

## OVERTURES RE: HUMAN SEXUALITY TO THE 2015 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The 2015 Assembly was heavily overtured around the issue of human sexuality. There were 6 received (3 from Presbyteries, 3 from sessions), which asked for the Church to celebrate same sex marriages and allow for the ordination of practicing homosexuals. There were 15 received (3 from Presbyteries, 12 from sessions), which asked for the Church to uphold its current understanding that marriage is between one man and one woman, and that those engaged in homosexual practice are not conducting themselves in their public and private life in a manner that befits the gospel. There were also 4 overtures and one memorial which were what we might call "procedural" (4 from presbyteries 1 from a session). They encouraged a conversation in the church around human sexuality emphasizing values of listening, church unity and study of the biblical texts. The memorial reminded the Church that no change in policy on this matter could rightly be taken by declaratory act. The procedural overture from a session asked for an investigation into a gracious way for a denomination to dismiss a congregation which, on conscientious grounds, felt it could no longer stay within it.

All the overtures were referred to a joint committee with representatives from the Committee on Church Doctrine and the Life and Mission Agency (Justice Ministries) who would facilitate a process whereby Assembly could consider this whole constellation of issues. The salient recommendations of this facilitation committee which were passed by Assembly in amended form were one which enjoined the Church, its "congregations, sessions, presbyteries, synods and denominational committees...to engage in a year of prayerful conversation, discernment and bible study on the topics of human sexuality, sexual orientation and other related matters raised in the overtures" and another which invited "congregations, sessions, presbyteries, and synods to share the results of their conversations with both the Church Doctrine Committee and Life and Mission Agency (Justice Ministries) prior to March 31, 2016." The latter recommendation also enjoined "the Committee on Church Doctrine and the Life and Mission Agency (Justice Ministries) [to] prepare a joint study guide...to be posted on the church's website by the end of October 2015." The feedback date to the Church Doctrine Committee and Life and Mission Agency (Justice Ministries) has subsequently been pushed up to February 17th. The study guide has indeed been produced. It is called *Body, Mind and Spirit*, and is available on the church's website.

PSALT is also preparing a statement of what it wishes to affirm and what it sees as issues in the whole area of human sexuality. Meanwhile, our views can largely be gleaned from the overtures which were sent by "welcoming but not affirming" Presbyteries and sessions to the 2015 Assembly. Although there were 15 of them, one was subscribed by 2 Presbyteries and 8 sessions, and there were four others (one from a session endorsed by a Presbytery, and three from sessions). They are as follows:

### **Re: Affirming the Statement on Human Sexuality (1994)**

(Referred to Church Doctrine Committee, p. 268-73, 540, 46)

WHEREAS, the General Assembly has spoken thoughtfully, faithfully and pastorally on matters of human sexuality in its 1994 Statement on Human Sexuality, (A&P 1994, p. 30, 48, 56-63, 251-74); and

WHEREAS, The Presbyterian Church in Canada adopted Living Faith as a subordinate standard in 1998, which defines marriage as a "union in Christ" between "a man and a woman" (in continuity with the Westminster Confession of Faith, adopted in 1875 and 1889 and in confirmation of the Statement on Human Sexuality [A&P 1998, p. 42, 471; WCF XXIV.1 and Living Faith 8.2.3]); and

WHEREAS, the General Assembly in 2002 passed a recommendation “that, through the Clerks of Assembly, it be communicated to the Government of Canada and the provincial governments of Canada that The Presbyterian Church in Canada holds to the position that marriage is between one man and one woman and that this position is clearly stated in our church’s doctrinal standards” (A&P 2002, p. 21, 237); and

WHEREAS, the General Assemblies of 2003 and 2009 expressed their reservations about going in a direction affirmative of same-sex intimacy by (a) declining to commend the resource: “Listening...” to congregations and sessions for study (2003) and (b) declining to receive Overture No. 16, 2009 which sought to redefine marriage with respect to love and faithfulness rather than specifying its participants as “a man and a woman” (A&P 2003, p. 43, 545 and A&P 2009, p. 21, 526–67); and

WHEREAS, what has not changed in the past 20 years is the validity of the arguments advanced in the Statement on Human Sexuality, for example (a) the theological significance of gender complementarity, (b) the hermeneutical significance of the Bible’s consistent negativity toward same-gender intimacy (despite ancient awareness of the complex origins of homosexual identity, the diverse kinds of homosexual relationships, and the gospel’s mandate to include various previously excluded sin-neutral groups: Gentiles, women, slaves, etc), and (c) the pastoral significance of the testimonies to liberation and abundant life discovered through disciplined sexual faithfulness and participation in Christian community; and

WHEREAS, each of these trajectories of argument anticipated by the Statement on Human Sexuality have been helpfully developed in the intervening 20 years, by, for example (a) Christopher Roberts on the theology of gender complementary, answering the proposals of Eugene Rogers and James Brownson, (b) Robert Gagnon, William Webb and Bernadette Brooten on exegesis and hermeneutics of the relevant biblical texts, answering the proposals of Jack Rogers and William Stacy Johnson, and (c) Richard Hays, Wesley Hill and Rosaria Butterfield, answering the proposals of Chris Glaser and Jeffrey John; and

WHEREAS, what has changed in the past 20 years is the intensification of cultural and political pressure to regard same-sex intimacy (and other diverse forms of sexual identity and expression) as part of a normalized diversity; and

WHEREAS, what has also changed is the move by a particular kind of church/denomination (ie. northern hemisphere, wealthy, mainline, declining) toward acceptance of homosexual practice/relationships in regard to ordination and/or marriage; and

