition. It encompasses all of us, it has consequences for all of us, and we can see its effects in our lives. We are complicit in this web of sin. Every day we both participate in it and perpetuate it by what we do or don’t do. Sin is about the state in which we live, until God’s grace burns through it.

Grace, simply put, is the unmerited favour, goodwill, benevolence and approval of God. In the Reformed tradition, we hang our hats on the idea that we “are saved by grace through faith” in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We cannot earn the favour of God through good works or any other means. We do not woo God into being kind to us or judging us with mercy. Grace is God’s initiative. And God chooses to justify us, which means to set us in right relationship with God, to love us and gift us, and indeed to save us, because of grace. Within the context of grace, Christians believe that Jesus came to fulfill or complete the law, rather than abolish it. We are saved by grace through faith not because *we* fulfill or keep the law, but because *Jesus* fulfills the law.

Flow Chart: Tracing Different Pathways

One focus of this particular conversation is whether homosexual activity is necessarily sinful or is not, when practiced within mutual and committed relationships. There are different theological perspectives on this topic within the PCC. In addition, the PCC has made certain statements over the last 20 years that have been approved by the General Assembly.

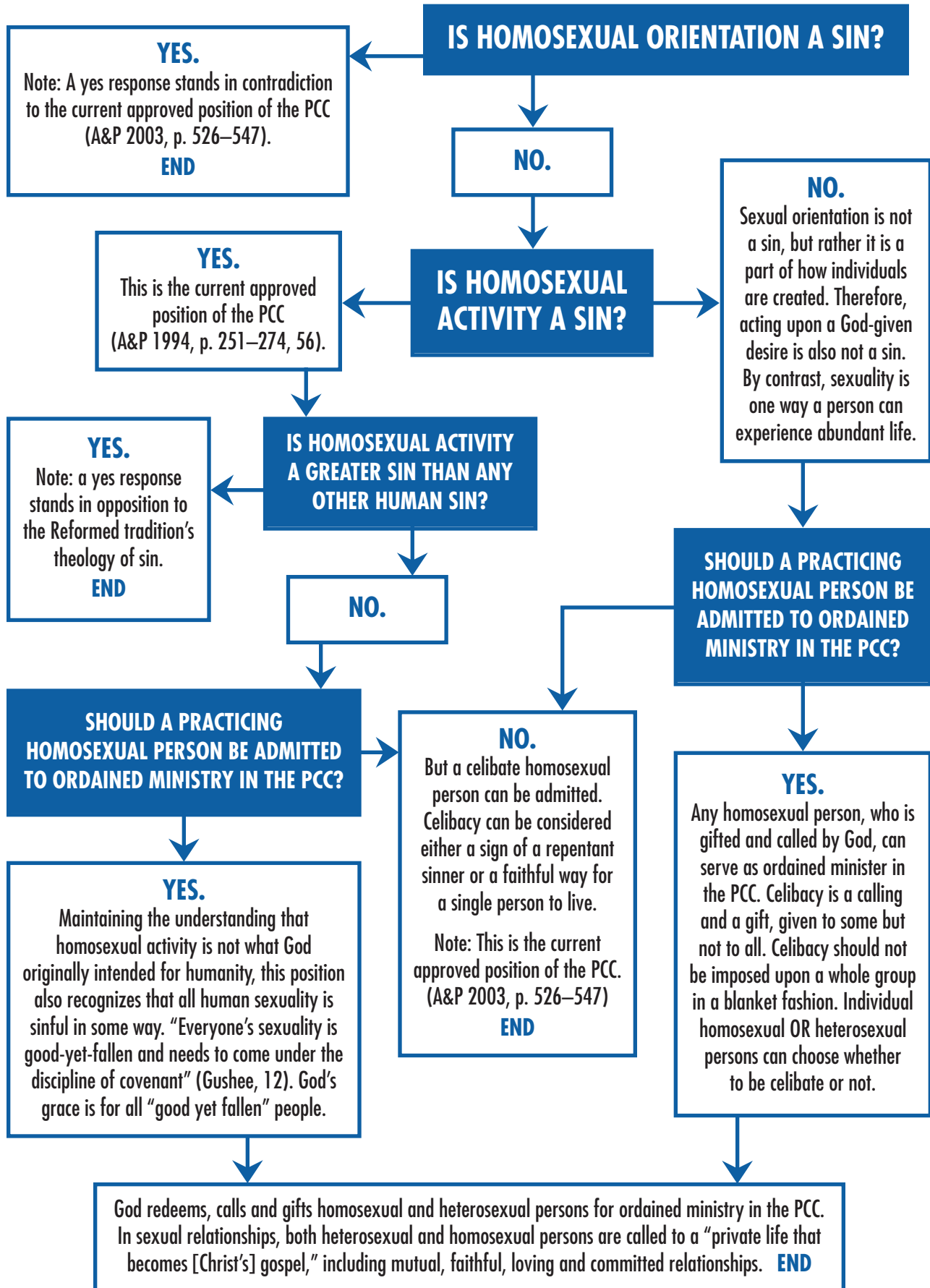
The flow chart on the following page is designed to help people do a few things:

1. See the current position of the PCC regarding sin and homosexuality.
2. Help participants examine their own theological understandings and positions by answering questions and following them to potential conclusions.
3. Show that there are various understandings of sin and homosexuality AND that those diverse understandings include the possibility of reaching a similar conclusion.

Discussion Questions

1. Where do you find yourself on this flow chart? Try to trace a path different from your own. Try to see the issues of sexual orientation and ordination from that other perspective. What makes you feel uncomfortable and why?
2. Notice that the chart allows people who believe that homosexual activity *is* a sin and people who believe that homosexual activity *is not* a sin to reach the same conclusions. How can Christians have different opinions about whether specific behaviours are sinful and still be unified?
3. Theologian David Gushee talks about the need for sinful human sexuality (both heterosexual and homosexual orientations) to come under the “discipline of covenant.” What does that mean?

Tracing Different Pathways



Baptism

Baptism is one of two sacraments in the Presbyterian Church. A sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace. A sacrament is an action initiated by Jesus Christ as a reminder and a sign of the covenantal relationship between God and human beings. Baptism is a gift from God. We do not earn it or buy it or purchase it. Baptism is an outward sign of an inner grace – already at work, already active and present in us. Baptism represents a union with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. As such, it is also understood as a cleansing activity, by which we are cleansed from sin and made free.

Through baptism and the symbol of water, we are marked with the Holy Spirit and claimed by God as God's own beloved child. Also through baptism, we become a part of the community of God's people – a covenant member of the church. Baptism involves the promises of God (an extension of the covenant between God and human beings) and the promises of the community of faith (the covenant between human beings to care for one another). Having been marked by God, as God's own beloved child, we become part of the family of faith and the household of God.

Baptism reminds us that God claimed and chose us first, long before we could choose God. By baptism we know, once again, that God is with us even, to the end of the age. In receiving baptism, we claim this mystery of faith for ourselves and for our children. In the church, we understand baptism as the beginning of a new life in Christ, wherein we can become fully the person that God created us to be. Baptism is the beginning of a journey toward wholeness, as we discover our true identity in Christ. This is an individual journey, but we journey together, as members of God's own family. Through baptism, God seals the promises that God made to us in the covenant of the Old Testament and in Jesus Christ – promising to be with us, to save us and to give us abundant life.

Discussion Questions

1. In this section, baptism is defined as "the beginning of a journey toward wholeness, as we discover our true identity in Christ." How is our understanding of sexual orientation a part of the journey toward wholeness for ourselves both as individuals and collectively as a gathered, worshipping people of God?
2. Given the vows we take as a congregation at a person's baptism, what is the church's role when a baptized person comes out as an LGBTQ person? How could a congregation help foster dialogue to promote mutual listening, respect and understanding?

The Church (Ecclesiology)

Church as *ecclesia*: the Assembly

As many of us have sung many times, “the church is not a building; the church is not a steeple; the church is not a resting place; the church is the people!”⁸ The church is the people of God, called from different backgrounds, different experiences, different walks of life to follow Jesus. Those who have heard Jesus’ call to follow gather together to worship God with their praise, their lives, their worship and their fellowship. The earliest understandings of the church were captured by the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means “the assembly” or “the gathering.” In the New Testament, Jesus uses this word four times and throughout the rest of the New Testament it is used over one hundred times. This word that we translate as “church” assumes a diversity of people, and indeed the early church included people from all different socio-economic levels of society, men and women, Gentile and Jew, slaves and free, people of high status and outcasts. The church met in people’s homes or wherever gathering places could be safely arranged.

Church as *hodos*: People of the Way

The other earliest descriptor of the Christian church, found in the book of Acts, is *hodos*, which is translated “the Way.”⁹ People who followed Jesus were called the “People of the Way.” Certainly this understanding of the church is a people who are on a journey and who are travelling together. This group is not stagnant, nor stationary. Knowledge about this fledgling movement, called the Way, spread across communities. People of the Way faced controversy and persecution, while at the same time gaining momentum and more believers in Jesus Christ.

If you put these two earliest descriptions of the church (the assembly/gathering and “People of the Way”) side by side, you can get a sense of the intended nature of God’s church. It is about people, not buildings. It is dynamic, not static. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Reformers understood the church as “Reformed and always to be Reformed.” The agency of Reformation is God’s and not ours. Reformation looks back to the roots of our faith embedded deeply in the Word of God, while at the same time relying on a living God, who continues to speak and lead in our current context and circumstance.

The Visible and Invisible Church

In his discussion on the nature of the church of Jesus Christ, John Calvin (father of Presbyterianism) reminds us that the church that we see is only a small part of the whole. We must work to sustain and maintain the visible church – the congregations/denomination that we see with our eyes and serve with our hands. Our gatherings as the visible church are imperfect, but entrusted to the Holy Spirit’s care. The visible church is “the place where we experience God’s grace and learn

⁸ Hymn #475 in the Presbyterian Book of Praise, “I am the church! You are the church!” Richard Avery and Donald Marsh

⁹ See Strong’s Concordance word 3598 ἡ ὁδός simply, of the Christian religion (cf. Buttman, 163 (142)), Acts 9:2; Acts 19:9, 23; Acts 24:22.

about God and ourselves.”¹⁰ But the visible church is not the only church. When caring for the well-being of the visible church, it is important to remember that there is also the church God alone sees. God makes decisions about who belongs to the true church, which is bigger than our knowing allows.¹¹ Calvin calls this the invisible church. We do not know its boundaries. It includes the great cloud of witnesses – all the redeemed of past, present and future – that we cannot see. But Calvin assures us that such a church exists, and someday we will see the whole of God’s true church.¹²

Unity, Not Uniformity

God’s creation is rooted in diversity. From the first accounts of the creation of the world, we can see that God values a rich assortment of different kinds of creatures, vegetation and people whom God claims in covenantal bonds. Through the interactions of Jesus, we can see that Jesus values people of both genders, of different races and of different experiences. From the story of the birth of the church at Pentecost, we can see the Holy Spirit’s drive toward reaching out to different languages, cultures and peoples. In other words, diversity and not uniformity is at the heart of what it means to be people called to serve God, from all different cultures, ethnicities, experiences, abilities, languages and walks of life. This also ought to include a willingness to engage with people of different theological positions within and outside the Reformed tradition.

However, the church is also susceptible to the practice of closing its doors and attracting only like-minded, single ethnic groups similar in socio-economic status. This has been true for centuries. Perhaps the most striking call to account on this matter came from Martin Luther King, Jr, when he called Sunday morning “the most segregated hour of the week” in the midst of the civil rights movement in the United States. King’s words have a lingering echo that stretches beyond the United States and beyond matters of race alone. Being with like-minded people in an atmosphere where people generally have similar opinions, particularly on matters of deep emotion or high controversy, is much more comfortable for everyone. However, it may not be in keeping with God’s vision and intention for the church to be a place of unity in diversity.

Unity in the Church

It is undeniable that God continually calls for unity in the church. Paul calls upon the young church in Ephesus to bear “with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”¹³ Unity is one of the highest priorities of those who seek to follow Jesus Christ.

10 Christopher Elwood, *Calvin for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 101–102.

11 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Volume 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, John T. McNeill, editor), V.1.2

12 Elwood, 101.

13 See Ephesians 4:1–6 for full passage.

At the same time, unity cannot be understood as a church where disagreement is absent. The church, from its inception and throughout two millennia, has wrestled with disagreements. They include:

- controversies over whether a Gentile Christian in the first century had to abide by the Mosaic law in order to be Christian (including questions of dietary restriction and circumcision)
- the decision not to synthesize the gospels into one harmonized version of Jesus' life, crucifixion and resurrection, but instead to keep four different and sometimes inconsistent accounts of Jesus' incarnation
- difference in theological convictions (the debate about the true nature of Christ, which resulted in both the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed)
- different perspectives concerning social, economic and political practices within both church and especially in the larger secular society

Sometimes disagreement leads to division. There is vast evidence of that across the history of the church. But in other ways, and perhaps even more often than history records, the church has found ways to remain unified in disagreement. In order for this to happen, there is requirement for listening and respect for people of all perspectives. There is also a requirement for creative thinking and for a spirit of generosity among members of the church and its leadership.

On the issues of human sexuality and sexual orientation, there is no question that diverse and even conflicting perspectives are present in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The real question that remains is whether we can maintain unity in the midst of our diversity or not.

Discussion Questions

1. Share an example from your own experience of how members of a congregation are able to disagree and yet continue to work together in the church.
2. Reflect on an experience of division, such as when someone or some group has left the congregation. Might there have been a way to maintain unity in the midst of disagreement?
3. It is highly unlikely that all members of the PCC will reach a common understanding on the matters before us of human sexuality and sexual orientation. Try to imagine some creative ways that we can maintain our unity and disagree on these matters.

Tradition

A coffee shop conversation:

Our church is talking about homosexuality again.

Again?

Yup.

Seems like everyone is talking about it. All. The. Time.

It's important to talk about it. Look at what is happening all around us. The church is out of sync with society.

I think we've said enough. The church has made a statement.

Um...er...
I'm not exactly sure.

I'm not sure either.
Gotta run.

A person overhearing the conversation:

I wonder what church they go to? My denomination is talking about that too.

Wouldn't it be good if we could all talk to each other about our faith and human sexuality?

Excuse me, what does your church say about homosexuality and the church?

Hmmm...
I wonder what my denomination says...

PRAYERS FROM THE 141ST GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Dear God, we, your people, want to abide in you and want your words to abide in us, so that you can bring healing to our church family.

Dear God, we lay our concerns and anxieties about our future as a Presbyterian Church before you for your guidance and direction for us.

Compassionate God, we face our future seeking your wisdom and grace to quiet the fears of the unknown. Give us courage and strength for the journey ahead of us all.

A Chicken and Egg Game

Before the Protestant Reformation, people of faith looked to the tradition of the church for the most authoritative statement on any particular issue or practice. The church was the institution gifted with the ability to read the Bible and offer interpretation. The church leaders were often the most educated people in the community – often among the few who could actually read the Bible (especially since it was only available in Latin!). If you wanted to know what the Bible said about something or what it meant, you looked to what the church and the tradition said, and did that. The church interpreted the scripture.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Reformers asserted that this was all wrong. The scripture, they said, shapes and forms the church. The church was answerable to the scripture and not the other way around. If you want to know what the Bible says about something or what it means, you read the Bible. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and with the community of faith, you interpret it together. The scripture has authority over the church, and not the other way around.

The Power and Wisdom of Tradition

The power of the tradition – the practices, interpretations and beliefs – handed down to us by those who have gone before us in faith is strong. This is true in positive ways that help us maintain continuity throughout the generations of faithful Christians. Tradition keeps us grounded and rooted in ways that serve us well. Tradition can remind us of who we are and where we come from. Tradition can also have the power to keep us from change. How many churches hold certain events, follow certain practices and use certain decorations for the holidays because “we have always done it this way” or because someone’s great grandfather or mother started it? Tradition can be emotional and influential.

