



The Presbyterian Church in Canada

JOIN THE CONVERSATION:

**Support as the Church Studies and Responds to the
Biblical and Theological Response to Overtures
Submitted by the Life and Mission Agency on Sexuality
2017**



Abbreviations

CCD: The Committee on Church Doctrine

GA: General Assembly

LGBTQ: people of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer community

LMA: Life and Mission Agency

PCC: The Presbyterian Church in Canada

What is This Guide For?

In response to overtures from courts of the church, the Life and Mission Agency submitted biblical and theological reflections to the 2017 General Assembly. The General Assembly decided to send those reflections to the church for study and report. This guide may help those who wish to participate in that study and report process.

Remember... that in every discussion about sex and sexuality in our church, there may be people in the discussion who are or are connected to people who are from the LGBTQ community. Expect a variety of viewpoints, life experiences and theological perspectives. We engage in these discussions as beloved children of God in one church family. Principles of respectful listening can help guide sometimes challenging conversations (See A&P 2015, p. 544, “Listening Circles Group Guidelines”). Creating safe sharing space for conversations builds up communities of love and respect.

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Introduction

Sex and sexuality are important aspects of life and faith. “Our creation as sexual beings is God’s loving purpose for us.”¹ In spite of their importance, the topics of sex and sexuality are rarely, if ever, discussed in most congregations or the courts and colleges of the church. For generations, it has been possible to spend a lifetime in the church and never discuss or encounter matters of sex and sexuality. One of the costs of setting aside these topics is that we now struggle to learn how to talk about sex and sexuality at the same time that we must have sophisticated and nuanced discussions about them.

The General Assembly adopted two recommendations this year that urged the church to seek the unity of Christ through the Holy Catholic Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as it discerns the mind of Christ in the matter of sexuality. And consistently, the church has called for discussions that are respectful. Great care, sensitivity, patience, and grace are required as conversations are planned and held on the topics of sex and sexuality in the church. These conversations are profoundly pastoral; they take place where faith, flesh, the soul, Christ and the community meet.

We pray that the courts and colleges of the church feel a strong sense of God’s presence, the leading of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of Christ in this time of study and discernment.

While the LMA welcomes all feedback to both its own documents and the documents submitted by the CCD, this particular resource is meant to help support courts and groups of the church as they read, study and report to the General Assembly about the Biblical/theological section of the response to overtures submitted to the General Assembly by the Life and Mission Agency.

Where have we been?

1969 GA supports proposed federal legislation that decriminalizes homosexual activity.

1994 GA receives a report with a statement on homosexuality submitted by the CCD.

1997 GA appoints a committee to clarify the roles of homosexual and lesbian persons in the church. Interim reports are presented to each assembly from 1998 to 2002.

2003 The final report of the Committee appointed in 1997 is received and adopted by the GA.

2015 23 overtures on sexuality are received by GA and referred to CCD and/or the LMA. GA commissioners participate in facilitated small group discussions at Assembly. GA instructs the CCD and LMA to jointly prepare a study guide on

¹ *Living Faith* 2.2.2

human sexuality. The study guide was titled “Body, Mind and Soul,” published October 31, 2015.

2016 Four overtures on sexuality are received by the GA and referred to the LMA and/or CCD. All feedback submitted to the LMA and the CCD is read and considered. A summary of feedback from the church on sexuality is prepared by the LMA and adopted by GA. CCD and LMA meet several times as both bodies prepare responses to the overtures in 2016. The LMA makes funding available to every Presbytery for discussions on sexuality. The LMA creates educational resources for how to use “Body, Mind and Soul” or otherwise facilitate study groups on sexuality in the church. The 2016 General Assembly asks for a response from the LMA and CCD by 2017. An additional motion from the GA requests that the responses take Romans 14:1-13 into consideration in responses to the overtures.

2017 The LMA and CCD presented reports to the GA for discussion. Portions of those reports were sent for study and support.

Why are we talking about sexuality?

In 2015, The Presbyterian Church in Canada began re-examining the matter of sexuality and marriage as a result of overtures submitted to the General Assembly by courts of the church. Submitting overtures is the way the church initiates topics for discussion. The overtures that initiated the continuation of the discussions contained a variety of different and competing requests.

Who responded to the overtures?

Since 2015, General Assemblies have referred overtures to the CCD and to the LMA. The two bodies have consulted frequently since 2015 and have met together periodically.

Who decided what would happen with the responses to the overtures in 2017?

The reports of the two committees were accepted and discussed by the commissioners of the General Assembly in June 2017. Together, the commissioners determined the next actions the church should take in its discernment.

What did the General Assembly decide?

The General Assembly referred sections of the reports written by the LMA and CCD to the church for study and report by January 31, 2018.

What happens next?

Groups in the church will study the documents and report their impressions and reflections to the LMA and CCD for consideration as they proceed with their work. The two committees will continue to consult and cooperate with each other. Both bodies will prepare reports for future General Assemblies.

What kind of response should we submit?

The LMA and the CCD will receive and consider all responses from the colleges and courts of the church in any format that is submitted by **January 31, 2018**. It is most helpful if your responses are respectful, reflect a commitment to love-of-neighbour, are focused on how the church can be faithful to God while we respond to the issues of sex and sexuality before us, and keep in mind the diversity of faithful perspectives on this issue.

There is no one way or format for responding. Groups could:

- select several questions provided at the end of this guide and send responses to them.
- after a group discussion, have the clerk or a designated person send a brief summary of the nature and format of your study group including highlights, concerns, questions and hopes for the church.
- The CCD will make available a survey for the church to use. The survey format helps the CCD and the LMA respond wisely and with precision because it includes standardized questions. The survey will also have sections for open-ended comments to capture all responses.