WHEREAS, the Holy Spirit (tethered to the Word, in Reformed theology) rarely corresponds with the Zeitgeist (the spirit of the age) but most often empowers the church to be truly prophetic in a counter-cultural mode; and

WHEREAS, the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of unity and is most surely grieved by such division as has occurred in the Anglican communion, the Church of Scotland, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and other denominations following the decision to extend ordination and marriage to practicing same sex partners, which has only weakened the church in its witness and mission; and

WHEREAS, the Holy Spirit creates a particular kind of multi-ethnic community which we cherish in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and which the present drive to normalize, and even to celebrate same sex relationships, risks destroying, since many Ghanaian, Korean, Cameroonian, Arabic, Taiwanese Presbyterians etc., find such discussion alien to their interests, exclusive of their voices, and a scandal to their understanding of the faith; and

WHEREAS, the pneumatology of the Statement on Human Sexuality with respect to the abovementioned matters of discernment, prophetic speaking and ecclesiastical unity is not particularly robust; and

WHEREAS, language of “inclusion” and “justice” is often incendiary, offensive and aggressively divisive in its suggestion that those who affirm the church’s teaching on human sexuality are somehow unjust, inhospitable and ultimately complicit in “deep spiritual harm” or “persecution” or “oppression” or “...killings” (see, for example, Overture No. 5. 2015 sent to this Assembly from the Presbytery of Waterloo-Wellington (p. 575–76) and the open letter posted at [pccforinclusion.org](http://pccforinclusion.org)), when such a spirit is the furthest thing from the heart of most non-affirming congregations and pastors in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and from the welcome experienced by homosexual persons worshipping in these congregations; and

WHEREAS, we admittedly have some ways to go in realizing the vision of the Statement on Human Sexuality for a church which repents of past antipathy to homosexuals, and offers an environment where unmarried persons (wherever they identify themselves on the straight to LGBTQ spectrum) may be transparent about their desires, and speak openly to the challenge of living sexually faithful lives in a generation where sexual gratification is idolatrously pursued as if it were the holy grail; and

WHEREAS, any change in the doctrine and practice of our church around the ordination and marriage of practicing homosexuals (as a political/justice issue simply), without close study of questions of exegesis, theology, polity and possible practical and pastoral fallout, would be a grave disservice to the church, and an unwarranted usurpation of the role of the committees of General Assembly under whose aegis these matters naturally fall; and

WHEREAS, any change in the doctrine and practice of our church around the ordination and marriage of practicing homosexuals, which would deem presbyteries competent to adjudicate in the matter, and lead to a diversity of practice across The Presbyterian Church in Canada, would fail to recognize the role of a General Assembly in “declaring truth” on an issue which relates directly to our understanding of the authority of scripture in the life of the church, and our understanding of the very God, who in scripture is revealed as both architect of this created order and powerful redeemer of those ensnared in all manner of sin; and

WHEREAS, any change in the doctrine and practice of our church around the ordination and marriage of practicing homosexuals by way of a declaratory act of one General Assembly is contrary to the law and practice of the church (which requires church-wide consultation through the Barrier Act), and would be a violation of the democratic impulse and virtue of balance enshrined in our Presbyterian polity;

THEREFORE, the Session of Kortright Church, Guelph, Ontario, humbly overtures the Venerable, the 141st General Assembly to prepare, through the Committee on Church Doctrine, an appendix to the Statement on Human Sexuality (1994) which affirms the original content/intent of that report, and which addresses current literature on the subject of same-sex intimacy and relationships, with particular attention to (a) what it means to be faithful to the Word, the Holy Spirit and the church’s prophetic vocation, in this particular cultural moment, (b) what it means concretely to form gospel communities which are truth-telling and love-embodiment, and where women and men, of whatever orientation or sex-history, may find that “fullness of life” which is promised as much to the unmarried, as to the married (Living Faith 8.2.2), and (c) what it means for a Presbyterian polity to navigate disunity in ways that are responsible to scripture, as our supreme standard, and to our vows at ordination; or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, may deem best.

**This overture was sent to Assembly by the Presbytery of Western Han-Ca and the Session of Innerkip, Ontario with the support of the Presbytery of Paris, and also by the sessions of Kortright Guelph, St. Andrew’s Arthur, Westminster-St. Paul’s Guelph, Essa Road Barrie, Ivy,**

**St. Andrew's Huntsville (Ontario), Bethel Riverview, and St. Andrew's Moncton (New Brunswick)**

**NO. 26 – SESSION OF ST. PAUL’S, SAULT STE. MARIE, ONTARIO**

**Re: Affirming the Statement on Human Sexuality (1994)**

(Referred to Church Doctrine Committee and Life and Mission Agency Committee (Justice Ministries), p. 248, 16)

WHEREAS, any change in the doctrine and practice of our church around the ordination and marriage of practicing homosexuals, which would deem presbyteries competent to adjudicate in the matter, and lead to a diversity of practice across The Presbyterian Church in Canada, would fail to recognize the role of a General Assembly in “declaring truth” on an issue which relates directly to our understanding of the authority of scripture in the life of the church, and our understanding of the very God, who in scripture is revealed as both architect of this created order, and powerful redeemer of those ensnared in all manner of sin; and

WHEREAS, any change in the doctrine and practice of our church around the ordination and marriage of practicing homosexuals by way of a declaratory act of one General Assembly is contrary to the law and practice of the church (which requires church-wide consultation through the Barrier Act), and would be a violation of the democratic impulse and virtue of balance enshrined in our Presbyterian polity;