The wisdom of the tradition – the careful and faithful discernment of our church mothers and fathers – is important. If we cannot trust their judgment and build on

what they believed, the church could not exist. God often uses tradition to teach and guide us, especially in uncertain times. In addition, tradition is, as the writers of the 1994 Church Doctrine Report on Human Sexuality noted, “a living, dynamic thing and not simply the dead hand of the past” (A&P 1994, 251–274).

Building on the Work of Others

On the issue of human sexuality and sexual orientation, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has done a lot of good, faithful, prayerful and often painstaking work. Each committee and statement has built upon the others. Many General Assemblies have prayed, deliberated and voted on matters of human sexual ethics and sexual orientation. It is important to honour that work, as well as build on it.

What follows is a summary of The Presbyterian Church in Canada’s current position on sexual orientation, ministry and ordination, same-sex marriage and other related matters, highlighting main points and transitions based on approved reports to GA from 1969 to 2005. (See Appendix B on page 74.)

Q: Is same-sex attraction, or orientation, a sin according to the PCC?

A: No.

Q: Is one’s sexual orientation a lifestyle choice?

A: No. Scientific evidence has shown that one’s sexual orientation is innate, established early in life, rather than a lifestyle choice.

Q: Is homosexual practice a sin according to the PCC?

A: Yes. Scripture treats same-sex activity as a departure from God’s created order.

Q: What does the PCC say about homophobia?

A: In 1985, the PCC stated that homophobia is a form of hatred and the church stands in opposition to it. In 1994, the PCC called the whole church to repent of its homophobia and hypocrisy. Anger, hatred and acts of denigration toward gay and lesbian people should not be tolerated within a congregation or the greater community.

Q: Are gay and lesbian people welcome to join the PCC?

A: Yes, the PCC affirms that the church is called to be a place where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported. There is no barrier to membership for persons from the LGBTQ community.

Q: What leadership roles can a LGBTQ person have in the PCC?

A: The church does not limit the roles of its members on the basis of their sexual orientation. These roles include church school teachers, musicians, youth leaders, ruling elders, teaching elders and members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries.

- Q: Can a homosexual person be ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments or designated to the Order of Diaconal Ministry in the PCC?**
A: Yes, if that person is celibate and non-practicing. Neither scripture nor church prohibits ordination based on same-sex attraction or orientation.
- Q: Can a *practicing* homosexual person or an LGBTQ person in a same-sex relationship be ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments or designated to the Order of Diaconal Ministry in the PCC?**
A: No.
- Q: Does the PCC believe that a person's sexual orientation can be changed?**
A: No.
- Q: Does the PCC endorse programs that claim to change or "heal" a person's same-sex attraction?**
A: No. The PCC cannot see any scriptural, scientific or pastoral basis for such programs.
- Q: What kind of pastoral care should sessions offer to those dealing with sexual issues?**
A: Sessions should provide support groups as requested and provide help for individuals and/or their family members who are facing sexual discrimination, support for parents whose children are gay or lesbian, and care for all those who have been victims of sexual abuse.
- Q: What is the definition of marriage in the PCC?**
A: The PCC states that a marriage is the union of a man and a woman.
- Q: Does the PCC allow public worship services blessing same-sex relationships or same-sex marriages?**
A: No.
- Q: Can a minister of the PCC officiate at same-sex marriages?**
A: No.

Discussion Questions

1. In this chapter, some information regarding the PCC's present teaching about human sexuality and sexual orientation is provided. Given the passage of time since the last report on human sexuality and sexual orientation was adopted by our denomination, what other questions might you like to see added to this list?
2. Have you ever had a discussion about same-sex marriage and/or sexual orientation with others from different church backgrounds than your own? Recall how this discussion unfolded. What did you learn from this discussion?

Biological and Psychological Studies

“I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” (Psalm 139:14)

PRAYERS FROM THE 141ST GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Lord, teach us, who can be so divided, to be one as you are one. Teach us how to be one without compromising your truth or who we know ourselves to be. Teach us to be one in love and care, that you may be seen in us, in just those places that drive a wedge between us. Lord, you are capable of more than we can imagine. Take those places we have feared, like division and name calling, and let us find a grace we did not expect to see. By that Spirit that surprises us often, surprise us in the love, charity and care manifest in us, your church. Amen.

Church and Culture

A common concern that is voiced about the subject of same-sex marriage, LGBTQ concerns and the church is how the culture is influencing the church. People worry that instead of preaching to the culture, the culture is preaching to us. This is not a new concern. In 1951, H. Richard Niebuhr, widely considered one of the most important Christian ethicists of the 20th century in North America, wrote a quintessential work entitled, *Christ and Culture*.¹ He examines five different models of understanding how church and culture ought to overlap and interact. They range from “Christ against culture” to “Christ the transformer of culture.” More recently, these models have been re-examined and understood not as mutually exclusive paradigms but as ways Christians interact with culture at different times and in various contexts.²

1 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1950).

2 D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008).

Sometimes, what is happening in the culture is diametrically opposed to the teachings of Jesus Christ. In these instances, Christ stands against culture and calls the church to do the same. Sometimes, and hopefully often, the church leads the way for the culture on matters of justice, peace, advocacy for the poor and care for the vulnerable. When this happens, Christ is shown to be the transformer of culture, through the church. Sometimes, though, Christ is at work beyond the church. The Holy Spirit is not confined to the church and cannot be contained by the church. When the legislation or government policy is a step ahead of the church, or takes a clear position when the church remains divided (such as was the case before slavery was abolished in the United States, for example), then it is the culture that has something to teach the church about the way of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps we cannot conclude that God only works in one way, or one direction, when it comes to the interaction between church and culture. If that is the case, then it is always the task of the Christian community to discern where the Holy Spirit is at work and to be open and humble in assessing the relationships between church and culture at any given time.

Science and Faith

How faith and science interact is also a complicated and long and often-fought battle in the church, with far too many considerations to even begin to outline here. But we do need to say a word about how The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and this study guide in particular, views the relationship between science and faith. It might be summarized by saying that faith and science cannot be an either/or consideration; but, rather, it must be a both/and consideration. Presbyterians value the insights of science into the human condition, in all its various facets. The 1994 Report on Human Sexuality says the following:

“Science can provide valuable information and concepts which must be taken into account in articulating a theology of sexuality... However, while biology, psychology, anthropology and sociology can provide helpful insights into the human condition, they cannot in themselves determine in any final way the criteria on which our ethical decisions should be based.”

Science has a role in informing decisions of Christian ethics. It has influence on how we read the scriptures, our theology and how we understand the world in which we live. For Christians, science informs faith and faith informs science. It is a dialogue. From the perspective of the Reformed tradition: critical thinking (represented here by the general field of science) and faith ought never to be in contradiction with one another. The 2003 Report of the Special Committee re Sexual Orientation says the following:

“Some in our church would not have science enter this debate at all, claiming that the only true debate is a biblical one... For Christians the Bible is the ultimate authority in matters of faith, but not the ultimate authority in matters of science. However we need not see science and the Bible as being at odds with one another, but view the relationship as a friendly one.”

A Note about Sexuality and Identity

Throughout this study guide, there has been an emphasis on sexual orientation versus sexual activity. The difference between these two categories is an important part of the debate about how the church might proceed in terms of either full inclusion or the continuation of the current church position. It might then be easy to fall into the trap of thinking that one's sexuality is a dominant factor in one's identity. This is further confused by the language often used in relation to categories of gender or sexuality when people say, "I identify as a gay man" or "I identify as male/female."

A person's identity is much bigger than his or her sexuality. At the same time, sexuality deeply affects how we express ourselves as human beings in the world. The 1994 Church Doctrine Report on Human Sexuality notes that "sexuality refers not only to the physical characteristics of the human body and feelings of sexual attraction to another person, but also includes emotional, cognitive, spiritual, social and cultural dimensions."³ In her book *Generous Spaciousness*, Wendy VanderWal-Gritter invites Christians to resist the notion that a person's gender or sexuality (heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual) can be reduced to how we experience physical stimulation and pleasure. We ought to start with the understanding that we are relational beings and our sexuality is a part of how we experience relationality. Our sexuality, then, affects our creative expression, the way that we understand and experience family, the way we offer ourselves in friendship, our sense of humour and many other aspects of our personhood.⁴ As Christians, we acknowledge that faithful discipleship includes examining our expressions of sexuality and all our relationships. VanderWal-Gritter says it this way: "no matter the direction of the attractions you experience, you have the capacity and are called to embody the love, faithfulness, fruitfulness, and justice of God's character in how you build relationships."⁵

Discussion Questions

1. After reading the discussion about church and culture, what do you find clarifying? What do you find challenging?
2. VanderWal-Gritter says that sexuality shapes or impacts how we experience the world through things like music, art, friendship and family relationships. Reflect on how that has been part of your life experience.
3. How does your own experience of sexuality and gender influence how you identify yourself? Imagine having a different sexual orientation than your own or being a different gender. What features of your identity change when you imagine yourself differently?

3 See the Church Doctrine Report on Human Sexuality (A&P 1994, p. 251–274, 56) in section 4.2. The report cites the following source: Whitehead, Evelyn and James, *A Sense of Sexuality: Christian Love and Intimacy* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 44–53.

4 VanderWal-Gritter, *Generous Spaciousness*, 115.

5 VanderWal-Gritter, 114.

Biological Studies

Biology and Theology

Biological studies have helped Christians understand and worship God better. As human knowledge about the body has advanced, we have been better able to see and understand the wonders of God's creation. From the study of human birth to the resiliency and healing capacity of the body, the human body is awe-inspiring. God's creation of such intricate, delicate and strong bodies and complex brains is mind-boggling. Biological studies allow Christians to pray Psalm 139, "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made," with greater conviction and more radical gratitude.

Sometimes biological studies allow us to interpret the Bible more faithfully. Take, for example, the concept of "barrenness" in the Bible. It was common understanding in both the Old and New Testaments that a woman's inability to bear children was the fault of the woman and was a curse or a punishment. Scientific understanding of human reproduction as well as male and female contributions to conception has led Christians to a different theological understanding of childlessness. Generally, in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, we would no longer say, and in fact would oppose the theology, that the inability to bear children is a curse or punishment. We understand the inability to conceive as biological rather than spiritual.

Interestingly, we still use the language of blessing when a child is conceived and born. And we rightly understand children as blessings from God. We do not throw out the concept of blessing, but have theologically reframed our understanding that blessing and curse are not necessarily opposites. Childlessness is not a sign that God's favour or blessing is being withheld. In the case of the ability to conceive and bear children, as in many other areas of experience, our theological reflection is nuanced and more complex than black and white.

Biology and Gender

On the subject of human sexuality and sexual orientation, biological studies have served to clarify some of our theology, but can sometimes add more questions or confusion as well. For example, we tend to think of biological sex as binary – a person is either male or female. It has become clear that there are biological variations on sex, most notably androgynous persons. Androgynous people (sometimes called hermaphrodites or intersex) are born with parts of both male and female genitalia, a combination of ovarian and testicular tissue or some combination of male and female physical appearance. We tend to think of this as an extremely rare occurrence, but it is

Crossover: Theology, the Bible and Scientific Inquiry

Scripture is the basis for all doctrine. How we interpret the Bible and read it shapes our theology. The Holy Spirit is always at work in how we read the Bible, so it is a Living Word. This means that our theology is potentially always changing. New scientific information and inquiry is one way that human beings continue to discover the genius of God's creation. Therefore, science is one way in which the Holy Spirit teaches us and informs us, including the way we read the Bible.

not as rare as generally thought. Some experts estimate that as many as 1 in 1,500 babies are intersex.⁶ In each individual case, doctors and parents analyze the situation to determine which sex to assign the baby. Children with intersex conditions can grow up to be either heterosexual or LGBTQ in terms of sexual orientation. This kind of biological variance can raise theological questions about gender, birth and creation.

Biology and Choice

Biological studies have produced mixed results concerning whether a person chooses his or her sexual orientation and what factors contribute to sexual orientation and identity. There is no conclusive evidence that sexual orientation is solely a matter of genetics or biology. While the science is complex and not everything is fully understood, science concludes that there *is* biological basis for sexual orientation, while leaving room for environmental and social factors. After reviewing biological studies, and recognizing that there is not complete clarity from scientific studies, the 2003 Report of the Special Committee re Sexual Orientation that was adopted by General Assembly affirmed that sexual orientation is “innate, established early in life, and not a matter of choice.”⁷

Discussion Questions

1. The diversity of genders is well documented in biological studies. This diversity is not mentioned at all in biblical accounts of the creation in Genesis. How do we account for such diversity as we look through the lens of faith? What other scientific things are not specifically mentioned in the Bible, but are understood by contemporary Christians as part of God’s creation?
2. In your own theological thinking, what difference, if any, does it make that biological studies have indicated that sexual orientation is not a choice?

Psychological Studies

Psychological Studies and Sexual Orientation

Over many decades, psychological studies have already influenced and changed our theology around sexual orientation. Scientific research has shown consistent evidence that sexual orientation is part of human development at early, even perhaps embryonic, stages of life. This does not rule out factors of nurture and socialization. However, the biological and psychological evidence is such that it led to the decriminalization of same-sex relations in Canada’s criminal code. In 1969, the PCC communicated approval to the Canadian government of their proposed legislation that homosexual acts between consenting adults are a private matter and should be decriminalized. The legislation passed later that year.

⁶ This estimate is provided by the American Psychological Association and can be found at the following link: www.apa.org/topics/LGBT/intersex.pdf

⁷ See the 2003 Report of the Special Committee re Sexual Orientation, (A&P 2003, 543–544).

In 1974, Canada removed homosexuality as well as being transgender from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). These scientific conclusions have also influenced theological thinking and understanding. In 2003, the Special Report on Sexual Orientation, which was approved by the General Assembly, concluded that homosexual orientation is not a sin.

Psychological Studies and LGBTQ Youth at Risk

Organizations such as the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)⁸ have recognized in recent years that LGBTQ youth, in particular, are at higher risks for bullying in schools, depression, anxiety and suicide than their straight peers. While there is not time or space to detail these studies in this document, it is important to note that since 2003 and the last official report on human sexuality and sexual orientation, many new studies have been done. In addition, LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the homeless youth population.⁹ One of the common reasons LGBTQ youth cite for being homeless is family rejection and conflict within their homes.

One example of the research being done in this area is being conducted by the U.S. based organization called the Family Acceptance Project (FAP). FAP is “a research, intervention, education and policy initiative that works to prevent health and mental health risks for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) children and youth, including suicide, homelessness and HIV – in the context of their families, cultures and faith communities.”¹⁰ The project has done interview-based research with a large cross-section of youth from a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences and geographic areas.¹¹ These studies have shown that LGBTQ youth from homes with strong moral codes and expectations, which are most often religious households, are somewhat more likely to face rejection or ostracism from their parents. FAP found a direct correlation between “highly rejecting” families and the following behaviours on the part of LGBTQ youth:

- more than eight times as likely to have attempted suicide at least once
- more than six times as likely to report high levels of depression”¹²

According to their research, these youth are also more likely to use illegal drugs and to be high risk for sexually transmitted diseases.

There is little question that The Presbyterian Church in Canada would commend and seek to encourage families who have developed a solid moral code for and with their children, and who have embedded strong expectations that this moral code be

8 www.camh.ca CAMH is Canada’s largest mental health and addiction teaching hospital, as well as one of the world’s leading research centres in its field.

9 CAMH has done some studies and tracking of LGBTQ homeless youth and their representation within the Canadian homeless population. See camhblog.com/2015/03/31/its-about-time-canada-stood-up-for-homeless-LGBT-youth

10 familyproject.sfsu.edu

11 familyproject.sfsu.edu/research “This includes youth from accepting, ambivalent and rejecting families, including youth living in gated, middle-class, low income, farming and rural communities, immigrant families, youth in foster care, and adjudicated and homeless youth and their families... Our interviews focused on family history and child development, sexual orientation and gender identity, religious beliefs and values, sexual orientation, culture and ethnicity, coming out, family response and adaptation over time, school-based experiences and victimization, resiliency and strength, sources of support, future goals and aspirations.”