How does the church submit responses?

The committees will receive and consider all responses from the church in any format that is submitted by January 31, 2018. Please include the name of the group submitting the material.

Please send all responses to survey@presbyterian.ca or by mail to Human Sexuality Report, Justice Ministries 50 Wynford Dr. Toronto, Ont., M3C 1J7.

Where can I get more information?

Additional documents that can support conversations about sexuality are available at presbyterian.ca/sexuality.

Please contact the following people for answers to questions about the report written by the Life and Mission Agency:

- Stephen Allen, Associate Secretary of the Life and Mission Agency (Justice Ministries)
- Katharine Sisk, Program Coordinator, Justice Ministries
- The Rev. Ian Ross-McDonald, General Secretary of the Life and Mission Agency

Please contact the following people for answers to questions about polity and process:

- The Rev. Stephen Kendall, Principal Clerk of the General Assembly
- The Rev. Don Muir, Deputy Clerk of the General Assembly

What is in the Report of the Life and Mission Agency?

Paragraphs 1–4

The purpose of the Life and Mission Agency's report is to help the church faithfully discern the mind of Christ on matters of human sexuality. In gathering and listening to the ongoing discussion across the church, the Life and Mission Agency heard a constant call for a response to the overtures beginning with the Bible, as this is always the primary source for Christian reflection. *Living Faith* affirms that the Scriptures are "necessary, sufficient, and reliable, revealing Jesus Christ, the living word" and are "the rule of faith and life." (Section 5.1) Therefore, the Bible is where our report begins.

Paragraphs 5–13

First, there is an analysis of the only seven texts in the Old and New Testaments that mention same sex sexual activity; all of them prohibit it. The report notes that there are some significant matters of interpretation that must be attended to in reading these texts. Thorough Presbyterian scholarship is divided on how best to apply these seven texts to the church today.

Paragraphs 14–18

Then, using the Reformed principle that "Scripture interprets Scripture", the report pushes beyond these seven texts to consider others, which do not specifically mention homosexuality. These texts, which include the creation stories and Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce, have been identified by the broader church as important to the conversation about sexuality.

Paragraphs 19–24

Considerable attention is given in the report to Jesus' teaching on divorce because this is primarily where Jesus himself addresses marriage in the gospels. The report notes that Jesus actually intensifies the teaching about divorce found in the Law by forbidding it entirely, except in the book of Matthew where he allows for an exception in the case of adultery. Mark and Luke do not record this provision. It is also noted that all of Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce in the NT also forbid remarriage of those who have been divorced.

Paying careful attention to these teachings of Jesus and the pastoral practice of The Presbyterian Church in Canada opens a new window of insight into how the church can and does interpret the Bible. The Westminster Confession interprets and expands Jesus' teaching on divorce, providing another reason whereby divorce is permissible (abandonment as found in WC 24.6). *Living Faith* takes this conversation further, allowing for divorce when a marriage has been "shattered beyond repair." (Section 8.2.5) In spite of Jesus' clear teaching on divorce in the gospels, the pastoral practice of the PCC allows those who have been divorced for many reasons to be ministers, teach in the colleges, be elected as elders, moderate all courts of the church and to be re-married. As the church, we have discerned the mind of Christ on the pastoral issue of

divorce, using Biblical, confessional and contextual means. Taking time and care to consider how the church has wrestled with Biblical interpretation and the church's subordinate standards, such as the Westminster Confession, on the topic of divorce may shed light on our current conversations.

Paragraphs 25–29

The report continues with reflection on references to marriage in the letters of Paul and in Revelation, which have been invoked to support the definition of marriage between one man and one woman. This section touches on ways the metaphor of marriage has been used in the New Testament to help us think about Christ and the church and how they may be regarded in our current context.

Following the review of all of these Biblical texts, the report concludes that there is no one single infallible, uncomplicated, unquestionable answer to the question of same sex marriages.

Paragraphs 30–38

The report then turns directly to the 2016 General Assembly's request that we carefully consider Romans 14:1-13 as a lens for understanding the questions around human sexuality, inclusion, unity and diversity. In Paul's interaction with the early Christian church, we see a model and a way forward for faithful discernment, Christ-centered disagreement and life together as Christ's church.

Paragraphs 39–44

With the understanding that the Bible always points to Jesus Christ as the Living Word, the report goes on to explore the larger Biblical witness and the trajectory of the Gospel, which has guided the church in such practices as the condemnation of slavery and the ordination of women. It also reflects on how the church has responded pastorally to the reality of divorce, wherein the church neither encourages nor endorses divorce, but at the same time allows for and accommodates divorce and remarriage in the life of the church.

Having Discussions

Prayer

Presbyterians value education and the life of the mind and bringing to bear rigorous thought, intellectual curiosity and reason to matters of theology. At the same time, John Calvin and those who have followed in his thinking understand that all of those intellectual matters are also spiritual endeavours. That is, authentic study requires trust in and openness to movement of the Holy 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 discern 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—in word and action—as faithfully as possible. Prayer and study, worship and work go hand in hand.

Prayer will be important as groups plan and lead discussions. Below are some prayers that may be of some help to the group.

1. In the law and your prophets, O God,
you have revealed your will and desire for justice.
And in the life and ministry of Christ, we see
your love and grace incarnate.
Open our hearts and minds
by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit
as we pray as your church
"to be guided into truth knowing that such truth may disturb and judge us"¹
but always trusting that in
your truth we may find freedom and in
your will find peace;
"for with you is the fountain of life and in your light we see light"²
through Christ our Lord,
Amen.