THEREFORE, the Session of St. Paul’s Church, Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, humbly overtures the Venerable, the 141st General Assembly to prepare, through the Committee on Church Doctrine, an appendix to the Statement on Human Sexuality (1994) which affirms the original content/intent of that report, and which addresses current literature on the subject of same-sex intimacy and relationships, with particular attention to (a) what it means to be faithful to the Word, the Holy Spirit and the church’s prophetic vocation, in this particular cultural movement, (b) what it means concretely to form gospel communities which are truth-telling and love-embodiment, and where women and men, of whatever orientation or sex-history, may find that “fullness of life” which is promised as much to the unmarried, as to the married (Living Faith 8.2.2) and, (c) what it means for a Presbyterian polity to navigate disunity in ways that are responsible to scripture, as our supreme standard, and to our vows at ordination; or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, may deem best.

Transmitted by the Presbytery of Algoma and North Bay, with approval.

**NO. 31 – SESSION OF VALLEYVIEW COMMUNITY, CALGARY, ALBERTA**

**Re: Affirming the Statement on Human Sexuality (1994)**

(Referred to Church Doctrine Committee and Life and Mission Agency Committee (Justice Ministries), p. 248, 17)

WHEREAS, the Session of Valleyview Community Church, Calgary desires that those who identify themselves as LGBTQ be included in the life and ministry of the church through experiencing the conviction of the Holy Spirit for their sins, forgiveness in Jesus Christ, and the restoration of the image of God in their lives; and

WHEREAS, we wish to emphasize and clarify that this desire is not an attempt to exclude people from the church but an expression of concern to ensure that any efforts to include people in the church actually do so; and

WHEREAS, we acknowledge that for many who identify themselves as LGBTQ, the experience of growing up in, or seeking help from the church has not been a gracious, merciful, pastoral experience and there has been a great deal of pain and anger and some tragedy as a result; we are saddened by this reality and regret that it has been that way; and WHEREAS, some are responding to this situation by advocating that the church affirm same sex orientation and desire as normative and bless same-sex relationships as being according to God's intention and design; and

WHEREAS, we believe this response, though well intentioned, actually excludes people from the means by which one becomes a part of the body of Christ, and also, then how they would continue to function as a member of the body of Christ; and

WHEREAS, we understand that this response is based, in part, on revisionist interpretations of the scriptural prohibitions against same-sex behaviour and relationships; and

WHEREAS, these revisionist interpretations assert that such scriptural prohibitions apply only to same sex behaviour and relationships that are characterized by "violence or rape" or instances where actions are pursued which are not according to one's "nature"; and

WHEREAS, revisionist interpretations assert that scripture does not prohibit same sex behaviour and relationships which are based on love, respect and mutual consent and commitment; and

WHEREAS, we consider this qualification of same sex behaviour and relationships to be a theological statement which asserts that human efforts and abilities (e.g. how loving and how committed one can be) are the deciding factors in what determines what behaviours and lifestyles are righteous before God; and

WHEREAS, these determining factors for righteousness originate from ourselves, the implication is that our standing before God can be determined by self-righteousness, instead of the righteousness of Christ Jesus that is graciously imputed to us through the work of the Holy Spirit; and

WHEREAS, scripture reveals that it is only Christ's righteousness which can fulfill the requirements of being a faithful covenant partner with God, and outside of Christ's righteousness we are all considered to be unfaithful covenant partners and under the penalties of covenant violation; and

WHEREAS, we re-emphasize our prior concern that the response of affirming qualified same sex orientation, desire, activity and relationships as normative, though well intentioned, actually excludes those who identify as LGBTQ from full inclusion in Christ and his body; and

WHEREAS, our Lord Jesus instructed his disciples in John 15:4, and thus his church, and those who would become part of it, to "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."; and

WHEREAS, remaining in Jesus involves accepting and trusting in his righteousness to include us in his body and not our own works and qualities, and we bear fruit by responding in gratitude and reforming our lives and relationships in accordance with the righteousness of Christ that has been given to us; and

WHEREAS, Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh; the same Word which spoke the creation into existence and ordered its structure and continues to order and uphold its existence, the same Word which spoke the law to Moses; and the same Word that spoke to Israel through the prophets; and

WHEREAS, we acknowledge there is a harmony and continuation in the Word of God in creation, in the law, and in Jesus Christ, which not only prohibits same sex activity, but reveals that sexual relationships are intended to be consummated in a life-long marriage covenant between a man and woman; and

WHEREAS, we confess that each person, as affected by sin, must confront the contrast between their own orientation and desires and what being obedient to what God's word for marriage and sexuality would require of them; and

WHEREAS, the role of the church is to assist and encourage people as they seek to be obedient to God's word for marriage and sexuality, through an honest recognition and confession of how we all fail in this obedience, through extending grace and mercy and assurance of forgiveness in Christ, and surrounding each other in Christian community where we are held accountable to the sanctification the Holy Spirit desires to work in us;

THEREFORE, The Session of Valleyview Community Church, Calgary, Alberta, humbly overtures the Venerable, 141st General Assembly to affirm and uphold the 1994 Statement on Human Sexuality, or to do what the General Assembly, in its wisdom, may deem best. Transmitted by the Presbytery of Calgary-Macleod, without comment.