12 Gushee, 15–16.

followed. This kind of strong moral code can make it more difficult for a teenager who self-identifies as LGBTQ to find acceptance and support from his or her family. When a teen self-identifies as LGBTQ and doesn't experience acceptance and support within his/her family system, they experience a diminished sense of belonging and therefore become increasingly vulnerable to opportunities to engage in high risk behaviours. This does not mean that all families who value and practice their faith and instill strong moral codes in the family structure reject children who self-identify as LGBTQ. In fact, families who embrace Christian faith and teach it to their children often have a great gift for love and resilience that allows for acceptance and support in as great or greater measure than other families. These studies cause us to pause and consider how our faith affects the way we relate and respond to each other when our moral convictions clash with the experiences of those whom we love.

Why is this discussion about LGBTQ youth at risk an important part of this study guide? It doesn't pertain specifically to issues of same-sex marriage and is not directly related to whether or not The Presbyterian Church in Canada ordains practicing LGBTQ persons to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. These issues certainly do speak to the church's role and responsibility in caring for people and their families who face LGBTQ issues of sexuality and identity. It speaks to the support that parents and families need when a son or daughter "comes out" and that revelation seems to go against the Christian values that a family has put in place for their household and family. In addition, it takes us back to baptism and belonging in the household of God. If teenagers cannot find their place in our communities of faith, in ways that not only tolerate but also value who they understand themselves to be, the rejection that they experience from their own family or their family of faith can easily be construed *by them* as rejection by God.

In most of our churches, the teenage years are when we offer confirmation classes and invite young people to claim their faith and become members of the church. Faith must meet these young people where they are and actively engage with the real experiences they are facing. What the church says and understands about these experiences is important and deserves careful and thoughtful communication as young people make decisions about their own sense of belonging and commitment to a congregation and a denomination.

Discussion Questions

1. How does statistical information like this affect the way we address the concerns of LGBTQ teens and their families within the church?
2. What are some ways the church might respond in light of such concerns?
3. Ask a young person in your family or congregation what he or she sees, hears or experiences in their school community in regards to students who identify as LGBTQ. How does our faith affect how we respond to what we see, hear and experience in such situations?

Experience

PRAYERS FROM THE 141ST GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Dear God, grant us the wisdom and guidance to listen with understanding and compassion as we discuss and discern the direction we should take on this issue of human sexuality.

Great and gracious God, in your all-inclusive love, may we all find our voices in the midst of this process, trusting as we speak our truth that you can weave our diverse voices into the dynamic harmony of your redemptive Word for us today.

Putting a Face on the “Issue”

Because we are human, we often don't know the depth and impact of an “issue” until we are somehow personally touched by it. It is human nature. This is true when it comes to illness, abuse or mental health. It is also true when it comes to debates over parenting or how to best care for the aging. Until *your* child or grandchild has autism, until *your* parent needs more nursing care than you can provide on your own, until *you or someone you love* has been diagnosed with mental illness, it is easier to remain aloof from the issues themselves. But when “issues” become people, everything changes.

The same thing is true for the “issue” of LGBTQ people and sexual orientation. When your child or parent comes out of the closet, when your sibling attempts suicide because of struggles with her sexual orientation, when your close friend confides his secret about being gay, the “issue” becomes a person.

Many people in the church want this renewed conversation about issues of human sexuality and sexual orientation because people that they know and care about identify as LGBTQ. Many Presbyterians are conflicted about these issues because they have profound impact on whether a son or daughter feels accepted in the church in which they were born and raised. Some Presbyterians who identify as LGBTQ want to get married in the sanctuary where they have worshipped, encountered God and come to know Jesus Christ. Questions around ordination and service, marriage and equality are no longer theoretical scenarios.

Face-to-Face Conversation¹

Some Presbyterians firmly believe that all homosexual activity is a sin; other Presbyterians firmly believe that homosexual activity within a covenantal relationship is a way to faithfully express one's God-given sexual identity. Some Presbyterians conclude that the biblical evidence points to a way of affirmation of heterosexual and homosexual expressions of sexuality within committed, faithful, long-term relationships; other Presbyterians conclude that the biblical evidence comes down on the side of condemning homosexual activity as against the intentions of God's creation. Knowing that this is the case, the General Assembly wishes to encourage all Presbyterians to listen to one another and honour each other's stories and experiences.

The intent of this chapter is to provide a way for congregations or presbyteries to have face-to-face, personal conversation on the topic of human sexuality, sexual orientation and the church. It is hoped that this conversation would be informed by the rest of this study guide, so that it is more than a sharing of opinions, but, rather, is a way to share perspectives in relation to the scripture, theology, tradition, and biological and psychological studies available. It is important that people know what the PCC already says about this issue as well as what the issues before the church are now.

Now is the time to find ways to engage one another in meaningful conversation. What follows are several different ways to do that. It is intended that groups will not use all of these formats, but, rather, choose the format and activities that best suit your context and participants.

1. Listening and Praying Circles: Small Group Discussion Format

You will need:

- a small shell or stone, which will be held by the speaker at each table/circle and is shared around the table in a timely manner
- pens and paper
- a copy of the Listening Circles Group Guidelines (see page 87)

Part A: Listening Circles

First, answer all of the following questions on your own, in writing, during a time of silence and prayer. Keep in mind that you will be invited to share your answers to the first four questions. No one is compelled to speak if they would rather pass on giving their answer to any of the questions.

1. When you consider the issues around human sexuality and sexual orientation in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, what do you most hope for?
2. When you consider the issues around human sexuality and sexual orientation in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, what are your greatest fears?

¹ This chapter of the study guide includes the process and material from General Assembly 2015. It will also make use of the document produced by Canadian Ministries called "Presbyterians are talking about...sexuality." The "Presbyterians are talking about..." document, which is available online at presbyterian.ca/talking-about, allows the conversation to be more explicit and more personal than the GA process allowed, because of time and circumstance.

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 Presbyterian Church in Canada?

(Questions 5 and 6 are intended for personal reflection only. After you reflect on these questions, you may want to speak to a personal friend, your elder or your minister.)

5. Respecting confidentiality and privacy concerns, share the story of someone you know who is struggling with issues of sexual orientation or related matters in their own lives or family situations. How have you responded to that person?
6. Respecting confidentiality and privacy concerns, share the story of someone you know who has left a church because of LGBTQ discussions, practices or concerns. How did that leaving impact you? the church? the people who left?

After a time of silent reflection (5–10 minutes):

- Review and read aloud the “Listening Circles Group Guidelines” provided in the introduction to this study guide.
- Go around the circle one question at a time (questions 1–4). Only the person holding the shell or stone is allowed to speak. When each person is finished, they pass the shell or stone on. Please make sure everyone has a chance to share in each go-round of the circle, if they wish. Practice open listening without interrupting or commenting on answers shared by others when it is your turn to speak on each question.
- Remember, no one is compelled to give an answer to any question. Any person who initially passed on speaking should be given an opportunity and time to speak after the first go-round.

Part B: Praying Circles

Question for praying circles: “If you were to summarize the conversations you had, based on the questions above, as a one-sentence prayer in your own words, what would that prayer be?”

- Give 5–10 minutes of individual time to consider and jot down personal notes/answers and write a prayer.
- Each person reads their one-sentence prayer to the group and briefly describes why they wrote what they did.
- Gather your individual prayers into one corporate prayer. Consider sharing this prayer with the larger congregation during a time of worship.

2. Garden Metaphor: Small Group Discussion Format²

You will need:

- magazines or calendars with flowers on them
- a pencil
- a circle of chairs, with a worship table in the centre set with a liturgical cloth, a candle or some other symbol of worship
- another table or perhaps enough floor space inside the circle of chairs on which to spread out the flower pictures

Preparation:

From magazines and calendars, cut out pictures of garden flowers – many more pictures than there will be group members. *On the backs of half of them*, print lightly in pencil *one* of these words: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer. *On the backs of the other half*, print lightly the word “heterosexual.” Spread out and mix around the flower pictures on a table at the entrance to your meeting room.

When the group is gathered:

Invite everyone to choose a picture and take turns showing it, possibly commenting on their choice, and then placing it on the worship table in the centre of the circle. Ask everyone to listen and reflect silently as the leader says:

- Look at the variety of flowers in our “garden”!
- Think about the pictures that remain on the table/floor, that are not part of our “garden.”
- Remember the diversity of flowers in the world that goes far beyond those in the pictures in this room.
- Remember the vastness of God’s creation.

The leader will then turn over and read aloud the words on the back of each picture. Ask everyone to reflect silently as the leader says:

“These words have different meanings for different people. Think about their meaning for you – for some people, most of them are words only; for other people, some of these words relate to friends, family or themselves. God’s creation includes all people: some are similar to us and some are different from us; some we know and some we will never meet; some have characteristics that attract us and some don’t. They are still all part of God’s creation.”

² This activity is taken from “Presbyterians are talking about...sexuality” which can be found at presbyterian.ca/talking-about

Invite comments and discussion. Some suggested questions might include:

- What did you experience or feel when you first chose your flower? Why did you choose it?
- What was it like to see all the different flowers placed together on the worship table in the centre of the circle?
- Did your perception of your flower change when you heard the word on the back of it? If you had known the word on the back, would you still have chosen it?
- What does it mean to you that “God’s creation includes all people”?

3. Continuums of Differences: Small Group Activity³

You will need:

- a room large enough for some movement from one end to the other

Designate one side of the room one extreme position on the issues and the opposite side of the room the other extreme position. Invite group members to line up along the imaginary line between the two sides according to how they feel about the issue. Always respect a person’s request to observe rather than participate.

As a leader or all together when the group gathers, think of some issues that are controversial or tend to be divisive. To get “warmed up,” you might want to start with some neutral or “more fun” examples:

- those who prefer the Maritimes or the mountains (with the prairies along the continuum in between)
- those who prefer salty treats or sweet treats (with sweet and salty mixed together along the continuum in between)

Move onto more serious topics in your neighbourhood or church that are controversial or tend to be divisive. Choose issues that might show some range in opinion in the group. Some examples:

- some might prefer “Communion by intinction” while others prefer “Communion distributed in the pews”
- some want “worship with traditional hymns” while others prefer “worship with contemporary hymns”
- in your neighbourhood, there might be discussion about land use, pesticides, crime or health facilities

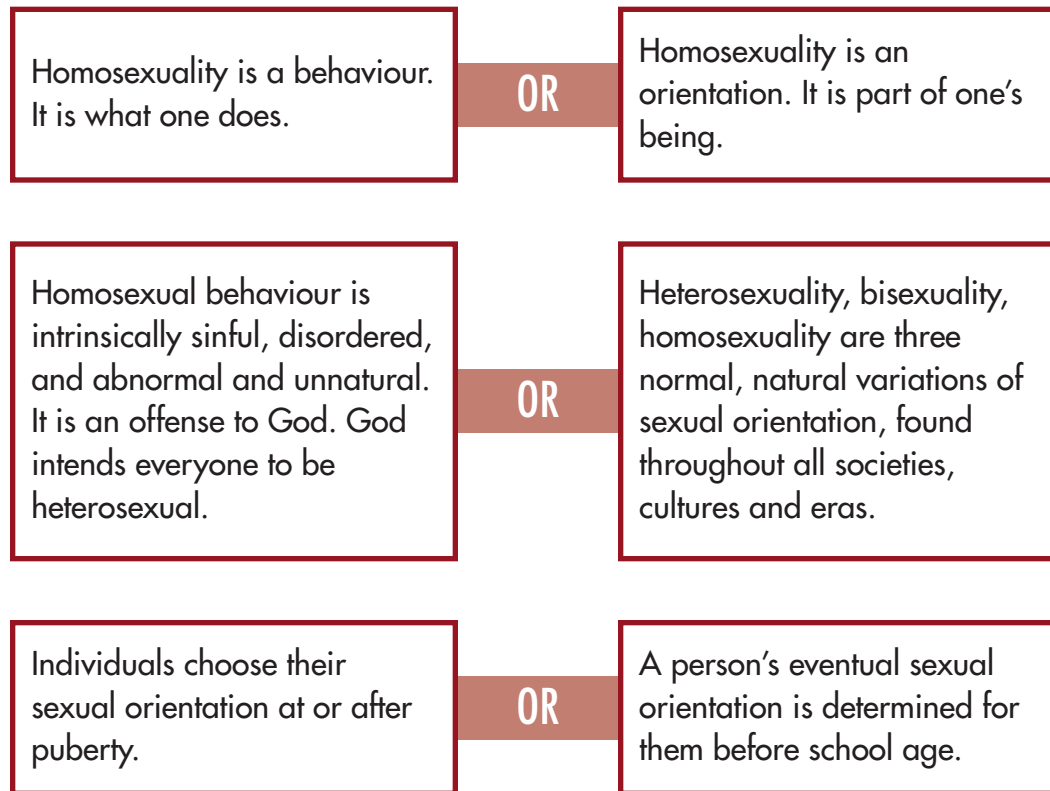
After a few rounds of the activity, the leader should comment on the fact that we all belong to this church and yet we hold different views on these subjects. Despite our differences, we can be – we are – a community.

³ This activity is adapted from “Presbyterians are talking about...sexuality” which can be found at presbyterian.ca/talking-about

Experience

The leader can ask, “How have we learned to be together despite our differences?” List the responses (e.g., avoid the topic, restraint, sense of humour, speaking respectfully, apology for upsetting someone).

Move on then to some issues of human sexuality, sexual orientation and related matters. One by one, read out the following three polarized points related to homosexuality, inviting group members to line up somewhere on the imaginary line for each of these points.⁴ (Note: Some people may not wish to do this.)



Whether or not group members are able to physically and publicly position themselves, invite them to reflect silently on their position and these questions:

- How did you come to this position?
- How long have you held this position?

Invite comments. Some questions might include:

- How do you live in dissonance or disagreement?
- What are some concrete tools for living with diversity/open-endedness/unresolved conflict?
- How can we work toward healing divisions, reconciling differences, and living with one another in love even if we continue to disagree?

⁴ Note: The wording of these points is taken from the list of views provided on the Religious Tolerance website: www.religioustolerance.org/hom_chur1.htm

Appendix A:

Listening to Our Neighbours

In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, we have long recognized the importance of working in ecumenical relationship with our neighbours. Especially in rural communities, Presbyterian congregations often co-operate more with other churches than with their nearest neighbour in presbytery. Increasingly, Presbyterians are working in partnership with ecumenical neighbours through more formal relationships such as Ecumenical Shared Ministries. In the PCC, we recognize that the struggle and decisions of others within the broader community of faith can inform our decisions. After all, the Holy Spirit is God over all of us. Sometimes we can learn a great deal from the discernment and decisions of our neighbours in Christ. What follows is a survey of other related denominational responses to the complex questions of human sexuality, sexual orientation, same-sex marriage and ordination standards.

The Anglican Church of Canada

The Anglican Church of Canada's General Synod has considered questions concerning human sexuality, particularly homosexuality, since 1989. A number of dioceses and parishes have studied and are studying this issue. The blessing of same-sex civil unions has been authorized under a diversity of protocols in about half of the Anglican Church of Canada's 30 dioceses.

The Anglican Church of Canada's General Synod adopted a resolution in 2013 that will bring the issue of same-sex marriage to a vote at the next General Synod in 2016. At this next General Synod, a resolution changing the church's law to permit same-sex marriage will be considered.

Under the Anglican Church of Canada's polity, this resolution will require a two-thirds majority of votes of laity, clergy and bishops (voting separately) to be adopted. As this matter concerns doctrine, it will have to be voted on at the next General Synod in 2019 and would require a second two-thirds majority before it would go into effect. If adopted at the General Synod in 2019, the church's canon on marriage would be changed, expanding its doctrinal understanding of marriage to include couples of the same sex.

The General Synod of 2013 also adopted a motion that will be part of the resolution on same-sex marriage coming to General Synod in 2016 to include

“a conscience clause so that no member of the clergy, bishop, congregation or diocese should be constrained to participate in or authorize such marriages against the dictates of their conscience.”

