

Unity in the Presbyterian Church in Canada Today
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Introduction: the reality of conflict in the church

The story is told of a young rabbi who found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service half the congregation stood for the prayers and the other half remained seated, with each side shouting at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did moved toward solving the impasse.

Finally in desperation the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's 90-year-old founder. He met the old rabbi in a nursing home and poured out his troubles. "So tell me, was it the tradition for the congregation to *stand* during prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Ah, then it was the tradition to *sit* during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Well, what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream."

"Ah," said the old man, "*that* was the tradition!"

Whenever two or more are gathered together, people will come down on different sides of an issue. There will be differences of opinion, painful interpersonal conflicts and tense theological debate. It's been that way since the beginning of the Christian church.

It was there in the churches the apostle Paul served. It was there in that very gifted, charismatic but doctrinally and morally confused church of Corinth, and it was there in the church in Philippi, where a very public disagreement between two prominent women was beginning to split the church. It was in the Galatian church with its temptation to revert to legalistic rule-keeping and it was in the Colossian church tempted to believe that salvation could be found in something other than Christ alone.

The churches addressed in the Johannine letters were dealing with the threat of Gnosticism; and almost all the seven churches in the province of Asia mentioned in the book of Revelation were dealing with controversies of one sort or another. So conflict within congregations and disagreements between different communities of faith is a central feature found right in the New Testament. Indeed Karl Barth once remarked that "There are no letters in the New Testament

apart from the problems of the church.”¹ And of course problems among God’s people didn’t stop with the apostles.

I don’t mean to make light of the very real impasse we are now face in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Our current theological debates are deadly serious, and have profound consequences for our congregations, our own ministries, and our denomination. We wouldn’t be here today if we didn’t believe that. But it’s helpful for us to remember that there has *never* been a pristine, pure time when the body of Christ had no doctrinal conflict or moral compromise or disagreement over which cultural values and practices we could or could not accommodate into our life together. “The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord,” as the old hymn puts it, but we live and work “mid toil and tribulation’ . . . by schisms rent asunder and heresies distressed.”² And so shall it always be this side of heaven.

I believe we are on the threshold of the greatest crisis within the PCC since 1925, and we face a season of intense, divisive conflict. The presenting issue, of course, is the attempt by some to change our church’s historic position on homosexual practice as it relates to God’s intent for marriage and for ordained leadership within the church. But the real issues we face are much deeper, relating to our views of biblical authority, hermeneutics and the very nature and function of theology. We are wrestling with radically divergent understandings of the inspiration and authority of the Bible. We are wrestling with seemingly incompatible hermeneutical approaches, of how to read and interpret Scripture for the life of the church in ways that are faithful to Scripture itself and in line with our doctrinal and confessional heritage as Reformed Christians. And we are wrestling with denominational structures and institutions that appear to have a profound case of theological amnesia, so that about the only thing that continues to hold us together is our form of church government but certainly not a common theology or a shared mission.

I will not be addressing these topics today. I’ve spoken on them at length at Chedoke Church in Hamilton last year and I’d be happy to share a copy of my remarks with you if you like. And we’ll be pondering these matters with our speakers Ephraim Radner, Bruxy Cavey, and Gene Haas, and with each other over the course of today and tomorrow. In our time together, I’d like to set the stage for what’s to come. First I want to briefly reiterate the PCC’s historic position on homosexual orientation and practice, so that we’re all on the same page. Then I’d like to review the state of things among other Reformed churches across the world. And finally, with a nod to the lessons we can learn from the experience of others, I’d like to posit three different scenarios of our future, and make a plea to guard the unity Christ has given us as we strive to embody the grace and truth of the gospel in these difficult days.

The PCC’s Historic Position on Homosexual Orientation and Practice³

¹ Earl Palmer, *Integrity in a World of Pretense: Insights from the Book of Philippians* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 86.

² “The Church’s One Foundation” (Samuel Stone, 1866).

³ Along with the Bible and our doctrinal standards the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Living Faith*, I would urge you to access two critical documents that summarize these matters much more fully than I can possibly do today. The first document is the *Statement on Human Sexuality*, approved by the General Assembly in 1994, which includes a section on homosexuality. The second document is a helpful summary of official church

So first, let me reiterate the PCC's historic position on homosexual orientation and practice, so that we clearly understand what our church professes to believe. Everything I share comes from official statements of our church from a variety of past General Assemblies, as recorded in the annual *Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada*.

- First, homosexual orientation is not a sin. The jury is still out, but a fair amount of scientific evidence suggests that sexual orientation is innate, established early in life, and not a matter of choice.⁴
- Second, the church does not limit the roles of its members on the basis of their sexual orientation. These roles include church school teachers, musicians, youth leaders, ruling elders, and ministers.⁵
- Third, we must oppose the form of hatred known as homophobia as vigorously as any other.⁶ Anger, hatred, and acts of denigration towards gay and lesbian people should not be tolerated within a congregation or the greater community.⁷
- Fourth, the church is called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supporting community, a true church family, where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported.⁸
- Fifth, Scripture does however treat homosexual practice as a departure from God's created order.⁹ It is a sign, among many others, of our fallenness.
- Sixth, neither scripture nor church prohibits ordination on the basis of the direction of one's sexual attraction to others, whether homosexual or heterosexual. But both scripture and church do, however, concern themselves with the proper and acceptable expression

actions and statements on these matters in the *Social Action Handbook*, which can be accessed online at our PCC website. At a more basic level, the following affirmations related to the PCC's teaching on sexuality in general are taken from the Board of Congregational Life's report on Human Sexuality. See *Acts and Proceedings 1987*, pp. 328-331.