### **NO. 32 – SESSION OF GRACE, WEST HILL, TORONTO, ONTARIO**

#### **Re: To uphold marriage as between one man and one woman**

(Referred to Church Doctrine Committee and Life and Mission Agency Committee (Justice Ministries), p. 248, 17)

WHEREAS, all mankind is born with a sinful nature in which we all struggle throughout our lives (Romans 6–7); and

WHEREAS, our loving Heavenly Father, in his purpose to redeem creation unto himself, sent his son Jesus Christ to die for all sinners (1 Peter 3:18, Romans 6:10–11) and so to save us by his grace alone (Ephesians 2:8–9), because his love for us is too great to leave us in our sins (Romans 6:1–14); and

WHEREAS, we are commanded to repent of our sins (Matthew 4:17, 2 Peter 3:9) and that our Lord himself grants us the ability to repent (Acts 11:18, 2 Timothy 2:25); and

WHEREAS, as Christians we are called by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to influence society by being the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:13–16); and

WHEREAS, God's good plan for marriage between one man and one woman, as well as experiencing sexual intimacy, is clearly defined in his word (Genesis 2:24) and is repeated and reinforced in the New Testament by our Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 10:6–9, Matthew 19:4–5) and the apostolic writings (Ephesians 5:31), as are sexual sins, including homosexuality, (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10) and the consequences of sexual sin (1 Corinthians 6:18); and

WHEREAS, to willingly continue in behaviour from which our Lord has commanded us to abstain can only be seen as unrepentant sin and as such can only have damaging consequences to us as individuals, to society and to the church; and

WHEREAS, all ordained elders and ministers of the Word in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, as well as candidates for these offices, must uphold and be “bound only to Jesus Christ the church's king and head; the scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the written Word of God” and are “to follow no divisive course, but to seek the peace and unity of Christ among his people”;

THEREFORE, the Session of Grace Church, West Hill, Toronto, Ontario, humbly overtures the Venerable, the 141st General Assembly to: - continue, as a unified voice, to uphold our historic and biblical stance that marriage is designed by God as a holy covenant between one man and one woman exclusively, and

- encourage the faithful to lovingly care for all persons and, if any unrepentant sin is found within the Church, with all gentleness, humility and prayer correct that brother or sister until repentance is attained, for such is our calling from God, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, may deem best.

Transmitted by the Presbytery of Pickering, without comment.

### **NO. 33 – SESSION OF BRIDLEWOOD, TORONTO, ONTARIO**

#### **Re: Addressing issues of human sexuality**

(Referred to Church Doctrine Committee and Life and Mission Agency Committee (Justice Ministries), p. 248, 17)

WHEREAS, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has wisely provided the means by which concerns may be presented to its courts; and

WHEREAS, there is intent by some members and presbyteries to request the church's official affirmation of same sex intimacy, the ordination of practicing homosexuals, and the marriage of same sex couples; and

WHEREAS, such inclusive affirmation would be a flagrant denial of the church's historical position that scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and manners; and

WHEREAS, this historical position is supported by the principal subordinate standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter XXIV), and also by Living Faith (8.2.3); and

WHEREAS, all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (1 Timothy 3:16-17); and

WHEREAS, scripture clearly and repeatedly states that sexuality is a gift from God, and all sexual relations are to be confined to the marriage of a man and a woman – (all others being considered unnatural and immoral); and

WHEREAS, the eternal God of truth has declared that his word will stand forever (Isaiah 40:8), and no one is to add or subtract from it and reject its eternal relevance; and

WHEREAS, the Holy Spirit has been provided to the church so its members can be taught God's will and enabled to apply it in their daily living; and

WHEREAS, it is the Holy Spirit who unites believers to live harmoniously in accordance with the revealed will of God for the church, and this unity is based on truth not compromise; and

WHEREAS, all people are born with a sinful disposition, regardless of sexual orientation, and require the transforming power of God to bring abundant life, and power over temptations and weaknesses of many kinds; and

WHEREAS, anger, disrespect, and animosity within the church, aimed at those who hold opposing views, grieves a holy God, and ought not to be; and

WHEREAS, tolerance of others' beliefs and lifestyles, as promoted by human opinions and cultural norms – must never be the goal within the church, rather, compassion and justice must be based on principles in scripture; and

WHEREAS, as John Stott stated, "without the wholesome positive teaching of the Bible on sex and marriage, our perspective on the homosexual question is bound to be skewed" (*Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, p. 344); and

WHEREAS, scripture urges believers not to allow the world to squeeze them into its mould (Romans 12:1-2) by following the culture's standards and practices, but to regard their bodies as gifts to be used in God-honouring ways, in dependence on his power to live in single purity and married faithfulness; and

WHEREAS, challenging the authority of God and being proud of such defiance resulted in Satan's downfall, yet, as the father of lies (John 8:44) he continues to promote sin as a pleasure and a right, and to suggest God could not possibly say unreasonable things (Genesis 3); and

WHEREAS, the numerous and notable talents and resources of homosexuals in the church may be regarded as needed and useful, scripture declares "obedience is better than offerings" (1 Samuel 15:22), and it is the Holy Spirit who works through obedient servants; and

WHEREAS, the apostle Paul rejoiced to announce that former practicing homosexuals in the church in Corinth had renounced their immoral lifestyle and been transformed by the grace and power of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11), thus proving the possibility and reality of change not necessarily of orientation, but of obedience to God through his power in an individual; and

WHEREAS, the cost of discipleship may be very high and may involve pain, loneliness, ridicule, misunderstanding, etc., it is what God may allow therefore, the believer must be prepared to obey God and leave the consequences with him; and

WHEREAS, the church must strive to support members who do not practice in spite of their homosexual orientation, to do otherwise would only increase the hurt and exclusion caused by insensitive believers who judge the weaknesses of others while ignoring their own obvious or hidden faults; and