More information can be found online at

www.anglican.ca/faith/focus/hs

www.anglican.ca/about/ccc/cogs/cmc/submissions

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

The Catholic Church maintains that marriage is a union between one man and one woman.

The Catholic Catechism states (article 6, sections 2357–9):

Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.” They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.

The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God’s will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.

Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection.

Catholic clergy take vows of celibacy, regardless of orientation. Catholic clergy may not bless same-sex unions.

Christian Reformed Church in North America

Ordination and Ministry

Homosexuality is a condition of disordered sexuality that reflects the brokenness of our sinful world. Persons of same-sex attraction should not be denied community acceptance solely because of their sexual orientation and should be wholeheartedly received by the church and given loving support and encouragement. Christian homosexuals, like all Christians, are called to discipleship, holy obedience, and the use of their gifts in the cause of the kingdom. Opportunities to serve within the offices and the life of the congregation should be afforded to them as to heterosexual Christians (celibate homosexual individuals).

Homosexualism (that is, explicit homosexual practice), however, is incompatible with obedience to the will of God as revealed in Scripture. The church affirms that it must exercise the same compassion for homosexuals in their sins as it exercises for all other sinners. The church should do everything in its power to help persons with homosexual orientation and give them support toward healing and wholeness.

Marriage

Marriage is an institution created by God. It is a covenant relationship established by mutual vows between a man and a woman united by God.

In 2013 synod received two overtures requesting guidance on applying the CRC's position in light of the legalization of same-sex marriage in many states and provinces of the United States and Canada, and synod responded by appointing a study committee to report to Synod 2016.

More information can be found online at

www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/homosexuality

A synodical report titled "Pastoral Care for Homosexual Members" is available at

www.crcna.org/SynodResources

A pastoral guide for church members is online at

www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/2002_report_careforhomosexuals.pdf

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (from the ELCIC's National Convention – 2011)

1. The following motion empowered clergy to preside at same-sex marriages.

It is the policy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada that rostered ministers may, according to the dictates of their consciences as informed by the Gospel, the Scriptures, the Ecumenical Creeds and the Confessions of the

Evangelical Lutheran Church, preside at or bless legal marriages according to the laws of the province within which they serve. All rostered ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada are encouraged to exercise due diligence in preparing couples for marriage. All rostered ministers serving congregations are encouraged at all times to conduct their ministry in consultation with the lay leaders in the congregation and with sensitivity to the culture within which the congregation serves.

2. This motion clarified that sexual orientation did not exclude people from ordination (or consecration as a deacon).

That the 2011 ELCIC National Convention rescind Convention actions NC-1993-16 and NC-1989-96 and that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada consider for approval the following policy:

It is the policy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada that sexual orientation is not in itself a factor which disqualifies a candidate for rostered ministry or a rostered minister seeking a call. Candidates and rostered ministers are in all cases expected to adhere to the qualifications and standards as set out in the constitution and bylaws of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and of the synod within which they serve. Synods and congregations are expected to evaluate candidates for ordination or consecration and rostered ministers for call in accordance with a conscience informed by the Gospel, the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

3. The following is a call for unity in the midst of division on moral questions.

That the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada in convention adopt the following affirmation as representing the position of this church and communicate this action to congregations, partner churches in Canada, sister churches in The Lutheran World Federation and other Lutheran church associations in Canada:

An Affirmation Concerning the Unity of the Church

As a confessional Lutheran Church which bases its life and teaching on the Scriptures, the Ecumenical Creeds and the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada affirms with the confessors at Augsburg in 1530 that “it is enough for the unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments” (AC VII).

We affirm that the church ought not be divided because of disagreement over moral issues, no matter how distressing such disagreement might be. We believe that any attempt to divide the church because of disagreements over morals, polity or liturgy is an unacceptable confusion of Law and Gospel, which will lead inevitably to a distortion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We encourage ELCIC members, congregations, synods and churches who share our commitment to the Scriptures, Creeds and Confessions and who disagree with

one another over issues of morals, polity (including standards for ordination or consecration) and/or liturgy to remain in dialogue and unity with one another and maintain unity in the Gospel and the sacraments as St. Paul recommends in 1 Corinthians 1:10–17. We encourage all Lutherans to work for and nurture the unity of the confessional witness to the Gospel which is essential to the Lutheran tradition. We ask those persons, congregations, synods and/or churches who are in disagreement to refrain from actions that will divide the body of Christ.

ELCIC Social Statement on Human Sexuality:

www.elcic.ca/CompassionateJustice/HumanSexualitySocialStatement.cfm

Mennonite Church Canada

Mennonite Church Canada is in its seventh year of discernment process to strengthen its capacity to be the church as it considers issues facing congregations. One of the issues the “Being A Faithful Church” process is considering is sexuality in broad terms and more specifically same-sex committed relationships.

The Mennonite Church Canada policy, based on several statements, is the following: same-sex relationships and other sexual activity outside of consensual relations in a heterosexual monogamous marriage are considered outside of God’s plan and will. Further, the statements also declare a covenant “to mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other,” “to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other,” and a commitment “that we call for and acknowledge the integrity of the same commitment [of faithfulness to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, according to the light that God has given us in the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit] on the part of those who disagree with us.”

At its Assembly in 2014, delegates affirmed (90% in favour) three discernment questions:

1. God’s gift of unity is not invalidated by our disagreement. How shall we maintain our unity in Christ as congregations, area churches and national church while understanding matters of same-sex relationships differently?
2. How will we express our desire to demonstrate the love of Christ towards all, irrespective of sexual orientation, different understandings of Scripture and its Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective? (“We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life”; Article 19).
3. Based on your reflections of #1 and #2, what counsel do you have for the Area/National Church. (Note: there are five Area Churches, one of which, for example, is Mennonite Church British Columbia; there are 225 congregations).

The “Being A Faithful Church” Taskforce will prepare a report and circulate the report to congregations that will be asked to respond to the Taskforce’s discernment in the fall, 2015. The responses will be shared with congregations in the spring, 2016. In July 2016, the report with recommendations will be received and considered by Mennonite Church Canada’s Assembly.

Summary and Analysis of BFC 6 Responses:

www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/21433/BFC-6-1.pdf

Summary and Recommendation on Sexuality (2009-2015):

www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/21432/BFC-7.pdf

The United Church of Canada

Ordination and Ministry

In 1988, all members of The United Church of Canada were eligible to be considered for ordered ministry, regardless of sexual orientation. In 1992, the first openly gay minister was ordained. In 2010, the first openly transgender minister was ordained.

Marriage

The United Church affirms all human beings as made in the image of God, regardless of sexual orientation. Some United Church congregations and ministries have gone through a process to declare that they are Affirming – fully inclusive of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

While General Council, the governing council of The United Church of Canada, welcomes same-sex marriage, individual United Church congregations are responsible for making decisions locally. Marriages are performed with the permission and under the responsibility of the local congregation.

Information about the UCC’s Affirm program is online at

affirmunited.ause.ca

Appendix B:

Summary of Statements Approved by General Assembly on Homosexuality

The following section is drawn from the Social Action Handbook.

For full reports, see the Acts and Proceedings at presbyterian.ca/acts-and-proceedings

- Homosexual acts between consenting adults are a private matter and should not be criminalized (A&P 1969, p. 316–17).
- We must oppose the form of hatred known as homophobia as vigorously as any other (A&P 1985, p. 238–241, 31).
- The church as a whole must repent of its homophobia and hypocrisy. The church is called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supporting community, a true church family, where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported (A&P 1994, p. 251–274, 56).
- Scripture treats homosexual practice as a departure from God’s created order (A&P 1994, p. 251–274, 56).
- A celibate homosexual may be ordained/designated as a minister or member of the Order of Diaconal Ministries under the present laws and practices of The Presbyterian Church in Canada (A&P 1995, p. 436, 26, 71).
- The Presbyterian Church in Canada is not prepared to ordain self-avowed, practicing homosexuals or to allow public worship services blessing same-sex relationships (A&P 1995, p. 436, 26, 71).
- Both scripture and church do concern themselves with the proper and acceptable expression of sexual attraction in sexual activity (A&P 1996, p. 444).

- Neither scripture nor church prohibits ordination on the basis of the direction of one's sexual attraction to others, whether homosexual or heterosexual (A&P 1996, p. 444, 48).
- Homosexual orientation is not a sin. The weight of scientific evidence suggests that sexual orientation is innate, established early in life, and not a matter of choice (A&P 2003, p. 526-547, 26, 34, 37-41, 43-45).
- The church does not limit the roles of its members on the basis of their sexual orientation. These roles include church school teachers, musicians, youth leaders, ruling elders, teaching elders and members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries (A&P 2003, p. 526-547, 26, 34, 37-41, 43-45).
- Anger, hatred, and acts of denigration towards gay and lesbian people should not be tolerated within a congregation or the greater community (A&P 2003, p. 526-547, 26, 34, 37-41, 43-45).
- Sessions should provide support groups if needed and/or requested for those who are struggling with sexual issues, to support parents whose children are gay or lesbian, individuals facing sexual discrimination, and victims of sexual abuse. Presbyteries should also provide similar pastoral care of their ministers (A&P 2003, p. 526-547, 26, 34, 37-41, 43-45).
- The 2005 General Assembly approved a recommendation that a letter be sent to the Government of Canada stating The Presbyterian Church in Canada's policy that marriage is the union of a man and a woman (A&P 2005, p. 41). On July 20, 2005, Bill C-38, the law giving same-sex couples the legal right to marry, received royal assent and became law.
- Studies have not revealed any scriptural, scientific or pastoral basis or justification for programs to change a person's sexual orientation (A&P 2003, p. 526-547, 26, 34, 37-41, 43-45).

Glossary of Terms

This glossary is intended to provide concise explanations of some of the terms used in this study guide and is not intended to be comprehensive either in its choice of terms or in its definitions.

abstinence – the habit or practice of refraining from sexual activity.

affirming – (of a church or other faith community) fully accepting of all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity; making no distinction among people based on sex, gender, orientation or sexual practice. [see *welcoming*]

androgynous – (of a person) **a.** having some or all of the physical or social characteristics of men and women. People with both male and female sex organs were formerly called hermaphrodites. **b.** neither male nor female.

bisexual – (used to describe a person) sexually attracted to both women and men; neither heterosexual nor homosexual.

celibacy – the practice of committed abstinence from marriage and from sexual activity as a religious discipline.

eunuch – (historically) a man who had been castrated, usually early in life, so that his hormonal development was altered and he did not develop masculine traits.

full inclusion – the fact or condition of being fully accepting of all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, or of making no distinction among people based on sex, gender, orientation or sexual practice. Within The Presbyterian Church in Canada, this is generally understood to mean allowing both same-sex marriage and the ordination of practicing LGBTQ persons to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments.

gay – **a.** (used to describe a person) sexually attracted to people of the same sex; (used to describe sexual activity) occurring between people of the same sex; homosexual. **b.** (used to describe a man) sexually attracted to other men; (used to describe sexual activity) occurring between men.

gender – the traits or characteristics that are determined culturally or socially because of a person's sex; a person's masculinity or femininity. [see *sex*]

gender complementarity – the belief that men and women are essentially different from one another, both anatomically and socially, and that each gender complements or makes up for deficiencies in the other.

heteronormativity – the belief that people can be divided into two complementary genders, male and female, with each gender having its own natural roles, and that the only normal sexual orientation is heterosexual.

heterosexual – (used to describe a person) sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex; (used to describe sexual activity) occurring between people of different sexes.

homosexual – (used to describe a person) sexually attracted to people of the same sex; (used to describe sexual activity) occurring between people of the same sex.

intersex – (of a person) **a.** having some or all of the physical or social characteristics of men and women. People with both male and female sex organs were formerly called hermaphrodites. **b.** neither male nor female.

lesbian – (used to describe a woman) sexually attracted to other women; (used to describe sexual activity) occurring between women.

LGBTQ – an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. The LGBTQ community, broadly speaking, can be said to include anyone who is not heterosexual.

practicing – (used to describe a person, especially one who is not heterosexual) sexually active; not celibate.

progressive – (used to describe a reading or an interpretation) relying on new or different cultural, linguistic or literary evidence, different from the previously common interpretation; (used to describe a person) favouring readings or interpretations that are different from those previously or commonly held.

queer – (used to describe a person) **a.** homosexual. **b.** not heterosexual; gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender; encompassing all sexual orientations that are not heterosexual. **c.** not identifying as having a specific or easily-categorized sexual orientation.

sex – either of the main groups (female or male) into which people are placed on the basis of biological differences, including their internal and external sexual organs, chromosomes, etc. [see *gender*]

sexual orientation – a person's sexual identity, as characterized by the gender(s) to which they are attracted.

socially constructed – (of human characteristics, such as gender roles) created by or influenced by culture or society, rather than by genetic factors.

spectrum of sexuality – the belief that human sexual orientation exists as a range or continuum, rather than simply as binary opposites such as heterosexuality and homosexuality.

traditionalist – (used to describe a reading or an interpretation) commonly held or accepted, and viewed as authoritative; (used to describe a person) favouring readings or interpretations that have been commonly held or accepted.

transgender – (used to describe a person) identifying with or expressing a gender identity that is not the one that corresponds to one's sex at birth.

two-spirited – (used to describe a First Nations or Aboriginal person) possessing both a masculine spirit and a feminine spirit; homosexual or transgender.

welcoming – (of a church or other faith community) accepting of all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, but with the understanding that the only acceptable form of sexual activity is heterosexual. [see *affirming*]

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Body, Mind and Soul

Thinking together about human sexuality and sexual orientation
in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

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Introduction

PRAYERS FROM THE 141ST GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Creating God, we pray that we will be the body of Christ: united and diverse; redeemed and transformed; broken but holy.

We pray that this will lead to a greater trust — trust in each other, trust in you, trust that the Spirit will guide us to make the decision you want us to make, and trust that we will move forward, united as your beloved children.

Gracious Lord, at the end of this process, when the decisions are made regarding how the church responds to humanity sexuality, whatever the decisions, may our church family come out stronger.

Sexuality is an essential part of who we are as human beings. In the past year, there has been renewed conversation and questions around human sexuality, sexual orientation and the church. The subject of human sexuality and sexual orientation was a significant focus for The Presbyterian Church in Canada's highest court, the General Assembly, when we met in June of 2015. As a result, the church has asked for a study guide to help us look at the biblical texts, think carefully, talk together, and prayerfully consider this important subject.

The story that follows is a first-person account of the writer's experience as a commissioner at the 141st General Assembly as a participant in the table discussions formed around sexual orientation and related matters. The Assembly gave commissioners a set of listening guidelines intended to help foster honest, forthcoming and authentic sharing within the groups (see guidelines on page 87). The General Assembly hopes that biblical and theological, honest and open conversation will continue to occur across our church so that we can better understand the Word of God and our brothers and sisters in Christ, and discern together the Holy Spirit at work in our midst. The guidelines are listed in full at the end of this introduction, with the hope that they will continue to be used in all conversations about human sexuality and sexual orientation in our church.

Beginnings: Presbyterians Gather for Conversation

At the 141st General Assembly, commissioners were divided into groups of eight people to discuss our experiences around the issues of human sexuality, sexual orientation and our church. The formation of the groups was a completely random process. As people headed to their numbered tables, they had no idea who they would meet and what the theological and experiential location of the various members of their group would be. As it turned out, my table had five women and three men. We had at least three different ethnic groups represented. We had three ministers and five elders. We covered an age span of about five decades. We came to that table with concerns about our brothers and sisters, our children and grandchildren, our neighbours, and our church.

At our table, some of us knew and stated that we were *against* the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons as ministers in our church and believed that marriage is only between one man and one woman. Some of us knew and stated that we were *in favour of* full inclusion of LGBTQ persons as ministers in our church and of redefining the definition of marriage to include same-sex marriage. Some of us felt conflicted – wanting to be welcoming, or maybe even affirming, yet unsure if our biblical interpretation and church doctrine could allow us to do so faithfully. Some of us found the courage to share hurtful experiences of sexual manipulation that made us fearful. Some of us had siblings or neighbours whom we knew to be part of the LGBTQ community and whom we felt a strong need to defend as full human beings, beloved children of God, who deserve the right to marry and are as capable of being called to ordained ministry as anyone else.