¹ *Living Faith*

² *Psalms 36*

2. God of wisdom and the ages,
you have shown great and steadfast love
to your church as it has desired to walk towards you
in faithfulness,
in righteousness,
and in uprightness of heart.
And now, O God, we turn to you
for direction and guidance.
Give us understanding minds,
wisdom,
the gift of discernment,
and a strong sense of your presence.

3. Loving God,
Save us from our pride and arrogance
and put Christ's humility at the centre of our lives and discussions.
Open our hearts and minds to receive your counsel,
to seek your truth,
to receive your wisdom,
to see clearly,
and let our discernment be marked by
your light, truth and justice.

4. Give us wisdom that is
pure,
peaceful,
gentle,
reasonable,
full of mercy,
and that leads to good things for the sake of your church
and that extends your reign in the world.

5. God of all things and all places,
Guide our pathway as we seek your truths.
We do not look for the wisdom that leads to power or fortune
but the wisdom that leads to faith and love.
As we search for knowledge in study we pray
that you lead us to discover understanding.
Help us sift through all we read to find the gems of your kingdom.
And let all things be done for your glory.

6. Come, Holy Spirit,
Come source of light and the fountain of wisdom.
Come God of all people and places.
Shed light on our confusion and
dissipate the darknesses that cloud our perception.
Give us penetrating minds so we can understand more fully.
Give us retentive memories so that we can recall your goodness, blessings, and grace.
Give us open minds and hearts so that we can discern your will.
Through Jesus Christ, we pray.

Respectful conversations

The discussions the church is having about sex and sexuality are important. How we speak with one another, and how we listen to one another, is even more important. Profound care should always be taken to create a space marked by sensitivity and patience, and that is safe for people to ask questions and speak the truth of their lives and convictions. Debate is not the goal of these conversations and can create an unhelpful adversarial environment. Conversations about sensitive topics like sex and sexuality are profoundly pastoral—they happen where faith, flesh, the soul, Christ, and the community meet. Below are two resources that have been used in the church to help set pastoral covenants and boundaries to support respectful and safe discussions. It has been helpful when using guidelines like these to read them out loud as a group at the beginning of your conversations.

Covenantal pledges for discussions about issues of sexuality

Excerpted from Guidelines for Discussion produced by the Human Sexuality Task Force, The Anglican Diocese of Nova Scotia

- We expect that the full range of issues of human sexuality exists within the church;
- We acknowledge that gay and lesbian [bisexual, transgender, queer] persons (as well as members of other sexual minorities*) and members of their families are in the Church;
- We will always assume that gays or lesbians (or representatives of other sexual minorities*) are present;
- While we disagree on issues we will use language which respects the dignity of others;
- We will respect the right of people to ‘name’ themselves and their experience. (*
- If we ask a question, we will be prepared to respond to it ourselves;
- We will respect people’s privacy and confidentiality; (Footnote: (The CCD’s 1994 report says: “The right to acceptance and to privacy surely belongs to the homosexual person as much as to any other, and none should ever feel that there is a risk of exposure of their private lives in the church or elsewhere.”

- We will respect people's integrity as people of faith.
- *E.g., singles, seniors, otherly-abled, the sick, the dying, sexually abused, etc.

Listening circles group guidelines

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

- 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.
- 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."
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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?"
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

- 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.
- 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.” 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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Some questions and matters of discussion

The Life and Mission Agency is eager to receive, in any format, all responses from the church to the material that was sent for study and report by the General Assembly.

Please be sure to name your group on your submission, and provide the name and contact information of a person we can communicate with to clarify any questions that arise as we consider submissions from the church.

All responses will be shared by the LMA and the CCD.

The questions below are not exhaustive or meant to limit discussion. Rather, they are provided as a way of helping courts and colleges begin to have discussions.

- What about the LMA’s Biblical/theological response to the overtures is clarifying? What is challenging? What is distressing? What is encouraging?
- What does it mean to “discern the mind of Christ?” What kinds of things ought we consider in order to “discern the mind of Christ” on any topic, practice, or decision? (Some Scripture references that might help: Philippians 2:1–10 and 1 Corinthians 2:11–3:9)
- What additional Biblical texts, beyond those that specifically mention same-sex sexual activity, should be considered and studied 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?

- 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?
- Romans 14:1-13 shows us how Paul, as a leader of the church, helped a church community deal with differences in practice as they lived out their faith in Jesus Christ. The report goes on to say, "The questions about marriage and ordination in light of the discussion about sexuality that are being posed in The Presbyterian Church in Canada are questions about what it means to be a Christian in daily living and practice." How does Romans 14:1-13 help us think about how our denomination can deal with the disagreement about sexuality?
- How can the church foster dialogue to promote mutual listening, respect, and understanding on the topic of sexuality?
- Members of the PCC do not hold the same theological understanding of Baptism, Holy Communion, ordination, worship, the interpretation of the Bible, divorce, etc. And the members of the PCC will not reach a common understanding on the matters before it about human sexuality and sexual orientation.
 1. How do we accommodate these differences in the church now?
 2. What ways can the court or college suggest for how the church can maintain our unity and disagree on these matters.
- The report has a refrain that is meant to help us understand the complexity of the Scripture. This has sometimes been interpreted to mean that the Scripture is murky, convoluted and unhelpful but that is not the spirit of this refrain or report. The Holy Scripture is a library, a rich spiritual gift capable of helping us meet the challenges of a complex life that is always bringing new questions for church and society to work with.
 1. Discuss the ways in which the refrain resonates with you in your own understanding of the Bible and life situations.
 2. What do you appreciate about the refrain and how it functions in this report?
 3. What about it is not helpful?
- The report reflects on ways in which The Presbyterian Church in Canada has experienced the arc of the Gospel, sometimes following "courses of practice led by the Spirit that diverge from what is allowed and forbidden in some specific pieces of Scripture." How do you see the development of these practices (e.g., the church's stance on slavery, the ordination of women, or divorce) as insightful for the questions of sexuality before the church now?
- How do the participants in the discussion understand the discrepancies between the Bible's various teachings about divorce and the church's practice of allowing

for a pastoral exception that departs from some biblical teachings and allowing divorced people fill positions of leadership?