WHEREAS, God values each individual and does not have favourites, only intimates, nor does he categorize sins as humans tend to do, therefore the church needs prayerfully to focus on a holy God who condemns all sin and offers forgiveness and cleansing to all who truly repent; and

WHEREAS, a vital relationship with Christ is essential to deal with life's many challenges, and especially with the strong and emotional sexual issues regardless of one's orientation; and

WHEREAS, regular fervent prayer, and diligent study of scripture applied to daily living, and reliance on the Holy Spirit to instruct and empower, are the means by which believers can grow in grace to spiritual maturity and usefulness in the church; and

WHEREAS, society has rejected absolutes in favour of moral relativism and the church is in danger of doing likewise, thus creating a difficult and complex dilemma; and

WHEREAS, the Book of Forms section 292 states that the General Assembly "in general, adopts such measures as may tend to promote true godliness, to repress error and immorality, to preserve the unity of the church, and to advance the kingdom of Christ throughout the world";

THEREFORE, the Session of Bridlewood Church, Toronto, Ontario, humbly overtures the Venerable, the 141st General Assembly to call for strong support of biblical standards for faith and practice; repentance for sins against God and fellow believers; and prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit in all the discussions and decisions relating to this critical issue; or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, may deem best.

Transmitted by the Presbytery of Pickering, without comment.



These overtures are in dialogue with the three overtures, affirming of homosexual practice, which were sent to Assembly from the Presbyteries of East Toronto (and the session of St. Andrew's Barrie), Waterloo Wellington (and the sessions of St. Andrew's Kitchener and Duff's Puslinch) and Calgary MacLeod:

**NO. 4 – PRESBYTERY OF EAST TORONTO, NO. 30 -- SESSION OF ST. ANDREW'S, BARRIE, ONTARIO**

**Re: Full inclusion in the church of all persons regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity**

(Referred to Life and Mission Agency Committee, (Justice Ministries) p. 382-84, 541, 47)

WHEREAS, there is one true God whom to know is life eternal, and whom to serve is joy and peace (Living Faith 1.1) and the mystery of human existence is that we belong to God and have been made in the divine image (Living Faith 2.2.1); and

WHEREAS, the teachings of Jesus challenged the people of his time, and us today, to think critically about the exclusion of those previously considered unacceptable such as women (under certain conditions), lepers, eunuchs (a form of gender variance in Jesus' time, see Matthew 19:11), Gentiles and Samaritans; and

WHEREAS, we commit to seek to read the scriptures under the continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit; and

WHEREAS, The Presbyterian Church in Canada historically has been on the forefront of advocating for the decriminalization of same sex relationships and for full justice for all, out of our gospel conviction of equality for all (Galatians 3:28); and

WHEREAS, recent biblical scholarship within the Reformed tradition such as the work of Jack Rogers (*Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality*), Beverly Harrison (*Making the Connections*), James Brownson (*Bible, Gender, Sexuality*) and Chris Glaser (*Uncommon Calling*) has concluded that there are faithful ways of reading scripture that affirm Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT)\* people in committed relationships; and

WHEREAS, many LGBT people within The Presbyterian Church in Canada struggle with the ambiguity of their position within the church where an unresolved tension and inconsistency exists between who they experience themselves to be but, at the same time, being considered barred from living who they are, and required to be celibate not as a matter of choice but of rule; and

WHEREAS, the imposition of permanent involuntary celibacy even in ordained ministry was rejected during the Reformation; and

WHEREAS, ecumenical partners of The Presbyterian Church in Canada such as The Presbyterian Church (USA), the Anglican Church of Canada, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the United Church of Canada and the Church of Scotland have developed nuanced and affirming theological positions on matters of human sexuality and committed relationships in recent years; and

WHEREAS, the assessment of the scientific and medical communities as well as the recognition of The Presbyterian Church in Canada's statement on human sexuality is that sexual orientation and gender identity are not only a matter of choice or lifestyle, but also factors in place prior to birth; and

WHEREAS, The Presbyterian Church in Canada recognizes that homosexual orientation is not a sin (Social Action Handbook, p. 35), and

WHEREAS, it is 20 years (1994) since The Presbyterian Church in Canada adopted a statement on human sexuality, and twelve years (2003) since the reception and adoption of the report of the Special Committee re Sexual Orientation (A&P 2003, p. 526ff); and

WHEREAS, LGBT people are fully included in our Canadian society and discrimination based on real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity is prohibited throughout Canada in private and public sector employment, marriage, housing, services provided to the public and publicity, in part due to the historic justice advocacy of The Presbyterian Church in Canada; and

WHEREAS, more and more congregations and presbyteries of The Presbyterian Church in Canada recognize and celebrate the diversity of their membership with the inclusion of LGBT people in full participation in congregational activities and leadership and discern the fruit of the Spirit and a call from God in them and their relationships; and

WHEREAS, those who are living in, or who may live in a committed same sex relationship, feel called by God and show gifts for ministry to serve in ordained and diaconal ministries of The Presbyterian Church in Canada; and

WHEREAS, The Presbyterian Church in Canada consists of a diversity of people and perspectives that may vary on biblical interpretation and Christian praxis while maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3);

THEREFORE, the Presbytery of East Toronto humbly overtures the Venerable, the 141st General Assembly,

- to cease ecclesial discipline in the courts of the church against ordained ministers of Word and Sacraments, diaconal ministers, and elders where such discipline is based on such ministers and elders being in committed, faithful relationships with people of the same sex, and

- to prepare through the Life and Mission Agency of the General Assembly, in consultation with Justice Ministries a declaratory statement for the General Assembly that affirms that The Presbyterian Church in Canada is fully inclusive of every person regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity in all aspects of church life, including calling, designation, ordination, and marriage equality as a matter of justice and hospitality, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, may deem best.