We came as strangers and left as friends. We listened to each other carefully. We respected the experiences that each expressed – sometimes with tears and deep empathy, sometimes with nods of agreement, sometimes with looks of deep puzzlement as we tried to understand what another was saying. We came with different, even opposite, opinions. We left with different, even opposite, opinions. But we were united in our love of God, our love of God's church in The Presbyterian Church in Canada and a renewed desire to love our neighbour. We left our table in a spirit of unity. This study guide is designed to create similar opportunities in congregations and presbyteries around Canada.

Intent of this Study Guide

This study guide is meant to promote biblical study, theological reflection and honest conversation on the subject of human sexuality and sexual orientation. It is not exhaustive and cannot be. Yet we cannot have a constructive conversation about human sexuality, inclusion or exclusion, biblical values, or what it means to be a Presbyterian Christian in Canada today without solid information, tools and reflection. This study guide is not designed to state a position on the issues before us, nor is it supposed to support one particular position or another.

Most certainly, this study guide is not a perfect document. One of the goals of this study guide is to attempt to outline, with integrity, various and even opposite perspectives on a complex and emotionally charged subject. Drawing attention to different ways of interpreting the scripture and understanding our theology is not intended to contribute to our polarization on this topic, but rather to bring us into conversation with each other. This study guide is not a response to the current overtures, but it is hoped that the conversations that it fosters may help prepare the church as a whole to formulate such a response.

The study guide will draw on the resources that are available both within our church and also outside of it, as already recommended by the Committee on Church Doctrine and the Justice Ministries (Life and Mission Agency). It is built upon previous reports to the General Assembly by the Committee on Church Doctrine and the Special Committee on Sexual Orientation (1994, 2000, 2003), as well as the study guides that have been produced for the church on this subject before (available online at presbyterian.ca/sexuality).

The Purpose of the Study Guide is

- to provide resources for members, adherents and leaders in the PCC so that we can effectively study the subject of human sexuality and sexual orientation
- to facilitate informed conversations in congregations, presbyteries and synods
- to invite the church to prayerful discernment for the way ahead regarding matters of human sexuality and Christ's church

In order to accomplish this threefold purpose, this study guide will

1. provide basic tools for biblical interpretation and study as well as engaging specific texts
2. review and explore some essential Reformed understanding of theological categories that are particularly relevant to the discussions about human sexuality
3. provide a summary statement of the current position of The Presbyterian Church in Canada as it has evolved through study and prayer over the last 45 years

4. consider and explore the role of biological and psychological studies in our deliberations as Christians on the topic of human sexuality and sexual orientation
5. offer a process for sharing personal experiences and perspectives regarding human sexuality, sexual orientation and faith in an atmosphere of honest and respectful listening
6. encourage congregations and presbyteries to share feedback with the Committee on Church Doctrine and the Justice Ministries Department of the Life and Mission Agency

In addition, an appendix to this document will provide a brief overview of other denominations' responses to the question of human sexuality. Understanding what our Canadian brothers and sisters have done in response to this subject may help us as we discern the work of the Holy Spirit in the PCC.

How to Use this Study Guide

- The study guide is meant to be used widely within The Presbyterian Church in Canada, including in congregations, presbyteries and synods.
- In the presbytery setting, where many congregations gather representing different theological perspectives, it could be used by table groups in Bible study, theological reflection, or sharing circles (similar to that of the Assembly and outlined in the Experience chapter of this guide).
- In congregations, this guide could be used *by sessions* (or adapted as session starters over a period of time), *in Bible studies or small groups*, or adapted for use in youth groups or as the focus of *an intergenerational gathering*.
- The study guide can be used as a whole study over the course of six to eight sessions, or it might be useful as independent sections.
- Particularly, if groups are pressed for time, users should feel free to use whatever parts of the guide are most helpful in their own contexts.
 - Some congregations and presbyteries may be struggling with biblical interpretation of particular texts and may find the Scripture chapter the most helpful in their situation.
 - Others may struggle with a way to share experiences in an honest and authentic way and might find the Experience chapter the most helpful.
- The language of the study guide is designed to help all of us use and understand theological vocabulary that all people of the church need to know and feel comfortable with. The Bible study within the guide is designed to give necessary background for all interpreters of the scriptures.
- If leaders discern that the document is too long or too detailed for the groups that are using the resource, a supplemental document has been prepared. Leaders can choose to reproduce just this document for participants in a

group and use the study guide itself as a leader's guide. The supplemental document includes

- the Introduction
- handout summaries of the Scripture, Theology, and Biological and Psychological Studies chapters
- the Tradition chapter
- Scripture and Theology charts (3)
- discussion questions for each chapter
- the Glossary of Terms

The supplemental document may also be helpful if congregations or other groups have limited time to use the resources.

A Note about the Acronym LGBTQ

On the whole, this study guide deals primarily with the issues of same-sex orientation, same-gender sexual relationships, and long-term, committed relationships between persons of the same sex. It also focuses on issues surrounding the question of gay and lesbian people and the office of minister of Word and Sacrament in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. In our society, persons who identify their sexuality as gay or lesbian are often described as LGBTQ. This acronym includes those who identify themselves as gay or lesbian, as well as those who identify as bisexual and transgender individuals. For full definitions of all of these terms please see the glossary included in this document (page 115). The overtures to the General Assembly that call upon the PCC to move toward full inclusion of all persons regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity are referring not only to gay and lesbian persons but to the whole LGBTQ community.

It is significant to note that conversation and study regarding persons who identify as bisexual or transgender are new additions to any official report of the PCC. The Church Doctrine Report on Human Sexuality (1994) and the Special Committee Report Re Sexual Orientation (2003) reflect on homosexual orientation and behaviour, but do not expand those categories to include a broader spectrum of sexuality, such as bisexual or transgender persons. Bisexual and transgender persons, along with heterosexual or homosexual persons, are capable of entering into committed, loving and mutual relationships with another human being. In this regard, the reflections here that explore the question of marriage pertain to all people. In the same way, reflections here on questions about ordination, on whether or not it is sinful for persons to act on their innate sexual attractions, and on appropriate sexual ethics for Christians pertain to all categories included in the LGBTQ acronym.

However, it is also important to note that for some, there are additional questions that might be asked about people who identify as bisexual or transgender or as the broader category of queer. On the issue of gender, these questions include whether one's gender (male or female) is essential to a person's identity at birth or if gender is *both* a God-given understanding of the self *as well as* a socially constructed reality. On the issue of sexuality, these questions include whether sexual attraction is confined to one sex or the other, or if it is possible to be attracted to both sexes. All of these questions point to a larger question about whether sexuality and gender are fixed and

unchanging features of a person's identity or if sexuality and gender are more fluid and complex categories that are shaped by many factors.

In the interest of having and fostering honest conversation, it must be noted that this study guide does not take up these larger questions. Hopefully, many parts of the study guide that refer to gay and lesbian persons refer also to the broader LGBTQ community, and the conversation and questions can pertain to people who experience their sexuality in a diversity of ways.

Pastorally the church has been clear: homophobia and any anger, hatred and acts of denigration toward gay and lesbian people should not be tolerated within a congregation or the greater community.¹ (See Appendix B on page 74 for a Summary of statements approved by General Assembly on homosexuality.) These statements are unequivocally understood to refer to the whole of the LGBTQ community of persons. The church must affirm its commitment to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supporting community, a true church family where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported.² For LGBTQ persons who often face great struggle and sometimes harsh rejection from family and friends, the church has particular responsibility for compassionate, holistic pastoral care. This includes care for families of LGBTQ persons who may be struggling to understand or accept the sexual identity of one whom they love.

Methodology

The study guide is based loosely on a historical method of theological reflection often credited to the Methodist Reformer, John Wesley. As such, it has been called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral and invites Christians to examine issues of theological significance through the lenses of scripture, tradition, reason and experience. The 1994 Report on Human Sexuality used this framework as well.³ Examining a theological topic from these multiple perspectives is not meant to dissect the topic into separate, equal pieces. Rather, it is a recognition that we need all of these perspectives in order to faithfully understand any significant topic. One might liken the method to looking at a precious jewel. By turning the jewel around, you can see the cuts and angles of the stone and appreciate the whole even more. (This method has been adopted by the preaching community as a sermon model as well, known as the Jewel Sermon.) Perhaps it would be helpful to understand scripture itself as the jewel and the topics of theology, science and tradition as different ways of engaging and understanding the scripture. In order to emphasize that all these angles should not be read in isolation from one another, this document seeks to highlight where the perspectives “cross over” or overlap with each other.

It is important to note that this method did not originate with Wesley. Wesley's methodology is a faithful witness to scripture. Indeed, the very writing of scripture itself involved the elements of tradition, reason and experience as well as developing understandings of who God is and who humanity is in relation to God (theology).

1 (A&P 1985, p. 238–241, 31); (A&P 1994, p. 251–274, 56); (A&P 2003, p. 526–547, 26, 34, 37–41, 43–45).

2 (A&P 1994, p. 251–274, 56).

3 (A&P 1994, p. 251–254).

In this way, theology precedes scripture and also flows out of scripture. Categories of theology, such as creation and sin for example, have been employed in all our discussions about sexual orientation up to this point. For this reason, we are adding theology as its own separate category of consideration. As such, it is regarded as one more perspective in the discussion as a whole as we seek to understand human sexuality and sexual orientation in light of our faith in Jesus Christ. In addition, the Wesleyan model has been adapted to include the specific category of biological and psychological sciences instead of the more general category of reason. Generally reason points to areas of critical thought and reflection from disciplines outside of biblical scholarship and theology. In this study, the more narrow focus on biological and psychological studies more adequately reflects the work that has been done previously on this topic in the PCC.

An Invitation to Prayer

Finally, this study guide is an invitation to prayer. Sometimes Presbyterians are the butt of jokes for being too “cerebral,” too much in our heads. Our pictures of John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, have carried over into the reputation of Presbyterians as stodgy, stern and serious. We joke, even among ourselves, that Presbyterians aren’t often “moved by the Spirit,” at least when it comes to demonstrative emotion, enthusiastic worship or spontaneous prayer. Of course, this is a stereotype, and like any stereotype, it is both true and a distortion of the truth.

The truth is that Presbyterians do value education, the life of the mind and decency and order. These are indeed God-given gifts. And at the same time, John Calvin and those who have followed in his thinking understand that all of those intellectual matters are also spiritual endeavors. That is, they require trust in the Holy Spirit and openness to movement of the Spirit. Presbyterians believe that study, critical thinking and informed conversation are not only important to the life of faith but are part of the practice of prayer.

When we pray, we listen for God and talk to God, and sometimes wrestle with God. We seek God’s will. We crave God’s wisdom. We search for the right path. In the PCC’s *A Catechism for Today*, prayer is described as “openness to the presence of God” (Question 127).

When we study, we are doing those exact same things.

In 1972, Fred Kaan wrote a hymn, which is #555 (Worship the Lord) in the Book of Praise. At the end of each verse, he includes the line, “worship and work must be one.” Study is hard work. Study is also crucial to mission. We study human sexuality and sexual orientation so that we can be the church of God – in word and action – as faithfully as possible. Prayer and study, worship and work go hand in hand.

It is our hope that this study guide will invite the church into prayerful consideration about how we can best be faithful when it comes to questions of human sexuality and sexual orientation. This study guide isn’t about an issue. It is about real people, real lives and a desire to be open to God’s presence and God’s calling to us as a church of Jesus Christ. Study and pray, pray and study. Let’s do both together and trust that in so doing, we will hear the voice of God.

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 honour 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.

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Scripture

Read:

Living Faith 5.1 and 5.2

Fear and Love:

Questions about human sexuality, sexual orientation and the church can bring up a lot of strong emotions, especially fear and love. People throughout our denomination are wondering if there is a conflict between loving and affirming LGBTQ persons and being faithful to the Bible. We may fear for ourselves or others. We may fear for the church. And we love the church and want to be loving toward others as we live the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Tenets of the Reformed Tradition for Reading the Bible

- Jesus Christ is the Living Word, to whom the written word bears witness.
- The scriptures are the basis of all church doctrine.
- The Holy Spirit is needed to illumine the scriptures.
- All people have access to and can read and interpret the scriptures by the teaching of the Holy Spirit.
- The life of the mind is of high importance and value in Christian faith, which leads to a focus on educated clergy and educated laity.
- The community of faith is necessary for interpretation.
- The Holy Spirit's guidance can lead to a change in the way we read or interpret the scriptures.

1. Tools for Biblical Reading and Interpretation (read *Living Faith* 5.4)

"Minding the Gap" – The distance between us and the Bible is multi-layered

- Time – a span of at least 1800 years.
- Language – none of the Bible was originally written in English or French or Korean! What we read is always a translation from a different language.
- Geographical place.
- Culture – cultural norms and values shift over time.

- Historical location – this includes social, economic, intellectual, technological and other knowledge and experience that is available to us, but wasn't to the writers of scripture (and vice versa)!

Historical Context

- It is essential to note that whenever we read the Bible we do so experientially.
- Gender Roles and Understandings
 - In the ancient context, the household or family, rather than the individual, was the basic unit of society. In the biblical context, gender roles were more strictly adhered to and well-entrenched.
- Codes for Living
 - In every culture, there are spoken and unspoken rules for how people live their lives (for example, in our time, think of “the glass ceiling”).
 - Many ancient societies were based on codes of honour and shame. Honour could be inherited, acquired or lost. Honour was associated with characteristics thought to be embodied by the male gender, such as rationality, strength and self-control.

The Texture and Movement of Scripture

- Scripture interprets scripture
 - It has long been a practice of biblical interpreters, both scholars and lay people, to use other scriptures to help interpret and understand difficult passages or subjects.
- The canon of scripture is not flat
 - There is movement within the Bible – different cultures and genres.
 - For Christian readers, there is also a trajectory through the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings of the Old Testament toward the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and beyond to the early church.
 - There is also the movement of the unfolding kingdom of God. In the scriptures, there is always a “time that is coming” and that indeed breaks in, occasionally, in the time that is. Our hope in that future informs and shapes how we understand the world today.
- The interpretive principle of love
 - How do we read biblical texts that uphold social practices we no longer endorse or that record episodes of violence, without endorsing violence or unjust practices?
 - People have struggled with this question for as long as they have been guided by scripture. The interpretive principle of love has long been offered as an appropriate response.
 - The greatest commandment: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “*You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*” (Matthew 22:35–40)

2. The Specific Texts and What They Say: seven texts mention same-gender sexual activity

Genesis 19:4–8 and Judges 19 – An Ultimate Crime Against Hospitality

- Both of these stories are texts of violence. The sexual activity that they refer to – both in terms of what is demanded and what is carried out – is violent, abusive, misogynistic and morally abhorrent. Most biblical scholars have argued that the primary evil in these two stories is that of violence, inhospitality and injustice. The previous reports of the PCC in 2003 and 1994 acknowledge this as well.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 – The Levitical Law

- The Holiness Code is a term given to Leviticus 17–26, which is a comprehensive set of laws regarding every aspect of life. The laws are meant to allow people of faith to live in purity, in cleanliness and in proper relation to God, one another and the earth. The holiness code divides all things into two groups – what is holy and what is common, or profane. What is holy is generally what was clean, pure and whole. What was profane included anything unclean (polluted) or mixed (or mixed-up).
- On the whole, most scholars agree that through Jesus Christ the purity laws were set aside and are no longer considered binding on Christians.
- **True:** The rules about sexual purity are placed in the same category alongside other purity laws that are no longer relevant to us in the 21st century, such as the prohibition against mixing fabrics (cotton-polyester blends), consuming the blood of animals, and touching dead pig's skin (a football, for example).
- **False:** Modern Christians and Christian traditions have uniformly understood that all the laws in this section of the Holiness Code except the one regarding same-sex sexual activity are no longer applicable to Christian living today.
- Paul and the Levitical Law: Some Christians argue that the laws concerning same-sex activity belong to a different category (more enduring or transcendent, such as the Ten Commandments) than the purity laws. Other Christians argue that Paul's understanding of same-sex relationships remains culturally bound, similar to other laws in the Holiness Code.
- Jesus and the Torah: There is not a one-size-fits-all answer to how Jesus interprets the law.
- Jesus' treatment of the law is neither systematic nor comprehensive. The only place that Jesus addresses the whole of the law is when he is asked which is the greatest commandment.
- In Jesus Christ, God enters the profane, and the profane takes on holiness.