- What areas or topics were identified in your discussions that the church should explore and investigate further on the matter of sexuality?

Going forward, what specific suggestions does the court/college have for addressing the questions of sexuality (including marriage or ordination) before the church?

- Imagine what it might be like for the denomination to allow ministers and sessions to decide whether people of the same sex could be married in their sanctuary. And imagine what it might be like for each presbytery to decide whether to ordain or sustain a call to a minister in a same-sex legal union. In what ways would this help the church move forward? What questions or suggestions does your group have about this practice? (Keep in mind that all legalities in this scenario would be well thought through and worked out concerning the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.)
- How do the members of the discussion account for the different conclusions that Christians come to on this matter as they seek to make faithful discernments about this matter?
- Describe the diversity of opinion on this matter in the group.

Conclusion

Whether you choose to use the above questions or some other format, we hope that you will share your reflections and responses with us. We value, read, and desire all feedback as we seek to guide the church in faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ. Presbyterians have long been known for rigorous engagement of both clergy and lay people in matters of faith, theology, biblical interpretation, social justice, and cultivating discipleship through the life and practices of Christian people as a church and individually. Through prayer and study, respectful and informed conversation, and through sharing our experiences of God's work in our lives, we can continue to be a faithful witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ together, in agreement and disagreement.

The Report

SEXUALITY OVERTURES – LIFE AND MISSION AGENCY REPORTS

(A&P 2017, p. 542–48, 38)

Overture Nos. 4, 5, 15, 21, 23, 24, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33 and 35, 2015, and Nos. 13, 15 and 21, 2016 Re human sexuality

Biblical Reflection

1. The Bible is where we begin. “The scriptures are necessary, sufficient, and reliable, revealing Jesus Christ, the living word” and have “been given to us by the inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life”. They are “...the standard of all doctrine by which we must test any word that comes to us from church, world, or inner experience”. All this we receive under the guidance and teaching of the Holy Spirit and from the tradition of the church and we affirm in Living Faith (5.1).
2. As people who regard the authority of scripture as a cornerstone of our faith, it is essential to understand that while scripture is our only rule in life, we do not worship the Bible itself. Rather, we believe that the scripture points beyond itself to the living word, Jesus Christ. That living word is dynamic, continually illumined by the Holy Spirit (John 16:12–15). It is a living rule, interpreted by the faithful across many centuries, which stands under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
3. So often, we want scripture to offer straightforward, definitive and uniform answers, and when those answers do not appear in the way we wish they would, we can become discouraged. However, it is never faithful or appropriate to leave the Bible behind. Instead, we are invited to search more diligently and discover that scripture is in fact a rich, complex wealth of teaching and truth, which does not lend itself to easy or direct answers. And this truth about scripture is a blessing and gift to us. Scripture is a library and not a single volume. It models for us a discernment process of a living faith. The Bible itself shows us how one section or teaching is used to interpret others. The Bible demonstrates multiple voices conversing with one another about the nature and character of God, the ways in which God interacts with human beings, and how human beings ought to live with each other. God’s wisdom revealed in the Bible acknowledges that these dynamics change with time and circumstance.
4. So there is no question about where to begin. We begin with the Bible. The question is how we engage the Bible as we discern the mind of Christ on the subject of sexuality. The church has asked significant questions and must make important decisions about human relationships and about leadership in the church. Whenever such decisions are before us, as a denomination, we must ask questions such as “How do we understand scripture in this matter as we discern

the mind of Christ?” By referring overtures about sexuality and marriage to more than one body for response, the church has determined that this is a question best approached from more than one vantage point within the church. The Life and Mission Agency seeks to read scripture and ask “as a matter of biblical justice, how would Christ have his church think about sexuality and full inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ) people in the church today?” And also, “what is the scope of God’s intent for human beings to live in relationship to one another?”

5. Various sections of scripture have been invoked in consultation and in the feedback we received from the church as appropriate and helpful to this discussion. The topic of homosexuality itself is not a frequent matter of focus in the Bible.
6. In fact, there are only seven biblical texts that explicitly address same sex matters: Genesis 19:4–8, Judges 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:9–10. Each of these texts mentions same sex sexual acts and condemns such activity. Congregations and the courts, agencies and colleges of the church have been directed by the General Assembly to study this issue and there has been much academic investigation made into this issue in the last 30 years; study material is readily available. However, we will briefly review each of these scriptures in turn.
7. Genesis 19 and Judges 19 recount stories of men seeking to attack and gang rape foreign men, who are strangers in the city. Both stories counter the stated demand to rape the men with an offer to sexually abuse young women in exchange for this offence against strangers. Both of these stories, and particularly the story from Judges, are texts of and about violence.
8. Leviticus 18 and 20 are a part of the strands of scripture in the Levitical Law referred to as The Holiness Code. The law in Leviticus 18:22 states that a man lying with a man is an abomination. Leviticus 20:13 restates that such activity is an abomination and then calls for the men to be put to death via divinely sanctioned homicide; the text allows for the legal killing of men who engage in homosexual activity. These texts pose an interpretive dilemma for those who reject the death penalty in light of the Mosaic commandments against murder and Jesus’ teaching against killing. It raises the question of how the church can take at face value or as directly transferrable from that culture to our own the sentiments of one clause in a verse, but ignore the violence in the second clause of the same verse?
9. Romans 1:26–27 is the most widely cited text that condemns same sex sexual activity and the only text that includes a reference to women. We are left to speculate about the reasons why none of the other texts mention women. Among those reasons must surely be that the texts which address sexual activity

between two men are not only about sex or sexual laws, but are also about matters of power, honour/shame, as well as the social structures related to gender roles and codes of conduct embedded in the cultures from which these texts arise.