(\*The term 'LGBT' is an acronym currently used to refer to people whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual and/or whose gender identity does not conform either to binary male/female categories or the 'assigned' gender at birth. While variations of the acronym exist to emphasize the spectrum that exists with respect to sexual orientation and gender identity, LGBT will be used for the purpose of this overture.)

**NO. 5 – PRESBYTERY OF WATERLOO-WELLINGTON, NO.24 -- SESSION OF ST. ANDREW'S KITCHENER, ONTARIO, NO. 35 -- SESSION OF DUFF'S PUSLINCH, ONTARIO,**

**Re: Full inclusion of all persons regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity**

(Referred to Life and Mission Agency Committee (Justice Ministries) and Church Doctrine Committee, p. 382–84 and 268–73, 541, 47)

WHEREAS, it is 20 years since The Presbyterian Church in Canada adopted a statement on human sexuality in 1994 (A&P 1994, p. 251ff); and

WHEREAS, it has been twelve years since the 2003 reception and adoption of the report of the Special Committee re Sexual Orientation (A&P 2003, p. 526ff); and

WHEREAS, the Special Committee on Sexual Orientation's recommendation that the Life and Mission Agency and the colleges of the church continue to study questions of human sexuality was adopted in 2003; and

WHEREAS, knowledge and the study of issues of human sexuality, both scripturally and scientifically, has changed significantly over the last 20 years; and

WHEREAS, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered (LGBT) people are fully included in our Canadian society and discrimination based on real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity is prohibited throughout Canada in private and public sector employment, marriage, housing, services provided to the public and publicity; and

WHEREAS, ecumenical partners of The Presbyterian Church in Canada such as the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Anglican Church of Canada, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the United Church of Canada and the Church of Scotland have developed nuanced and affirming theological positions on matters of human sexuality over this period; and

WHEREAS, more and more congregations of The Presbyterian Church in Canada recognize and celebrate the diversity of their membership with the inclusion of LGBT people in full participation in congregational activities and leadership; and

WHEREAS, many LGBT people within The Presbyterian Church in Canada struggle with the ambiguity of their position within the church and the lack of pastoral affirmation and hospitality they experience in light of the 1994 Report on Human Sexuality and its interpretation; and

WHEREAS, those who are living in, or who may live in a committed same sex relationship, feel called by God to serve as ordained ministers of The Presbyterian Church in Canada; and

WHEREAS, Christian organizations that used to seek to change people's sexual orientation such as Exodus International and New Direction Ministries have recognized and apologized for deep spiritual harm and psychological damage done to LGBT people by not affirming their innate sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity; and  
WHEREAS, in the residential school apology we confessed the "sin of trying to change someone's fundamental nature"; and  
WHEREAS, the assessment of the scientific and medical communities is that largely sexual orientation and gender identity is not a matter of choice or lifestyle, but a factor in place prior to birth; and  
WHEREAS, our Leading with Care Policy ensures that congregations, groups and organizations within The Presbyterian Church in Canada will ensure "a safe place for all"; and  
WHEREAS, the anti-LGBT stance of the Christian church in its many worldwide forms has resulted in approval of, or collaboration in, the persecution of LGBT persons, leading to verbal, psychological and physical assaults and killings; and  
WHEREAS, the teachings of Jesus require that acceptance and inclusiveness of oppressed or persecuted minorities is central to the gospel message;  
THEREFORE, the Presbytery of Waterloo-Wellington humbly overtures the Venerable, the 141st General Assembly to affirm that The Presbyterian Church in Canada is fully inclusive of every person regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity in all aspects of church life, calling and relationship as a matter of justice and hospitality; or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, may deem best.

#### **NO. 23 – PRESBYTERY OF CALGARY-MACLEOD, ALBERTA**

##### **Re: Gay and lesbian candidates for ministry and same-sex marriages**

(Referred to Church Doctrine Committee and Life and Mission Agency Committee (Justice Ministries), p. 248, 16)

WHEREAS, the Reformed tradition confesses salvation by grace alone through Christ alone, accepted by faith alone and not by any claim of human action or identity which makes some more acceptable to God than others; and

WHEREAS, we all hear God's call to live out our faith in God by following Jesus' commandment to love God with heart, mind, strength and soul and our neighbours as ourselves; and

WHEREAS, no one among us can ever live out Jesus' commandment perfectly and so we all stand together in need of God's mercy and forgiveness, whatever our sexual orientation; and

WHEREAS, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has sought to offer to all welcoming, respectful and safe communities in its congregations through the leadership and decisions of the General Assembly (i.e. the report of the Special Committee on Sexual Orientation [A&P, 2003, p. 526–47] and the Leading with Care Policy); and

WHEREAS, this intention is betrayed by the lack of welcome offered to at least some gay and lesbian members of our church through the resistance to recognize God's call to those who have gifts for the ministry of Word and Sacraments and through the inability to bless or marry same sex couples in committed relationships; and

WHEREAS, the General Assembly has allowed presbyteries and sessions the ability to discern calls to ministry, assessing the gifts and faith of candidates within their pastoral jurisdiction, and has also given sessions the responsibility to determine who appropriately is to be married with each congregation or pastoral charge; and

WHEREAS, The Presbyterian Church in Canada falls short of its calling to be a means of grace and to live out the love of God and neighbour we profess when it continues to deny

gay and lesbian members of our church the right and responsibility to participate fully in its ministries and also to withhold from them God's blessing and support in their relationships;

THEREFORE, the Presbytery of Calgary-Macleod humbly overtures the Venerable, the 141st General Assembly to prepare declaratory legislation which enables presbyteries and sessions to consider for certification gay and lesbian candidates for ministry and which enables sessions to give permission for the celebration of marriage for gay or lesbian couples who come under their pastoral care, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, may deem best.