1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10 – Tricky Translations

- Presbyterians value the insight and depth that comes from being able to study the Bible in its original language. This is particularly helpful when there are difficult translations issues, such as in these two texts. Some Greek words to wrestle with:
 - *arsenokoitēs* (literally “male” and “bed”) – a compound of two words found in Leviticus. A very rare word that is difficult to translate
 - *malakos* (literally “soft”) – a widely used word that refers a broad category to things such as laziness, decadence, lack of courage, weakness, and in general anything feminine
 - *pornos* (male prostitute) and *andropodistēs* (“slave-trader” and refers to the practice of sexual slavery)
- All agree, however, that the terms are ambiguous and are difficult to translate accurately. Difference in interpretation is still hotly debated. There are also cultural issues at work here: do these words, when translated as “homosexual,” correspond to the way that we use that word in 21st century Canada?

Romans 1:26–27 – A Debate about Natural vs. Unnatural

- Most sources from both sides recognize that the passage in Romans 1 is at the heart of the scriptural debate about homosexuality.
- The passage is set in a long argument about the universality of human sin, and this section focuses on idolatry and pagan worship practices.
- It is the only place where women are included in the discussion.
- See the Scripture Chart on page 94 for two readings of the text.

3. The Bible, Sexual Norms and Family Structures

- Normal vs. Normative in the Bible
 - “Normal” is **descriptive** of a practice *in a particular time and particular place* such as first century Palestinian culture or 21st century Canadian culture.
 - “Normative” is **prescriptive** and therefore is meant to apply a practice in a more universal way *for all times and all places*.
- Marriage – normal but not normative in the Bible
 - Marriage is not essential to Christian faith. A person is not more complete when married, rather than single. Like other God-given gifts, marriage is intended for the building up of the body of Christ and for the purpose of making the world a more loving, more just place.
- Celibacy – a spiritual gift that is given, rather than just a decision that is made
 - Celibacy in Paul’s writings
 - ◆ 1 Corinthians 7
 - Celibacy in church tradition
 - ◆ The Reformers rejected the idea that the celibate lifestyle is a purer or higher moral good.

- Celibacy and abstinence
 - ◆ Abstinence is refraining from sexual activity.
 - ◆ Celibacy is more than a call to repress sexual desires, but is also a commitment to set aside sexual desire entirely as an important component of a fulfilled and satisfying life.

Diversity of Interpretation

- Consider this quotation from Wendy VanderWal-Gritter in her book *Generous Spaciousness*:

“If individuals of differing perspectives are to find a way to listen well, extend respect, and embody the priority of peace-making over proselytizing, we will need to recognize the potential within our interpretive lenses for diversity. And we will need to refrain from automatically assuming that someone whose perspective differs from our own is failing to honor the authority of Scripture or submit to the lordship of Christ. Generous spaciousness humbly acknowledges our limitations and intentionally chooses a posture of listening and learning. It recognizes that among those who identify as followers of Jesus and have a high regard for Scripture, there are diverse perspectives on many different questions (including but not limited to the matter of same-sex sexuality) in regard to how to live as a faithful disciple of Christ. Despite those differences, generous spaciousness makes room for us to join in conversations together in a shared quest for a deeper and more robust relationship with Christ.”¹

- As we seek to interpret the scriptures, we will have to face the reality that we will not all agree on how they are best understood. We will continue to hold different, even opposite, opinions. The real question for us is whether we can offer those differing opinions to God, respect one another as each seeking to be faithful to Christ, and continue to be a community of disciples together in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Fear and Love

- All agree that the Bible does have significant things to say about sexual ethics, intimate relationships between human beings and healthy and life-giving understandings of sexuality within communities.
- We still disagree on what those specifically are, and perhaps we always will. But we need not fear that our Presbyterian brothers and sisters in faith are either “sticking with the Bible” or “rejecting the Bible.” Traditionalists and progressives both recognize the authority of the Bible.
- We are all wrestling with how to read the Bible faithfully. Perhaps if we can set this fear aside and listen to each other’s perspectives, we can live together in love and not fear.

¹ VanderWal-Gritter, Wendy. *Generous Spaciousness: Responding to Gay Christians in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014), 167–168.

Romans 1:26–27

The chart that follows is a synopsis of how people with different understandings of human sexuality and sexual orientation tend to interpret this text in Romans.³⁷ While certainly these categories are oversimplified, they seek to fairly represent a continuum of perspectives while highlighting the differences of interpretation. In an effort to name the two groups, those who think that same-gender relationships and sexual activity are prohibited by the Bible are called “traditionalists” and those who are in favour of full inclusion of LGBTQ persons and expanding the definition of marriage to include same-sex union are called “progressives.”³⁸ Within these two poles is a range of perspectives, which will be nuanced differently by different readers.

Users can read this chart in several ways. It might be helpful to think of it as an eye chart at the optometrist’s office. You can cover the right side of the chart and read down the rows. In doing so, you can see how a person who reads this text as a prohibition of same-sex relations interprets Romans 1. Then you can cover the left side of the chart and see how a person who has revisited the text in favour of same-sex relations interprets Romans 1. In addition, you can use the key words or themes on the far left side to help you understand how the different understandings compare on particular sections of Romans 1.

Key words or phrases	A Traditionalist Reading	A Progressive Reading
natural and unnatural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Paul’s context, what is “natural” is aligned with God’s created intention for man and woman in sexual relationships. • “Natural” and “unnatural” in this passage are predominantly biological terms. “Natural” is in keeping with the will or intentions of God. “Unnatural” goes against the divine standard. Heterosexuality is understood as the natural sexual inclination of all human beings, as created by God. • In this reading, what is “natural” refers to God’s original design. What is “unnatural” goes against the creative intentions of God. • These categories are unchanging. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Paul’s context, what is “natural” is aligned with what is divine and true. Anything “unnatural” is aligned with idolatry, lies and uncontrolled lust. This is larger than sexual norms, yet includes them. • What is “natural” also includes social well-being and cultural norms. Something that is natural is “conventional.” Conventional includes sexual relationships, gender ideologies and how men and women conduct themselves in society, all of which are very different today than they were for Paul.³⁹ • Progressives note that Paul does not always use the notion of what is “natural” to mean what is good. In other places (such as Ephesians 2), what comes naturally is a negative thing.⁴⁰ “Natural” is not a term that is synonymous with “the will of God.” • The categories of “natural” and “unnatural” are not fixed. Our understanding of how God’s will is shown to humanity within the natural order changes, grows and deepens over time.⁴¹

chart continues on next page

³⁷ The two main sources for these different readings are Stanley Grenz and James Brownson.

³⁸ It is difficult to know what language is best in this context. Susan Garrett’s work uses the terms “affirmers” (those who affirm same-sex unions) and “prohibitionists” (those who would prohibit same-sex unions). Others use “revisionists” versus “traditionalists.” All of these terms are somewhat problematic, and carry some negative connotations.

³⁹ Brownson, 234–237.

⁴⁰ Brownson, 227.

⁴¹ Brownson, 247.

Scripture Chart

Romans 1 chart continued

Key words or phrases	A Traditionalist Reading	A Progressive Reading
inner disposition	Paul does not have individuals in mind in this text. Therefore, his argument is not against people going against “their” natural sexual functioning, but rather against “the” natural sexual functioning. ⁴² His argument is wider in scope than a person’s natural tendencies. “Natural” and “unnatural” are not relative terms, but part of the created order.	By looking at various biblical usages of the word, “natural,” one can argue that “naturally” can refer to “one’s own individual nature.” Paul could be interpreted then to be arguing that one’s God-given identity includes what “comes naturally” to an individual. In our current context, we now understand that a person’s sexual orientation is something that “comes naturally” to them. While Paul might not have had this modern understanding of sexuality as an individual’s natural disposition, the concept of nature as inner disposition is present in Paul’s use of the word and concept and can be applied in a new way to a different understanding of sexuality than what was available to Paul himself.
degrading	The use of words and phrases such as degrading or dishonourable, “consumed with passion” and shameless emphasize the strength of Paul’s convictions on this subject.	The word “degrading” can also be translated as “dishonourable.” In this case, rationality (associated with male gender roles) is taken over by passions (associated with a less honourable disposition and with a female gender role). A male who behaves in a way that does not conform to the societal norms of his gender (rational, dominant, honourable and moderate) is behaving in a degrading way.
consumed with passion	Someone who is “consumed with passion” indicates a person whose sexual appetite is not satisfied with accepted male-female relationships. These individuals have an undisciplined sex drive and seek to satisfy their desires through sexual perversion (anything outside of “natural” male-female sexual relations).	Passion in the first century context, as opposed to the 21st century is more often negative than positive. It is something that stands in contrast to moderation and rationality. Uncontrolled passion is associated with excess, lust, lack of control and self-centredness. While we in the 21st century have a different usage and positive understanding of the word “passion,” Christian sexual ethics for both heterosexuals and homosexuals would guard against these same characteristics (excess, lust, lack of control and self-centredness).
women	The fact that women are included in this specific passage of scripture in the context of same-sex sexual activity puts lesbian sexual activity on par with gay sexual activity. While there is acknowledgment that Paul does not specifically define the term “natural intercourse,” it can be rightfully be assumed that this is a straight-forward reference to heterosexual activity. Therefore, “unnatural intercourse” in this context points to the opposite, which is same-sex sexual activity.	Understanding women’s role in sexual relationships in Paul’s cultural context is crucial to interpreting the text that says women exchanged “natural intercourse for unnatural.” Any engagement in sexual activity that was not procreative or in which the woman took a dominant role would be considered “unnatural” in Paul’s cultural context. While “unnatural” is a term that could be used in the ancient world for same-gender sexual activity, it also could refer to a much wider number of sexual behaviours. ⁴³ In addition, many of the roles we consider appropriate for women in sexual relationships, as well as society in general (including education and leadership) would contradict what was deemed “natural” for women of the first century.

⁴² Grenz, 49.

⁴³ Brownson, 225.

1. Tools for Biblical Reading and Interpretation

1. Name one idea in this section that you found helpful. Why? What did you find most challenging. Why?
2. What does the phrase “faithful interpretation of the Bible” mean for you?
3. Share an example of a time when you read a scripture passage that seemed to be speaking directly to you.
4. Share an example of a time when a Bible study or sermon helped you understand a passage of scripture in a new way. What helped you understand it differently?

2. The Specific Texts and What They Say: seven texts mention same-gender sexual activity

Old Testament

1. How do you understand the law (such as the Holiness Code in Leviticus 17–20) in connection with your own Christian faith?
2. After examining these Old Testament texts that speak to same-gender sexual activity, what is your dominant impression? What is clarifying? What is challenging? What is distressing?

New Testament (see chart on Romans 1, page 94)

1. After reading the summary of the traditionalist interpretation of Romans 1, what is clarifying? What is challenging?
2. After reading the summary of the progressive interpretation of Romans 1, what is clarifying? What is challenging?
3. What common ground, if any, do you see in these two perspectives?
4. How does having some background regarding the seven texts that reference same-gender sexual activity help your understanding of our church’s conversation about this matter?

3. The Bible, Sexual Norms and Family Structures

1. Understandings of family structures, including marriage and celibacy, have differed and shifted through time and between different cultures. What are some of our understandings of family structure today in Canada? What are some of the strengths and the challenges that come with different kinds of family structures in our society?
2. How can we as Presbyterians disagree about how we interpret the scriptures and still remain together as a unified church? What other subjects can you think of where we disagree on how to interpret scripture across our denomination?
3. What other biblical texts or stories, beyond those that specifically mention same-sex sexual activity, should we consider when discussing the issues of human sexuality, sexual orientation and sexual ethics (in relation to both marriage and ordination standards) that are before us as a church? (For example: Luke 15:11–32, 1 John 4:16–21, 1 Corinthians 5–7, Galatians 3. You might want to use these as a beginning and come up with your own as well.)

Theology

What is Theology?

- Theology is a kind of bridge from the scriptures and their ancient contexts to the church of the 21st century and our context. Theology allows us to read specific texts of the Bible as well as reading the Bible as a whole.

Creation (Genesis 1–2)

- The creation texts found in Genesis 1–2 play a foundational role in understanding God’s relationship to human beings and how humans relate to each other. Included in these foundational texts are understandings of gender and sexuality.
- The creation stories are meant to teach us enduring truths about God and human beings, and about our relationships to each other and to the rest of the created world.
- See the Theology Chart on page 101 for traditional and progressive readings of the creation stories.

Covenant

- Christians understand God as a God of covenant. A covenant can be understood as a promise within the context of a relationship. (See Genesis 17:7 and Exodus 6:7.)
- It is within an understanding of covenant that the law comes into being. The covenant governs the intentions and actions of those who are part of it. The covenant can be broken or confirmed.
- Covenants can be renewed and re-imagined. (See Jeremiah 31:33 and Luke 22:20.)
- The early church understands itself as descendants of the covenant that God first established with Abraham, transformed and renewed through the life, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- While human beings break covenant (with God and each other) regularly, this stands in stark contrast to the character and actions of God. As people of faith, we seek to model our relationships on the relationship that God has established with us.

Sin and Grace

- Sin might best be described as that condition which separates or alienates us from each other and from God.
- Sin is broken covenant with God and with other human beings. Sin might be described as a lack of harmony between human beings, between humans and God, between human beings and the creation itself, or even the conflict that often goes on within our own hearts. (See Genesis 3.)
- Sin is everywhere – all human structures, institutions and relationships. Personal sin – what individuals do or do not do – is part of sin, but one part of the larger understanding of sin. Sin is a condition. It encompasses all of us, it has consequences for all of us, and we can see its effects in our lives. We are complicit in this web of sin. Every day we both participate in it and perpetuate it by what we do or don't do. Sin is about the state in which we live, until God's grace burns through it.
- Grace, simply put, is the unmerited favour, goodwill, benevolence and approval of God.
- We cannot earn the favour of God through good works or any other means. We do not woo God into being kind to us or judging us with mercy. Grace is God's initiative.
- Review the flow chart on human sexuality, sexual orientation and sin.

Baptism

- Baptism is one of two sacraments in the Presbyterian Church. A sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace. A sacrament is an action initiated by Jesus Christ as a reminder and a sign of the covenantal relationship between God and human beings.
- Having been marked by God, as God's own beloved child, we become part of the family of faith and the household of God.
- Baptism reminds us that God claimed and chose us first.
- In the church, we understand baptism as the beginning of a new life in Christ, wherein we can become fully the person that God created us to be. Baptism is the beginning of a journey toward wholeness, as we discover our true identity in Christ. This is an individual journey, but we journey together, as members of God's own family.