10. In this section of Paul's letter to the Romans, he is building toward the first piece of his theological argument that all people are sinners, who are reliant upon God's grace and redemption. This reference to men and women exchanging "natural intercourse" for "unnatural" is the conclusion of a discussion about idol worshippers and suggests idol or cultic practices. Knowing the context in which Paul writes is critical for understanding his reference to sex in this passage. Careful word study and historical critical investigation raises questions about the possibility that Paul is referring in this text to abusive practices of pederasty, cultic prostitution or the excessive sexual appetites driven by power-mongering members of the Roman imperial court. It can be argued that this text is not simply about homosexuality. In fact, we may minimize the significance and theological power of Paul's stinging and courageous ethical reproof about idolatry and various social activities by limiting its interpretation to only sexual attraction or activity between two people of the same sex.
11. In 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and in 1 Timothy 1:9–10, there are lists of offenders who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Included in this list are two Greek terms, which are notoriously difficult to translate. They have been rendered in major translations of the Bible (such as the King James Version, the Good News Bible, the New Revised Standard Version and the New International Version) as effeminate, or male prostitutes, or sodomites, or sexual perverts. The Greek terms raise many questions about whether they are referring to abusive sexual relationships or cultural norms (that effeminate characteristics are shameful, for example) or if these words are referring to the modern understanding of a homosexual person who lives out her understanding of her sexuality in a committed, mutual relationship with someone of the same sex.
12. These seven texts have also been thoroughly examined by Christian scholars who argue against same sex relationships, concluding that they contradict God's intentions for humanity, and also by Christian scholars who argue that same sex relationships can be appropriate expressions of love and intimacy between human beings. There are Presbyterian scholars (represented by Robert Gagnon¹, for example) who, through careful translation and rigorous biblical criticism, advocate that these texts offer a moral standard against same sex intimacy for all times and places. Likewise, there are other Presbyterian scholars (represented by Jack Rogers,² for example) who, through careful translation and rigorous biblical criticism, advocate that these texts represent moral standards and contain cultural references that are particular to and reflective of the culture and social constructs of ancient Israel and first century Palestine. The arguments of both groups of biblical scholars are thorough, faithful and sincere. Their disagreements of

interpretation involve how to translate appropriately from ancient languages (Hebrew and Greek) into English and how best to understand the social, historical, and religious context of each situation, which varies from the time before Christ into the first century after Christ.

13. The Reformed tradition often returns to the motto “faith seeking understanding”³ as one of the guides to piety. We place a high value on both the feeling and movement of the heart and the life of the mind in faithful devotion to God in the restless and unending search for God’s will. In other words, we worship and follow God using our hearts and souls, always informed by the insights yielded from careful study and thought as we use the gifts of intellect and reflection. The Reformed tradition holds fast to the call for both a well-educated clergy and an educated laity. Therefore, we look to and value biblical scholarship that faithfully and carefully considers how biblical critical methods help us understand how the Bible informs and shapes Christian living, church law, pastoral practices and devotion in every age. On the matter of sexuality, the faithful work of scholars and teaching elders has led to very different, even opposite, conclusions. This same variance in interpretation was reflected in the feedback Justice Ministries received from across the church. These seven texts have been referred to frequently in that feedback and many different conclusions were reached by those who communicated with Justice Ministries.
14. What that means for us is that the resolution of the issues of human sexuality before the church today is neither simple nor easy. There is no one single infallible, uncomplicated, unquestionable answer to be found in the examination of these seven texts. Therefore, we must look more deeply into the biblical text in search of greater understanding.
15. We understand that scripture interprets scripture. We also understand that there are texts that do not specifically mention a particular word or topic, but which must be considered as we discern the mind of Christ on that subject. Many of these other texts have been identified for us by Presbyterians in our discussion across the church. And so, our next step in trying to discern the mind of Christ for the church on the issue of human sexuality is to look to additional texts in the Bible that can help us.
16. The first texts we will review are the stories of creation found in Genesis chapters one and two that people in the denomination have invoked during the discussion of this matter in the church. It is important for us to remember that there is more than one story about creation in the Book of Genesis. We recall that Presbyterians have understood and accepted the work of biblical scholars who point to multiple writers and editors behind and within these stories, each with different, competing and complementary perspectives and purposes. The majority of Presbyterians have come to understand that the many different creation stories are not literal or scientific accounts of creation, but rather foundational stories and

poetic expressions that point to, among other things, truths about the relationship between human beings, and about the relationship between God and human beings. Certainly, these are highly condensed texts that do a number of things at once as they lay the groundwork for all that is to follow and while they gesture toward sexuality, these are not texts that are primarily about sexual relationships.