Finally, these are the "Procedural" overtures:

**NO. 15 – PRESBYTERY OF PICKERING**

**Re: Calling the church to listen regarding human sexuality**

(Referred to Life and Mission Agency Committee (Justice Ministries) and Church Doctrine Committee, p. 268–73, 540, 46)

WHEREAS, the church is called to point others to God revealed in Jesus Christ; and  
WHEREAS, issues of human sexuality continue to be prominent in both the public sphere and a very real concern in the lives of the many individuals and congregations who, together, make up The Presbyterian Church in Canada; and  
WHEREAS, in the struggle to respond, the church, in obedience to scripture, is compelled to give voice to the biblical call to both do justice and love righteousness; and  
WHEREAS, the way to sound both those notes continues to be a matter over which there is a wide difference of opinion within the church; and  
WHEREAS, past efforts of our denomination to respond to issues of human sexuality have themselves issued a clear call for “listening” and have expressed the opinion that, should there be a “winner” in this continued conversation the only loser will be the church; and  
WHEREAS, an insistence on any one way of understanding and approaching these issues cannot help but be divisive, as evidenced the painful experience of numerous sister denominations in recent years; and  
WHEREAS, one of the strengths of our denomination has been our ability to accommodate a breadth of understanding and opinion as we wrestle together with what the Holy Spirit is saying to us in scripture; and  
WHEREAS, groups doing ministry in LGBTQ communities (e.g. New Directions) have shown a similar ability to accommodate a breadth of understanding on sexuality and gender identity as they fulfill our shared calling to point others to God revealed in Jesus Christ; and  
WHEREAS, the church can ill afford to see its resources divided and its unity fractured at such a time as this, when both the Assembly and our collective experience have told us that congregational health and vitality must be our primary concern; and  
WHEREAS, such a fracturing of the church would seem to be a denial of our Lord who calls us to speak the truth to one another in love and who prays that all his own might be one;  
THEREFORE, the Presbytery of Pickering humbly overtures the Venerable, the 141st General Assembly to engage the church in a fresh round of “listening” through (a) developing an intentional strategy within the church's congregations and courts where we can share stories and explore the scriptures, and (b) creating a safe space for this sharing by removing any possibility of church discipline for those who come forward with their stories, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, may deem best.

## **NO. 16 – PRESBYTERY OF OAK RIDGES**

### **Re: Encouraging dialogue on marriage and sexuality**

(Referred to Church Doctrine Committee, p. 268–73, 540, 46)

WHEREAS, the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, in accordance with its duty, “adopts such measures as may tend...to preserve the unity of the church” (Book of Forms section 292); and

WHEREAS, the issues of homosexuality and same-sex marriage are particularly controversial in both church and society; and

WHEREAS, denominations have been divided and damaged by adopting new policies on these issues, prior to establishing a strong consensus and common bond of understanding among their members; and

WHEREAS, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has the responsibility and opportunity to pursue a better course by working toward unity; and

WHEREAS, many within our denomination are currently unfamiliar with each other’s views and the official stance of The Presbyterian Church in Canada;

THEREFORE, the Presbytery of Oak Ridges humbly overtures the Venerable, the 141st General Assembly to pursue unity and consensus within the church by encouraging presbyteries to familiarize their congregations with relevant scriptures and the official documents of The Presbyterian Church in Canada pertaining to marriage and sexuality, and to create opportunities for respectful theological dialogue with emphasis placed on points of agreement, or to do otherwise, as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, may deem best.

## **NO. 29 – SESSION OF KNOX, ST. CATHARINES, ONTARIO**

### **Re: Review biblical texts that speak to homosexual relationships**

(Referred to Church Doctrine Committee and Life and Mission Agency Committee (Justice Ministries), p. 248, 17)

WHEREAS, we honour Jesus Christ as Lord of our church, and want to witness to his lordship in every area of life; and

WHEREAS, one significant area of life relates to our sexuality; and

WHEREAS, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, in the report of the Church Doctrine Committee adopted by the 118th General Assembly concluded that, “The church, in faithfulness to God speaking in the scriptures, will...call homosexual brothers and sisters in Christ to abstain from homosexual genital activity”; and

WHEREAS, some members of our denomination who are attracted to the same sex find such an ethical conclusion a hard but helpful discipline for their lives, while others of our denomination who are attracted to the same sex find such an ethical conclusion creates tension between their self-identity and desire for intimacy on the one hand, and their desire to be faithful Christian believers on the other; and

WHEREAS, our church acknowledges that our interpretation of scripture is fallible and thus in constant need of revision; and

WHEREAS, as Christians we want to be both true to scripture and to care for those who suffer for whatever reasons, including homosexual ones; and

WHEREAS, the weight of the objection to homosexual genital relationships in the 1992 Church Doctrine Committee report lay in the exegesis of the biblical texts that speak negatively of homosexuality; and

WHEREAS, the possibility of reversing the church’s teaching on this highly sensitive issue needs to be thoroughly examined;

THEREFORE, the Session of Knox Church, St. Catharines, Ontario, humbly overtures the Venerable, the 141st General Assembly to direct the Church Doctrine Committee to review how The Presbyterian Church in Canada has formerly addressed the issue of homosexual

relationships, and in particular to study the traditional exegesis of the biblical texts that speak to this issue, alongside the various revisionist readings of those texts that have been suggested in recent decades, so to prepare a report that will guide the church on this contentious issue, or to do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, may deem best.