The Church (Ecclesiology)

- The Greek word *ecclesia*, that we translate as “church,” assumes a diversity of people, and indeed the early church included people from all different socio-economic levels of society, men and women, Gentile and Jew, slaves and free, people of high status and outcasts.
- The other earliest descriptor of the Christian church, found in the book of Acts, is *hodos*, which is translated “the Way.”
- Certainly this understanding of the church is a people who are on a journey and who are travelling together.
- If you put these two earliest descriptions of the church side by side, you can get a sense of the intended nature of God’s church. It is about people, not buildings. It is dynamic, not static.
- Calvin teaches that there is the visible church that we see with our eyes and also the invisible church that God alone knows.
- God desires unity, not uniformity. From the first accounts of the creation of the world, we can see that God values a rich assortment of different kinds of creatures, vegetation and people whom God claims in covenantal bonds. Through the interactions of Jesus, we can see that Jesus values people of both genders, of different races and of different experiences. From the story of the birth of the church at Pentecost, we can see the Holy Spirit’s drive toward reaching out to different languages, cultures and peoples.
- Being with like-minded people in an atmosphere where people generally have similar opinions, particularly on matters of deep emotion or high controversy, is much more comfortable for everyone.
- It is undeniable that God continually calls for unity in the church. But unity cannot be understood as a church where disagreement is absent.
- On the issues of human sexuality and sexual orientation, there is no question that diverse and even conflicting perspectives are present in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The real question that remains is whether we can maintain unity in the midst of our diversity or not.

Genesis 1 and 2

The chart that follows is a synopsis of how people with different understandings of human sexuality and sexual orientation tend to think about the theology of creation. While certainly these categories are oversimplified, they seek to fairly represent a continuum of perspectives while highlighting the differences of interpretation. In an effort to name the two groups, those who are in favour of full inclusion of LGBTQ persons and expanding the definition of marriage to include same-sex union are called “progressives” and those who think that same-gender relationships and sexual activity are prohibited by the Bible are called “traditionalists.”¹ Within these two poles is a range of perspectives, which will be nuanced differently by different readers.

Users can read this chart in several ways. It might be helpful to think of it as an eye chart at the optometrist’s office. You can cover the right side of the chart and read down the rows. In doing so, you can see how a person who advocates for the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons understands the creation story. Then you can cover the left side of the chart and see how a person who reads the text in a traditional way understands the creation story. In addition, you can use the subject headings on the far left side to help you understand how the different understandings compare on particular sections of Genesis 1 and 2.

Key words or phrases	A Progressive Reading	A Traditionalist Reading
<p>The creation of human beings Genesis 1:27 Genesis 2:7, 22</p>	<p>Progressives tend to read the creation stories with an understanding that God created male and female simultaneously in the first account of creation (as in Genesis 1:27). In the second account of creation (Genesis 2:7), God created the first human being out of the earth, not as a person specifically of the male gender, but as a creature of the earth. The Hebrew word translated “man” in Genesis 1 is “<i>adam</i>” and the Hebrew word for earth or dust is “<i>adama</i>.”² So “<i>adam</i>” is literally an earthling, not a particular gender.³</p>	<p>Traditionalists understand that in chapter 1 God created both male and female in God’s image. Chapter 2 expands that story with the understanding that man was formed first and then humanity was completed with the forming of woman.</p>
<p>“It is not good that the man should be alone.” Genesis 2:18</p>	<p>God realized that it was not good for the creature of the earth, made in God’s image, to be alone. None of the animals that God had made were sufficient to be a companion for the human being. So God created another human being from the first, for companionship, as a life mate, who shares the same flesh and bone. The terms “man” (<i>ish</i>) and “woman” (<i>isha</i>) are then introduced into the text. The two human beings do not complete one another, in the sense that the male needs the female to be whole, or vice versa. They are equally made in the image of God independently of one another.</p>	<p>In the chapter 2 expansion, the good of 1:27 is tempered by the “not good for the man to be alone.” Nothing yet created was sufficient to satisfy this aloneness. So, from the man, God created woman to be the man’s helper or partner in a way that no other creature could. The female as “helper” or partner is a divine gift. Male and female, while understood by many traditionalists as equal, are often regarded as different reflections of the divine image.</p>

chart continues on next page

1 It is difficult to know what language is best in this context. Susan Garrett’s work uses the terms “affirmers” (those who affirm same-sex unions) and “prohibitionists” (those who would prohibit same-sex unions). Others use “revisionists” versus “traditionalists.” All of these terms are somewhat problematic, carrying negative connotations for some over others.

2 Genesis 1:26, 27; 2:7, 20.

3 Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 149–152. Taylor interprets the Hebrew text here and refers to “*adam*” as an earthling, a mud-baby, a dirt-person, a dust-creature, whom God breathed into and it became a living being. God created earth and earthlings to tend the earth. In examining the spiritual practice of physical labour that brings human beings back into relationship with the stuff of earth, Taylor invokes this imagery saying, “Welcome home, you beloved dirt-person of God.”

Genesis 1 and 2 chart continued

Key words or phrases	A Progressive Reading	A Traditionalist Reading
<p>“cling to each other and become one flesh” Genesis 2:24</p>	<p>Human beings have an intense need to be in meaningful relationship with one another. This quest is in response to a feeling of loneliness. While this idea of becoming “one flesh” has been used to express the commitment of a marriage between one man and one woman, this language primarily refers to a new primary kinship bond.⁴ This kind of lifelong kinship bond could extend to other relationships beyond one man and one woman in marriage and still remain faithful to the intentions of God’s creation and human beings’ need for one another in intimate and kindred relationships.</p>	<p>For Traditionalists, this language speaks specifically to a sexual union between a man and a woman. It is applied primarily to the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman. The quest of the man for a woman, and vice versa, is understood by some traditionalists as the quest for completeness. It is often also expanded to speak of the bonding of two persons in “heart and soul” so that each not only becomes more whole or complete in relationship with the other, but by mutual self-giving they become one.</p>
<p>Gender Complementarity Genesis 1:27 Genesis 2:23</p>	<p>Progressives believe that the idea of gender complementarity is not inherent in the creation stories, but is a later idea added into the text.⁵ The bonding of the male and female is a covenantal, unitive kinship, linking two families and creating a new family. In addition, the Genesis accounts do not emphasize the <i>difference</i> between the man and woman so much as the <i>similarity</i> between them.⁶ The male finds in the woman someone similar to himself (unlike anything else in creation), which enables an intimate relationship that involves sexual union. This is not to say that male and female do <i>not</i> complement each other. However, it also does not rule out the possibility that two different people of the same sex have complementary aspects.</p>	<p>Traditionalists understand the accounts of creation in chapters 1 and 2 to present a divine design of gender complementarity. This view emphasizes that there are inherent and intended differences in man and woman, though both reflect the divine image. Genesis teaches that the similarity of the human being with God is only found in the association of the man and the woman and not in each one taken separately. As such, they are able to complete one another (fit together to form one flesh) in ways no other creature can. This can be understood in anatomical or biological terms as well as in social and spiritual terms. For many traditionalists, this concept of gender complementarity involves the roles that men and women play in society, the church and particularly in family structures. Furthermore, some of these traditionalists assert that these gender roles, while both valuable, ought to remain distinct from one another.</p>
<p>Procreation Genesis 1:28</p>	<p>God gives the blessings of procreation, “Be fruitful and multiply,” not only to the human beings of creation, but to all the creatures of creation. Procreation is one of many purposes for human marriage and the mandate for a lifelong kinship bond. However, procreation is neither the sole purpose nor an essential component of marriage. The primary reason for marriage is faithful love and care for two partners in unitive, intimate relationship to one another and for the greater good of society.</p>	<p>Procreation and the responsibility to nurture children is understood as one of the primary reasons for marriage. Marriage, as an exclusive bond between a man and a woman, is often celebrated by sexual intercourse that leaves open the possibility for new life. This creation mandate is often developed with other parts of scripture with regard to sexual intercourse within marriage and family life in general.</p>
<p>Genesis in relation to the rest of the canon of scripture</p>	<p>Progressives understand the creation stories as setting the stage for the relationship between God and humanity and between human beings. All of the relationships cited in these stories grow, change and deepen in a variety of ways throughout the canon of scripture, as God interacts with the covenant community of Israel, individuals and the church.</p>	<p>Traditionalists see Genesis 1 and 2 as God’s design of a “sexual-ethical paradigm” for all times and places. As such, it is a divine pattern that is enduring for humanity. This design understands sexuality as “consistently gendered, complementarian, procreative and marital.”</p>

4 Brownson, 86. For example, Ruth clings to Naomi, her mother-in-law, thus forming a new primary kinship bond (Ruth 1:14).

5 Garrett.

6 Brownson, 30.

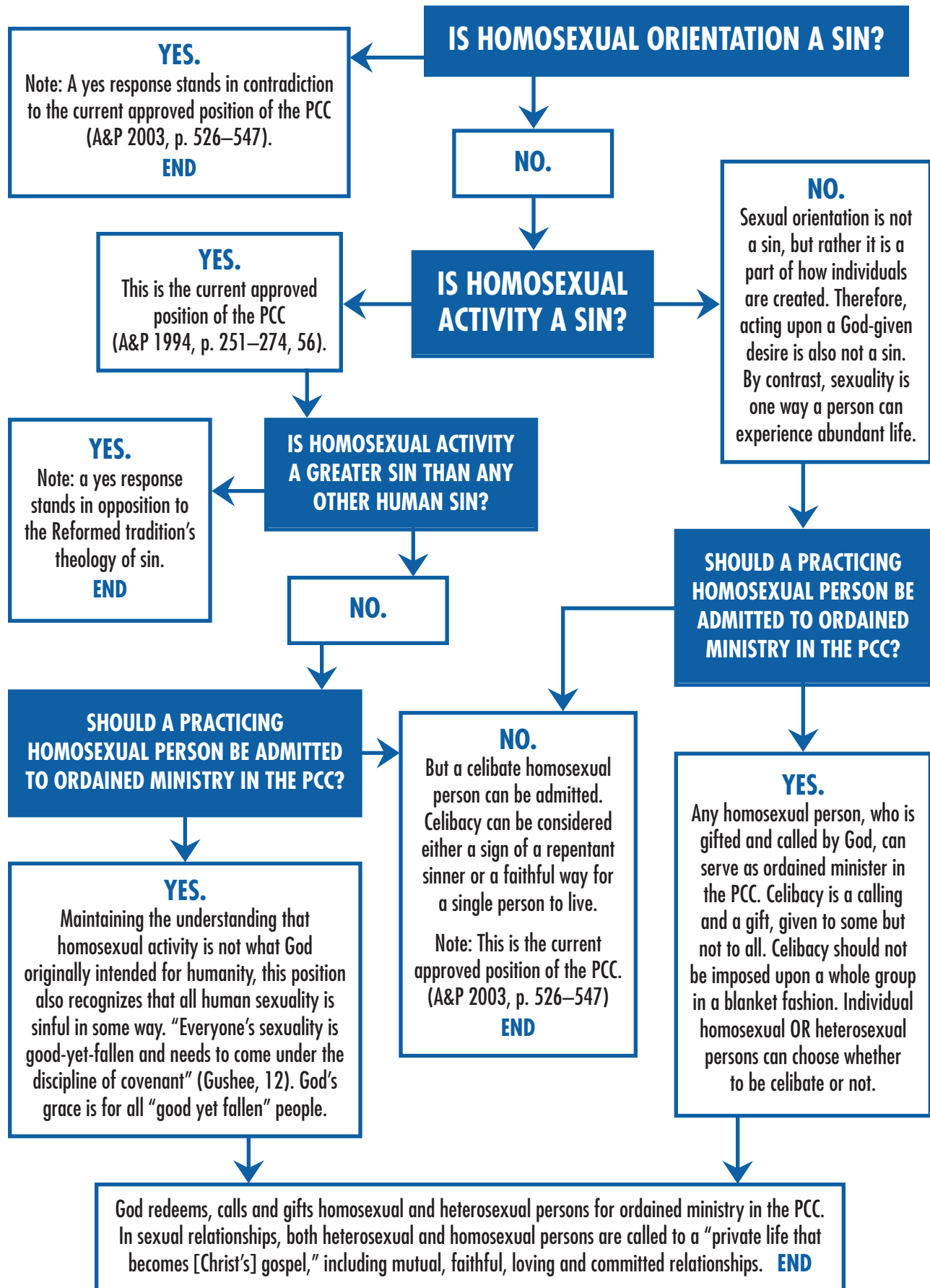
Tracing Different Pathways

Throughout our history, there have been many debates in the church about whether sexuality and sexual activity itself is sinful or not and in what contexts sexuality ought to be expressed. One focus of this particular conversation is whether homosexuality and homosexual activity is necessarily sinful or is not, when practiced within mutual and committed relationships. There are different theological perspectives on this topic with the PCC. And the PCC has made certain statements over the last 20 years that have been approved by the General Assembly.

The flow chart on the following page is designed to help people do a few things:

1. See the current position of the PCC regarding sin and homosexuality.
2. Help participants examine their own theological understandings and positions by answering questions and following them to potential conclusions.
3. Show that there are various understandings of sin and homosexuality AND that those diverse understandings include the possibility of reaching a similar conclusion.

Tracing Different Pathways



Story: Life and Faith Get Complicated

1. How do you respond to the story of Katherine and Tim?
2. Why do questions about our sexual identity sometimes feel different or more difficult than other aspects of our identity?
3. How do you think this story ends? What are some possible faithful responses and outcomes of this story for the daughter? For Katherine and Tim? For the other siblings in the story?

Creation

1. After reading the summary of the traditionalist interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2, what is clarifying? What is challenging?
2. After reading the summary of the progressive interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2, what is clarifying? What is challenging?
3. What are some key ideas that are important to you in your understanding of creation in relationship to human sexuality?

Covenant

1. In contemporary Canada, how does the understanding and practice of marriage:
 - a. reflect the covenantal promise and relationship with God outlined above?
 - b. differ from the concepts of covenant outlined above?
2. How, if at all, would an affirmation of same-sex marriage affect your understanding of marriage as a covenant?
3. Covenant life in the church and legal life in society are not always identical. As a result, how, if at all, should the understanding and practice of marriage in the PCC be different from that of society in general?

Sin and Grace (see Flow Chart: Tracing Different Pathways on page 103)

1. Where do you find yourself on this flow chart? Try to trace a path different from your own. Try to see the issues of sexual orientation and ordination from that other perspective. What makes you feel uncomfortable and why?
2. Notice that the chart allows people who believe that homosexual activity *is* a sin and people who believe that homosexual activity *is not* a sin to reach the same conclusions. How can Christians have different opinions about whether specific behaviours are sinful and still be unified?
3. Theologian David Gushee talks about the need for sinful human sexuality (both heterosexual and homosexual orientations) to come under the “discipline of covenant.” What does that mean?

Baptism

1. In this section, baptism is defined as “the beginning of a journey toward wholeness, as we discover our true identity in Christ.” How is our understanding of sexual orientation a part of the journey toward wholeness for ourselves both as individuals and collectively as a gathered, worshipping people of God?
2. Given the vows we take as a congregation at a person’s baptism, what is the church’s role when a baptized person comes out as an LGBTQ person? How could a congregation help foster dialogue to promote mutual listening, respect and understanding?

The Church

1. Share an example from your own experience of how members of a congregation are able to disagree and yet continue to work together in the church.
2. Reflect on an experience of division, such as when someone or some group has left the congregation. Might there have been a way to maintain unity in the midst of disagreement?
3. It is highly unlikely that all members of the PCC will reach a common understanding on the matters before us of human sexuality and sexual orientation. Try to imagine some creative ways that we can maintain our unity and disagree on these matters.

Tradition

A coffee shop conversation:

Our church is talking about homosexuality again.

Again?

Yup.

Seems like everyone is talking about it. All. The. Time.

It's important to talk about it. Look at what is happening all around us. The church is out of sync with society.

I think we've said enough. The church has made a statement.

Um...er...
I'm not exactly sure.

I'm not sure either.
Gotta run.

A person overhearing the conversation:

I wonder what church they go to? My denomination is talking about that too.

Wouldn't it be good if we could all talk to each other about our faith and human sexuality?

Excuse me, what does your church say about homosexuality and the church?

Hmmm...
I wonder what my denomination says...

PRAYERS FROM THE 141ST GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Dear God, we, your people, want to abide in you and want your words to abide in us, so that you can bring healing to our church family.

Dear God, we lay our concerns and anxieties about our future as a Presbyterian Church before you for your guidance and direction for us.

Compassionate God, we face our future seeking your wisdom and grace to quiet the fears of the unknown. Give us courage and strength for the journey ahead of us all.