17. Therefore, when these creation stories are brought into conversation with the matter of human sexuality, the faithful work of biblical scholars has led them to a variety of conclusions. One school of thought discerns in the creation stories a template for sexual ethics exclusively between a male and a female, which includes certain unchangeable decrees that shape human life. These ordinances include the prototype for marriage, which hinges on the complementarity of a man and a woman. Another school of thought discerns in the creation stories an enduring recognition that both males and females are created in the image of God, with a profound need for relationship with God and with each other. In this second view, the creation narratives primarily illustrate the covenantal relationships with God and other human beings that God calls us to and is faithful to, even when we are not. It also leaves room for those covenantal relationships to be lived out between partners of the same sex.
18. What that means for us is that resolution of the issues of human sexuality before the church today is neither simple nor easy. There is no one single, infallible, uncomplicated, unquestionable answer to be found in the creation stories of the Bible. Therefore, we must look more deeply into the biblical text in search of greater understanding.
19. We now turn our focus to texts in the New Testament that Presbyterians have cited in the last two years in discussions about same sex marriage where the gospel writers record that Jesus invokes the creation stories in his conversation with Pharisees on the subject of divorce (Matthew 19:3–12; Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18). These texts have been summoned to prove that Jesus would not permit marriage to occur outside of the one man and one woman relationship. However, it is important to remember that these conversations are not primarily about marriage, but rather are about divorce. In all the versions of this conversation, Jesus prohibits divorce strictly and soundly, with only one exception – in the Gospel of Matthew – which allows for divorce only in the case of adultery. In addition, in all the texts that forbid divorce in the New Testament, the remarriage of those who have been divorced is also forbidden.
20. In the background of this conversation about divorce, Jesus is referring to the precarious situation of women and children and social responsibility towards them in the patriarchal society in which they live. In fact, in this situation, Jesus makes the existing law, which allowed a man to divorce his wife rather easily thereby leaving her in a highly vulnerable and often destitute situation in society, even stricter so that the application of the law is more just.

21. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has wrestled with texts containing Jesus' teaching on divorce in sophisticated and faithful ways before when it came to another complex decision about human relationships and about leadership in the church. At that time, through study and practice, the church discerned that while God always desires wholeness of relationship and fidelity, and while God always keeps covenant and expects human beings to do the same, there is a time and place for divorce in a variety of circumstances – far beyond what Jesus allows for in these specific discourses.
22. In the case of divorce, the church engaged with the scripture texts that explicitly prohibit divorce and sought to discern the mind of Christ in regard to human relationships and leadership in the church. We are reminded that the church concluded, in study and practice, that there is room in the church for divorced persons to diverge from Jesus' original teachings, remarry and enter into, or continue in, ordained leadership as teaching and ruling elders, be appointed to the General Assembly, and be elected to any office of the church, including Moderator of the General Assembly.⁴ So while Jesus engages with the creation stories, and while Jesus prohibits divorce in his particular context, we as disciples of Christ in the twenty-first century have discerned that the mind of Christ in our context is different from this particular conversation about a specific question that Jesus once had with religious leaders in the first century.
23. This raises the question of how Jesus deals with the law in his teachings. There is not a uniform 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, Jesus calls for absolute adherence to the law, or a stricter implementation of it as is the case with divorce (Matthew 5:31–32). In some cases, he expands the law in order to include not only one's actions but also one's motivation and inner character (Matthew 5:21–30). In other places, including when Jesus interprets laws regarding the Sabbath, he outright rejects interpretations of the law that stand in the way of a person's healing, well-being and restoration to an abundant life.⁵ Jesus' interpretation of the law is neither systematically applied nor consistent. There must surely be many reasons behind Jesus' handling of the law, among them are reasons of justice and how the law impacts the treatment of vulnerable human beings, as well as how human beings can best honour God.
24. What that means for us is that resolution of the issues of human sexuality before the church today is neither simple nor easy. There is no one single, uncomplicated, unquestionable answer to be found in Jesus' teachings on marriage and divorce in the gospels, nor in the way that Jesus deals with individual laws from the Mosaic tradition.
25. Throughout the discussions among Presbyterians on this topic over the past two years, questions have been raised about the broader literature of the New

Testament, wherein we find a simile that refers to the relationship between Christ and the church in the language of marriage. Jesus refers to himself as the bridegroom in one conversation recorded about the Pharisees and the practice of fasting (Mark 2:19–20, Luke 5:34–35 and Matthew 9:15). John the Baptist refers to Christ as the bridegroom and himself as the friend of the bridegroom (John 3:28–29). The wedding feast is a symbol of a future time of fulfillment, which will be a time of justice and abundance. In Revelation, there are references to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7) and to Jerusalem as “a bride adorned for her husband” (Revelation 21:2, 9). These references are embedded in apocalyptic literature.⁶

26. In addition, in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians 5:22–33, the relationship between Christ and the church is likened to the relationship between a husband and a wife. For Paul, the simile that Christ is to the church as a husband is to his wife, hinges on a concept of marriage where the female is subservient to the male, where the male is the head and ruler of the household, and where salvation comes through the husband to the wife.
27. Paul challenges some of the social norms of his day, such as calling on husbands to respect their wives and emphasizing mutuality. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has followed Paul’s trajectory and taken it further than Paul himself did. The Church brought texts that seem to relegate the equality of women into conversations with other texts, such as the ancient baptismal blessing in Galatians 3:28, where Paul says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”
28. Through discerning the mind of Christ, The Presbyterian Church in Canada now holds that men and women are equal – in marriage, in positions of leadership and authority in the church. This operative stance of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, which stands in contrast to the understandings of gender and marriage reflected in the household codes of the Pauline letters, has implications for the simile that hinges on them about the church as the bride of Christ and how we understand it. We are constantly looking, as Jesus did in parables, for situations in our own everyday context that can help us understand the relationship between God and us. In different contexts, we will need to employ different similes, which can accomplish that important work. When importing a simile from a different context, it becomes essential to notice the ways in which the simile still works and ways in which it no longer functions. Unless we are willing to assert that the church and Christ are equals, the simile of the church as the bride of Christ no longer functions in the same way in the twenty-first century as it did in the first century.
29. What that means for us is that resolution of the issues of human sexuality before the church today is neither simple nor easy. There is no one single,

uncomplicated, unquestionable answer to be found in either the household codes nor the similes and illustrative parables of Pauline literature or the apocalyptic literature of the New Testament.