Transmitted by the Presbytery of Niagara, with approval.

#### **NO. 37 – SESSION OF GRACE CHURCH, ORLEANS, ONTARIO**

##### **Re: Process for a congregation leaving the denomination**

(Referred to Clerks of Assembly in consultation with Trustee Board, Assembly Council, and Pension and Benefits Board, p. 249, 17)

WHEREAS, it is understood that the trustees of a local congregation hold the real property of a congregation in trust for that congregation; and

WHEREAS, the local congregation is the body which pays the mortgage, monthly bills, does the maintenance of the building and property, and over time invests all the time and energy into the maintenance of its witness in the community; and

WHEREAS, according to the current law and practice of the church upon dissolution of a congregation the real property and assets vest in the Trustee Board of The Presbyterian Church in Canada; and

WHEREAS, there is no present provision whereby a congregation dissenting from a majority decision within The Presbyterian Church in Canada can withdraw from The Presbyterian Church in Canada and expect to keep its property; and

WHEREAS, the potential for legal battles over property is likely to be lengthy, costly and a poor witness to the world; and

WHEREAS, other Reformed bodies including the Presbyterian Church (USA) have made allowance for “gracious dismissal” of dissenting congregations whereby the withdrawing congregations are able to retain the title to their property and assets; and

WHEREAS, the development of a gracious process to divide, dismiss, or dissolve churches in consultation with their members which exercises consistency, pastoral responsibility, transparency, and gracious witness should be our desire:

THEREFORE, the Session of Grace Church, Orleans, Ontario, humbly overtures the Venerable, the 141st General Assembly to consider establishing a means for “gracious dismissal” of congregations which might in good conscience be unable to accept changes in doctrine or discipline which depart from the historic confessional standards of the church, or do otherwise as the General Assembly, in its wisdom, may deem best.

Transmitted by the Presbytery of Ottawa, without comment.

#### **MEMORIALS – 2015**

##### **NO. 1 – PRESBYTERY OF MONTREAL**

##### **Re: Process re changes to church’s teaching on human sexuality**

(Referred to Clerks of Assembly re Declaratory Act and Committee on Church Doctrine and the Life and Mission Agency Committee (Justice Ministry), p. 249, 17)

WHEREAS, the past several months have seen informal debate, within some circles of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, on the church’s teaching on human sexuality and the narrower question of how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons should be welcomed within the life of the church; and

WHEREAS, some within the denomination wish to see a change in the church’s long-held teaching on human sexuality as this is outlined within the 1994 Report on Human Sexuality; and

WHEREAS, the denomination's historic belief and teaching concerning human sexuality is encapsulated in the statement of Living Faith (a subordinate standard adopted in 1998) that "Christian marriage is a union in Christ whereby a man and a woman become one in the sight of God"; and

WHEREAS, The Presbyterian Church in Canada is divided on the important question of precisely how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons should be welcomed within the life of the church; and

WHEREAS, at least two presbyteries have forwarded overtures to the 141st General Assembly asking for a change in the church's teaching and/or discipline in this area of church law and practice (which overtures were subsequently made public, on social media platforms, by various members of those presbyteries); and

WHEREAS, these overtures request that the 141st General Assembly simply declare (by way of a declaratory act) a change in the church's teaching and/or discipline in this area of church law and practice; and

WHEREAS, a declaratory act is a means by which a General Assembly may affirm "what it understands to be the law of the church regarding any particular matter," (Book of Forms section 293), and is not a means by which a General Assembly may change any such law; and

WHEREAS, "no prepared law or rule relative to matters of doctrine, discipline, government or worship" may be established by a declaratory act (Book of Forms section 293.1); and

WHEREAS, the General Assembly may make a change to the doctrine, discipline, government, or worship of the church only by way of the Barrier Act process which requires approval by a majority of presbyteries and by two General Assemblies; and

WHEREAS, the Barrier Act gives expression to deeply democratic impulses within Presbyterianism, and exists to prevent any minority within the church from enacting substantial changes to church law and discipline without wide discussion, consultation, and agreement; and

WHEREAS, the Barrier Act is intended to prevent the adoption of novel laws, practices, or standards without due and careful consideration; and

WHEREAS, any change in the areas of doctrine and discipline, on questions of human sexuality, without full consideration of related exegetical, theological and polity matters would be a grave disservice to the church and an unwarranted usurpation of the role of the committees of the General Assembly;

THEREFORE, the Presbytery of Montreal humbly memorializes the Venerable, the 141st General Assembly,

1. that the law and traditions of the church prevent it from establishing any change in the church's doctrine or discipline, on the questions of human sexuality referenced above, by way of a declaratory act,
2. that any request for such a change by way of a declaratory act is contrary both to the spirit and the letter of the church's law, and
3. that any such request for a change in the church's teaching and practice in the area of human sexuality are, if appropriately brought before the General Assembly, rightly referred to the Assembly's Committee on Church Doctrine (in consultation with other appropriate bodies); or, may interpret the law and traditions of the church otherwise, as the General Assembly may deem best.