A Chicken and Egg Game

Before the Protestant Reformation, people of faith looked to the tradition of the church for the most authoritative statement on any particular issue or practice. The church was the institution gifted with the ability to read the Bible and offer interpretation. The church leaders were often the most educated people in the community – often among the few who could actually read the Bible (especially since it was only available in Latin!). If you wanted to know what the Bible said about something or what it meant, you looked to what the church and the tradition said, and did that. The church interpreted the scripture.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Reformers asserted that this was all wrong. The scripture, they said, shapes and forms the church. The church was answerable to the scripture and not the other way around. If you want to know what the Bible says about something or what it means, you read the Bible. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and with the community of faith, you interpret it together. The scripture has authority over the church, and not the other way around.

The Power and Wisdom of Tradition

The power of the tradition – the practices, interpretations and beliefs – handed down to us by those who have gone before us in faith is strong. This is true in positive ways that help us maintain continuity throughout the generations of faithful Christians. Tradition keeps us grounded and rooted in ways that serve us well. Tradition can remind us of who we are and where we come from. Tradition can also have the power to keep us from change. How many churches hold certain events, follow certain practices and use certain decorations for the holidays because “we have always done it this way” or because someone’s great grandfather or mother started it? Tradition can be emotional and influential.

The wisdom of the tradition – the careful and faithful discernment of our church mothers and fathers – is important. If we cannot trust their judgment and build on

what they believed, the church could not exist. God often uses tradition to teach and guide us, especially in uncertain times. In addition, tradition is, as the writers of the 1994 Church Doctrine Report on Human Sexuality noted, “a living, dynamic thing and not simply the dead hand of the past” (A&P 1994, 251–274).

Building on the Work of Others

On the issue of human sexuality and sexual orientation, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has done a lot of good, faithful, prayerful and often painstaking work. Each committee and statement has built upon the others. Many General Assemblies have prayed, deliberated and voted on matters of human sexual ethics and sexual orientation. It is important to honour that work, as well as build on it.

What follows is a summary of The Presbyterian Church in Canada’s current position on sexual orientation, ministry and ordination, same-sex marriage and other related matters, highlighting main points and transitions based on approved reports to GA from 1969 to 2005. (See Appendix B on page 74.)

Q: Is same-sex attraction, or orientation, a sin according to the PCC?

A: No.

Q: Is one’s sexual orientation a lifestyle choice?

A: No. Scientific evidence has shown that one’s sexual orientation is innate, established early in life, rather than a lifestyle choice.

Q: Is homosexual practice a sin according to the PCC?

A: Yes. Scripture treats same-sex activity as a departure from God’s created order.

Q: What does the PCC say about homophobia?

A: In 1985, the PCC stated that homophobia is a form of hatred and the church stands in opposition to it. In 1994, the PCC called the whole church to repent of its homophobia and hypocrisy. Anger, hatred and acts of denigration toward gay and lesbian people should not be tolerated within a congregation or the greater community.

Q: Are gay and lesbian people welcome to join the PCC?

A: Yes, the PCC affirms that the church is called to be a place where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported. There is no barrier to membership for persons from the LGBTQ community.

Q: What leadership roles can a LGBTQ person have in the PCC?

A: The church does not limit the roles of its members on the basis of their sexual orientation. These roles include church school teachers, musicians, youth leaders, ruling elders, teaching elders and members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries.

- Q: Can a homosexual person be ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments or designated to the Order of Diaconal Ministry in the PCC?**
A: Yes, if that person is celibate and non-practicing. Neither scripture nor church prohibits ordination based on same-sex attraction or orientation.
- Q: Can a *practicing* homosexual person or an LGBTQ person in a same-sex relationship be ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments or designated to the Order of Diaconal Ministry in the PCC?**
A: No.
- Q: Does the PCC believe that a person's sexual orientation can be changed?**
A: No.
- Q: Does the PCC endorse programs that claim to change or "heal" a person's same-sex attraction?**
A: No. The PCC cannot see any scriptural, scientific or pastoral basis for such programs.
- Q: What kind of pastoral care should sessions offer to those dealing with sexual issues?**
A: Sessions should provide support groups as requested and provide help for individuals and/or their family members who are facing sexual discrimination, support for parents whose children are gay or lesbian, and care for all those who have been victims of sexual abuse.
- Q: What is the definition of marriage in the PCC?**
A: The PCC states that a marriage is the union of a man and a woman.
- Q: Does the PCC allow public worship services blessing same-sex relationships or same-sex marriages?**
A: No.
- Q: Can a minister of the PCC officiate at same-sex marriages?**
A: No.

Discussion Questions

1. In this chapter, some information regarding the PCC's present teaching about human sexuality and sexual orientation is provided. Given the passage of time since the last report on human sexuality and sexual orientation was adopted by our denomination, what other questions might you like to see added to this list?
2. Have you ever had a discussion about same-sex marriage and/or sexual orientation with others from different church backgrounds than your own? Recall how this discussion unfolded. What did you learn from this discussion?

Biological and Psychological Studies

“I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” (Psalm 139:14)

Church and Culture

- A common worry across the church on matters of sexual orientation and same-sex marriage is: Is the church just doing what culture is doing? Shouldn't the church lead the culture on moral issues, rather than the other way around?
- Studies of church and culture have shown that the relationship between church and culture is complex and doesn't always work in one direction.

Science and Faith

- The 1994 Report on Human Sexuality says that “*science can provide valuable information and concepts which must be taken into account in articulating a theology of sexuality...*” but “*they cannot in themselves determine in any final way the criteria on which our ethical decisions should be based.*”
- Science has a role in informing decisions of Christian ethics. It has influence on how we read the scriptures, our theology and how we understand the world in which we live.
- From the perspective of the Reformed tradition: critical thinking and faith ought never to be in contradiction with one another.
- The 2003 Report of the Special Committee re Sexual Orientation says, “*For Christians the Bible is the ultimate authority in matters of faith, but not the ultimate authority in matters of science. However we need not see science and the Bible as being at odds with one another, but view the relationship as a friendly one.*”

A Note about Sexuality and Identity

- Throughout this study guide, there has been an emphasis on sexual orientation versus sexual activity. The difference between these two categories is an important part of the debate about how the church might proceed in terms of full inclusion or the continuation of the current church position.
- It has been argued that a person's sexuality, while being only one part of a person's identity, affects how we experience the world generally in emotional, cognitive, spiritual and relational ways.

Biological Studies

Biology and Theology

- Biological studies have helped Christians understand and worship God better. God's creation of such intricate, delicate and strong bodies and brains is mind-boggling.
- Sometimes biological studies clarify and allow us to interpret the Bible more faithfully. For example, in both the Old and New Testaments, a woman's inability to conceive was understood as the fault of the woman and was considered a curse or a punishment. Scientific understanding of human reproduction as well as male and female contributions to conception has led Christians to a different theological understanding of childlessness.

Biology and Gender

- Sometimes biological studies can add more questions about how we interpret the Bible for sexual ethics. For example, we tend to think of biological sex as binary – a person is either male or female. It has become clear that there are biological variations on sex, most notably androgynous persons. This kind of biological variance can raise theological questions about gender, birth and creation.

Biology and Choice

- While the science is complex and not everything is fully understood, science concludes that there is biological basis for sexual orientation, while leaving room for environmental and social factors.
- After reviewing biological studies, and recognizing that there is not complete clarity from scientific studies, the 2003 Report of the Special Committee re Sexual Orientation that was adopted by General Assembly affirmed that sexual orientation is “innate, established early in life, and not a matter of choice.”

Psychological Studies

Psychological Studies and Sexual Orientation

- The decriminalization of homosexual acts (1969) and the removal of homosexuality and transgender from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (1974) have influenced theological thinking and understanding. The 2003 Special Report on Sexual Orientation, which was approved by the General Assembly, concluded that homosexual orientation is not a sin.

Psychological Studies and LGBTQ Youth at Risk

- Organizations such as the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) have recognized in recent years that LGBTQ youth, in particular, are at higher risks for bullying, depression, anxiety and suicide than their straight peers. In addition, LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the homeless youth population.
- Some studies have shown that LGBTQ youth from homes with strong moral codes and expectations, which are most often religious households, are somewhat more likely to face rejection or ostracism from their parents.
- However, it is also true that families who embrace Christian faith and teach it to their children often have a great gift for love and resilience that allows for acceptance and support in as great or greater measure than other families.
- These kinds of studies cause us to pause and consider how our faith affects the way we relate and respond to each other when our moral convictions clash with the experiences of those whom we love.
- These issues speak to the church's role and responsibility in caring for people and their families who face LGBTQ issues of sexuality and identity.
- How we respond to teenagers in our churches who identify as LGBTQ is related to our baptismal vows. If teenagers cannot find their place in our communities of faith, in ways that not only tolerate but also value who they understand themselves to be, the rejection that they experience from their own family or their family of faith can easily be construed *by them* as rejection by God.
- Faith must meet these young people where they are and actively engage with the real experiences they are facing. What the church says and understands about these experiences is important and deserves careful and thoughtful communication as young people make decisions about their own sense of belonging and commitment to a congregation and a denomination.

Biological and Psychological Studies

Discussion Questions

Church and Culture, Science and Faith, Sexuality and Identity

1. After reading the discussion about church and culture, what do you find clarifying? What do you find challenging?
2. VanderWal-Gritter says that sexuality shapes or impacts how we experience the world through things like music, art, friendship and family relationships. Reflect on how that has been part of your life experience.
3. How does your own experience of sexuality and gender influence how you identify yourself? Imagine having a different sexual orientation than your own or being a different gender. What features of your identity change when you imagine yourself differently?

Biological Studies

1. The diversity of genders is well documented in biological studies. This diversity is not mentioned at all in biblical accounts of the creation in Genesis. How do we account for such diversity as we look through the lens of faith? What other scientific things are not specifically mentioned in the Bible, but are understood by contemporary Christians as part of God's creation?
2. In your own theological thinking, what difference, if any, does it make that biological studies have indicated that sexual orientation is not a choice?

Psychological Studies

1. How does statistical information like this affect the way we address the concerns of LGBTQ teens and their families within the church?
2. What are some ways the church might respond in light of such concerns?
3. Ask a young person in your family or congregation what he or she sees, hears, or experiences in their school community in regards to students who identify as LGBTQ. How does our faith affect how we respond to what we see, hear and experience in such situations?

Glossary of Terms

This glossary is intended to provide concise explanations of some of the terms used in this study guide and is not intended to be comprehensive either in its choice of terms or in its definitions.

abstinence – the habit or practice of refraining from sexual activity.

affirming – (of a church or other faith community) fully accepting of all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity; making no distinction among people based on sex, gender, orientation or sexual practice. [see *welcoming*]

androgynous – (of a person) **a.** having some or all of the physical or social characteristics of men and women. People with both male and female sex organs were formerly called hermaphrodites. **b.** neither male nor female.

bisexual – (used to describe a person) sexually attracted to both women and men; neither heterosexual nor homosexual.

celibacy – the practice of committed abstinence from marriage and from sexual activity as a religious discipline.

eunuch – (historically) a man who had been castrated, usually early in life, so that his hormonal development was altered and he did not develop masculine traits.

full inclusion – the fact or condition of being fully accepting of all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, or of making no distinction among people based on sex, gender, orientation or sexual practice. Within The Presbyterian Church in Canada, this is generally understood to mean allowing both same-sex marriage and the ordination of practicing LGBTQ persons to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments.

gay – **a.** (used to describe a person) sexually attracted to people of the same sex; (used to describe sexual activity) occurring between people of the same sex; homosexual. **b.** (used to describe a man) sexually attracted to other men; (used to describe sexual activity) occurring between men.

gender – the traits or characteristics that are determined culturally or socially because of a person's sex; a person's masculinity or femininity. [see *sex*]

gender complementarity – the belief that men and women are essentially different from one another, both anatomically and socially, and that each gender complements or makes up for deficiencies in the other.

heteronormativity – the belief that people can be divided into two complementary genders, male and female, with each gender having its own natural roles, and that the only normal sexual orientation is heterosexual.

heterosexual – (used to describe a person) sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex; (used to describe sexual activity) occurring between people of different sexes.

homosexual – (used to describe a person) sexually attracted to people of the same sex; (used to describe sexual activity) occurring between people of the same sex.

intersex – (of a person) **a.** having some or all of the physical or social characteristics of men and women. People with both male and female sex organs were formerly called hermaphrodites. **b.** neither male nor female.

lesbian – (used to describe a woman) sexually attracted to other women; (used to describe sexual activity) occurring between women.

LGBTQ – an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. The LGBTQ community, broadly speaking, can be said to include anyone who is not heterosexual.

practicing – (used to describe a person, especially one who is not heterosexual) sexually active; not celibate.

progressive – (used to describe a reading or an interpretation) relying on new or different cultural, linguistic or literary evidence, different from the previously common interpretation; (used to describe a person) favouring readings or interpretations that are different from those previously or commonly held.

queer – (used to describe a person) **a.** homosexual. **b.** not heterosexual; gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender; encompassing all sexual orientations that are not heterosexual. **c.** not identifying as having a specific or easily-categorized sexual orientation.

sex – either of the main groups (female or male) into which people are placed on the basis of biological differences, including their internal and external sexual organs, chromosomes, etc. [see *gender*]

sexual orientation – a person's sexual identity, as characterized by the gender(s) to which they are attracted.

socially constructed – (of human characteristics, such as gender roles) created by or influenced by culture or society, rather than by genetic factors.

spectrum of sexuality – the belief that human sexual orientation exists as a range or continuum, rather than simply as binary opposites such as heterosexuality and homosexuality.

traditionalist – (used to describe a reading or an interpretation) commonly held or accepted, and viewed as authoritative; (used to describe a person) favouring readings or interpretations that have been commonly held or accepted.

transgender – (used to describe a person) identifying with or expressing a gender identity that is not the one that corresponds to one's sex at birth.

two-spirited – (used to describe a First Nations or Aboriginal person) possessing both a masculine spirit and a feminine spirit; homosexual or transgender.

welcoming – (of a church or other faith community) accepting of all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, but with the understanding that the only acceptable form of sexual activity is heterosexual. [see *affirming*]

Body, Mind and Soul: Study Guide Survey

If you are a group leader for this study guide, please take a few moments when you have completed using the study guide for some feedback from the group. Individuals are welcome to send in their comments.

There are three methods for completing the survey. Choose one of the following:

1. Complete and submit the survey online at presbyterian.ca/sexuality.
(Click here to go to online survey.)
2. Download the fillable PDF survey from presbyterian.ca/sexuality and type your responses in the fields provided. Then save the PDF and email it as an attachment to survey@presbyterian.ca.
(Click here to go to the PDF survey.)
3. Print the survey on following page and write your responses in the spaces provided. Then mail the completed survey to

Human Sexuality Study Guide
c/o The Presbyterian Church in Canada
50 Wynford Drive
Toronto, ON M3C 1J7

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Body, Mind and Soul – Study Guide Survey

(October 27, 2015)

1. Who used the study guide? (study group in the congregation, the session, committee of presbytery, etc.)

2. Was the study guide used over several evenings, a day long or a weekend retreat?

3. What parts of the guide were:

a) Easy to use?

b) Difficult to use?

4. What were some benefits you experienced from the use of this study guide?

5. In what ways was the study guide unhelpful or of little benefit?

6. You have been invited by the General Assembly to give feedback to Justice Ministries (Life and Mission Agency) and the Committee on Church Doctrine as they consider various overtures related to matters raised in the study guide. Please forward up to the three of the most valuable experiences or learnings that have come to light as you pondered the issues addressed in the study guide.

6.1 _____

6.2 _____

6.3 _____

Optional:

Name: _____

Congregation: _____

Presbytery: _____

*Please send your responses to: Human Sexuality Study Guide, c/o The Presbyterian Church in Canada
50 Wynford Drive, Toronto, ON M3C 1J7*

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Body, Mind and Soul

*Thinking together about human sexuality and sexual orientation
in The Presbyterian Church in Canada*

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All biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV),
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