30. In its wisdom, the 2016 General Assembly asked that the Life and Mission Agency (Justice Ministries) and the Committee on Church Doctrine “include in their study and examination of Overture Nos. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33 and 35, 2015, a consideration of Romans 14:1–13 as permission to recommend a dual or two-prong approach, in the interest of avoiding rupture of the denomination, as an option to these overtures.” (A&P 2016, p. 39) While Romans 14:1–13 does not speak specifically about sexuality, it is germane to the conversation both in subject matter and in context. Christian communities, who are seeking to work out faithful biblical practice and discern the mind of Christ as to how they ought to conduct their lives, have been around since the church was first formed. Their struggles to live in the spirit of Jesus Christ, and according to the will of God, serve as a model for all Christian communities.
31. In his letter to the Romans, Paul lays out a long, rich and complex set of theological arguments that requires thought, analysis and careful attention. However, in essence, Paul’s theological argument unfolds in this way: up to and including chapter 3, Paul establishes that we all fall short of the glory of God and are all sinners. In chapter 5, Paul establishes that, as sinners, we are only justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and can therefore have peace with God, others and ourselves. In chapters 6, 7 and 8, Paul makes it clear that as redeemed sinners there will be inner conflict as we discern the will and way of Christ, but also that neither that conflict, nor anything else on earth or beyond it, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. And out of love for his Jewish brothers and sisters, and respect for their long relationship with the God of the covenant, he argues in chapters 9, 10 and 11 that salvation is for Israel, and now by the extension of grace, includes the gentiles.
32. Then, in chapter 12, the tone and the purpose of the book takes a turn. This is signified, in part, by Paul’s switch to a new way of communicating. There is a new and obvious urgency in his tone; his sentences are shorter and the ideas more crisp in expression. The remaining chapters of the letter (12–16) focus on Christian practice. Here is the practical, which is born out of the theoretical. Paul is now talking about what it means to be a Christian in daily living and practice.
33. Right in the middle of this section about what it means to live as a faithful Christian, in chapter 14, Paul takes up the question about the role of food and spiritual practice (festival days). The consumption of meat in the first century is closely tied to the discussion of idolatry and the practice of eating meat sacrificed to idols.⁷ It is not as inconsequential a topic as it may seem to us in the twenty-first century. Paul uses the disagreement between people who do eat such meat

and people who do not to illustrate that people of faith will come to differing conclusions about what a faithful life that honours God looks like in daily practice. He leaves room for different conclusions and practices and calls upon all Christians to be fully convinced in their own minds about what they think is the most prayerful, faithful action considered within a community of faith (14:5). And then, Paul asks them all to refrain from judgement regarding a fellow Christian who comes to a different conclusion. The larger, binding conviction is that whatever we do, we do to the honour of the Lord (14:6).

34. The questions about marriage and ordination in light of the discussion about sexuality that are being posed in The Presbyterian Church in Canada are questions about what it means to be a Christian in daily living and practice. Marriage is not a sacrament in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. And Christians who are called into marriage do so not only to express covenantal love to another human being, but also to honour God. It is before the church to decide if this is true regardless of whether Christians make that covenant with a partner of the opposite sex or the same sex.
35. What that means for us is that while resolution of the issues of human sexuality before the church today is neither simple nor easy, the scriptures do offer a means by which we can discern the mind of Christ when faithful Christians come to differing conclusions about what they think is the most prayerful, faithful action considered within a community of faith and remain unified as a community of faith. Scripture is in fact a rich, complex wealth of teaching and truth, which does not lend itself to easy or direct answers, but it models for us how to discern the mind of Christ, even when we disagree in matters about how to live out the Christian faith in our bodies, in our relationships, and in our leadership. And this truth about scripture is a blessing and gift to us.
36. No doubt it is important that we carefully examine and seek to understand specific texts when it comes to the matter of human sexuality, and particularly same sex marriage and the giftedness of LGBTQ persons in same sex civil marriages for ordained leadership in the church. Here, we have looked at the seven texts that explicitly mention same sex relations, along with several other texts that are appropriate to this decision, as we seek to discern the mind of Christ on this matter.
37. No doubt there are many other scripture texts that can and should be examined for what they say or imply about how God thinks about intimate relations between humans, and about the nature of human love and sexuality. This response is not, and cannot be, exhaustive.
38. But, no doubt, there is something else which must be considered when examining the scriptures in order to discern the mind of Christ on a significant matter of human relationship and leadership in the church. There is more to our Bible than

just chapter and verse. The word of God is dynamic and living, not static and dead. It has movement and direction, within itself, and also beyond itself, as the story of God's people in the world continues to unfold. This can be understood as the trajectory or arc of the gospel. That also demands our attention.

39. There is a gospel arc throughout the scriptures that continually points toward God's irresistible and efficacious grace, the dignity, inclusion, worth and spiritual giftedness of all human beings, and abundant life found in those who follow Jesus Christ. The arc of the gospel is toward continued epiphany; we think of the non-Jewish magi drawn to the Christ child, and gentiles included in the covenant in spite of their rejection of the law. The arc of the gospel is towards liberation and new life as Jesus conquers sin and death and gathers to himself and his church those who had once inhabited the margins of society, a group populated by those who fell outside the holiness codes, such as lepers, eunuchs, Samaritans, and the unclean. The arc of the gospel is toward justice.⁸
40. The following are a few examples from the Bible where we can see the origins of this arc:
- God resolves never to destroy the whole earth in a flood ever again (Genesis 9:8–17), choosing to deal with humanity not by punitive measures but by covenant.
 - While Jesus deals with individual laws in radically different ways, he deals with the whole of the law in one, comprehensive way when he is asked which is the greatest commandment. Jesus responds with two commandments. "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 22:35–39). And in so choosing, Jesus says that "on these two commandments hang all the law and prophets" (Matthew 22:40). In all his interpretations of the law, Jesus promotes loving relationships. This is how all his various teachings about the law converge and what governs all his actions and further commandments. The arc of the gospel that bends towards justice is illustrated by how Jesus interprets individual laws through the supreme law of love, often bringing people from the outside into the centre of the conversation in acts of healing and restoration.⁹
 - In Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman, he denies her request to exorcize the demon that possesses her daughter because she is a gentile. But in a remarkable exchange, Jesus reverses his original response and extends grace to her and her daughter is made well (Matthew 15:21–28, Mark 7:24–30).
 - Peter is commissioned with continuing and expanding Christ's ministry of grace, as God persuades him that the Gentiles are to be included in the covenant as well (Acts 10:9–16).

- Paul extends this trajectory of the gospel in his own ministry as well, as he addresses communities in different contexts. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he speaks about the body of Christ and he says, “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:13) In his letter to the Galatians, Paul invokes the same inclusiveness, but this time he expands it, adding gender/sexuality to the categories of ethnicity and class. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) As questions arise in the community, Paul logically extends inclusion along the trajectory of grace.

41. This same gospel arc has led The Presbyterian Church in Canada to follow courses of practice led by the Spirit that diverge from what is allowed and forbidden in some specific pieces of scripture. In 1845, the Presbyterian Church of Canada Synod met in Cobourg and condemned slavery, and communicated its opposition to the practice to the Presbyterian Church (Old School) in the United States of America. This decision was a departure from the practices provided for in some scripture passages in the Old and New Testaments.¹⁰

42. Likewise, while some pericopes of scripture explicitly direct otherwise, The Presbyterian Church in Canada elected in 1966 to ordain and celebrate women in leadership and ministry as elders and members of kirk sessions. In the same year, the General Assembly also discerned that the Holy Spirit was calling the church to ordain women to the ministry of Word and Sacraments in contradiction to certain passages in the Bible restricting the role and leadership of women in society and the faith community. Over the years, the denomination has also struggled with the issue of divorce and the role of divorced people in the church. The church now allows, for pastoral reasons, an exception to the strict adherence to the teaching of Jesus about divorce and accommodates a practice that welcomes divorced persons to the Lord’s table, allows for subsequent re-marriages, and provides for the election and confirmation of divorced people in positions of significant leadership in the service to Christ and ministry in his church.

43. If the arc of the gospel incarnated in Christ and heard in his preaching and seen in his life and ministry is grace; if it bends towards justice; if it is loving, then we believe that the same arc of the gospel can permit the church to make additional pastoral accommodations to allow ministers to bless same sex marriages already performed by civil authorities. And we believe that there is room in the church for gifted leaders in same sex civil marriages to receive and answer the call of Christ to serve as ordained ministers of Word and Sacraments.

44. The God, who is revealed through the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, whose word becomes flesh in Jesus Christ, and who continually speaks through

the Holy Spirit, invites us to consider ways the church might faithfully and more fully include people in the LGBTQ community.

Endnote

¹ Robert A. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*. Abingdon Press, 2002, 2009.

² Jack Rogers, *Jesus, Bible and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

³ This motto, *fides quaerens intellectum*, originates with St. Anselm of Canterbury. Students of theology across North America will most readily hear its echo in the widely used textbook such as *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* by Daniel Migliore. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004.

⁴ See the *Social Action Handbook*, p. 23–26, for a summary of General Assembly statements and Living Faith 8.2.5.

⁵ In Matthew 5:33–37, Jesus overturns the law of oaths saying that swearing an oath is not necessary since one should always tell the truth. In Matthew 5:38–42, Jesus challenge the law of retaliation in Leviticus 24:20 by telling his disciples to turn the other cheek. For an example of how Jesus deals with the Sabbath, see Luke 6:1–10.

⁶ Apocalyptic literature is a particular kind of highly symbolic writing in both Jewish and Christian traditions. In the scriptures, classic examples of this writing are found in Daniel and Revelation.

⁷ Paul also takes up this discussion in 1 Corinthians 8:1–13. His reference to meat in this text is explicitly connected with food sacrificed to idols. While Paul does not make this direct reference in Romans 14, it can be reasonably deduced that the discussion of meat in Romans 14 is in connection with the same issue.

⁸ See Living Faith on Justice, section 8.4, Excerpts from this section include: God is always calling the church to seek that justice in the world which reflects the divine righteousness revealed in the Bible. (8.4.1) God's justice is seen when we deal fairly with each other and strive to change customs and practices that oppress and enslave others. (8.4.2) Justice involves protecting the rights of others. It protests against everything that destroys human dignity. (8.4.3) Justice opposes prejudice in every form. It rejects discrimination on such grounds as race, sex, age, status, or handicap. Justice stands with our neighbours in their struggle for dignity and respect and demands the exercise of power for the common good. (8.4.6)

⁹ Examples of this include the healing of the man with the withered hand, the healing of the woman bent over and Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman, among others.

¹⁰ The Presbyterian Church of Canada Synod, Resolutions on American Slavery, Cobourg, 1845, p. 51–53.