- 1) Human sexuality is an integral part of our humanity and has emotional, physical, cognitive... spiritual, personal and social dimensions. Our sexuality permeates every aspect of our being. It is central to who we are as persons.
- 2) Sexual intercourse is an outward and visible expression of love and respect that provides a sense of mutual acceptance and support in the various experiences of life.
- 3) Marriage is the proper context for [such] sexual relationships. Sexual relationship in marriage is grounded in creation and affirmed by Jesus.
- 4) The values of mutuality and equality, inherent in marriage, require faithful monogamy.
- 5) Single people are called to abstinence from sexual intercourse.

⁴ *Acts and Proceedings* 2003, pp. 526-547, 26, 34, 37-41, 43-45. For a recent scientific challenge to this perspective, see <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/part-one-sexual-orientation-sexuality-and-gender>

⁵ *Acts and Proceedings* 2003, pp. 526-547, 26, 34, 37-41, 43-45.

⁶ *Acts and Proceedings* 1985, pp. 238-241.

⁷ *Acts and Proceedings* 2003, pp. 526-547, 26, 34, 37-41, 43-45.

⁸ *Acts and Proceedings* 1994, pp. 251-274.

⁹ *Acts and Proceedings* 1994, pp. 251-274.

of sexual attraction in sexual activity.¹⁰

- Seventh, a celibate homosexual may be ordained/designated as a minister under the present laws and practices of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.¹¹
- Finally however, the Presbyterian Church in Canada is not prepared to ordain self-avowed, practicing homosexuals or to allow public worship services blessing same-sex relationships.¹²

In its 1994 report, the Church Doctrine Committee wrestled with the question of whether a faithful, committed, homosexual relationship can ever be a faithful Christian option. After a reviewing the key biblical texts, the committee concludes – and I quote:

In the light of the biblical norm of the one flesh union of male and female, the Bible consistently rejects homosexual practice. . . . Is homosexual practice a Christian option? Our brief exegetical review of biblical texts set within a broader biblical perspective on our vocation as sexual beings leads us to say ‘No’. Committed heterosexual union is so connected with creation in both its unitive and procreative dimensions that we must consider this as central to God’s intention for human sexuality. Accordingly, Scripture treats all other contexts for sexual intercourse as departures from God’s created order....

These eight principles and conclusion summarize our church’s historic position on these matters. But as we all know, yesterday’s cultural consensus regarding appropriate expressions of human sexuality that once mirrored much of the PCC’s standards has drastically changed. Strong forces in Western culture are driving society’s attitude toward same-sex relationships and other gender and family-related issues in a very different direction.

The state of the discussion in Reformed churches worldwide

There are now 20 countries around the world that recognize so-called marriage equality, mostly but not exclusively in Western Europe and North America. On July 20, 2005, Canada became the first country outside Europe and the fourth country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage nationwide after the enactment of the Civil Marriage Act. In the United States of America, same-sex marriage has been legal nationwide since June 26, 2015, when the United States Supreme Court ruled that state-level bans on same-sex marriage are unconstitutional.¹³

These rapidly changing attitudes toward homosexuality and larger issues concerning gender identity, marriage and cohabitation, and the definition of family have become a collective cultural tsunami that has left many Christians feeling adrift or in conflict with their own culture in ways that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

¹⁰ *Acts and Proceedings* 1998, p. 474.

¹¹ *Acts and Proceedings* 1995, p. 435.

¹² *Acts and Proceedings* 1995, p. 435.

¹³ “The Freedom to Marry Internationally,” <http://www.whymarriagematters.org/landscape/entry/c/international>

But not all Christians feel this way, it must be said. There are numerous voices within the Christian community who are welcoming these changes, and are embracing – in one form or another – many of the values espoused by this movement toward the normalization of alternative forms of sexual expression and family life. We must be careful here not to paint with too broad a brush, for there are many shades of opinion on these matters among those who favour these cultural shifts – just as there are differing understandings and approaches among those of us who are attempting to resist this change.

But we must acknowledge that some of our brothers and sisters within the larger Christian community, and a significant faction within our fellow Presbyterian and Reformed church family have moved in this direction. And it is leaving fractures and division within its wake.

Let's begin here in **North America**. Many Reformed denominations continue to maintain the historic Christian position, including the Christian Reformed Church, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA); the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) and the newly created Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO). The latter three of these bodies all emerged out of the mainline Presbyterian church over the last four decades, and all are growing, now totalling some 650,000 members between them. Add in the membership of the Cumberland Presbyterians, the Christian Reformed Church, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Korean Presbyterian Church in America and the Korean American Presbyterian Church – all of whom oppose gay ordination and same sex marriage -- and that makes a Reformed witness of well over one million members.

Some groups, like the Reformed Church in America and our own Presbyterian Church in Canada, continue to maintain the historic Christian position but are under severe pressure to modify their stance.

Numerous mainline churches within the Reformed family, including the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ, and the United Church of Canada, have moved to affirm the ordination of LGBT persons in same-sex relationships, and have changed their practice to permit same-sex marriages. In a remarkably frank report written by the PC(USA)'s Office of Theology and Worship, summarizes the current policy as follows:

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in recent decisions on ordination and same-gender marriage, is attempting to map a challenging way forward. We have decided not to declare *as a denomination* whether same-gender sexual relationships are (under certain conditions: marriage or some form of clear commitment) to be regarded as faithful and holy. We have set ourselves on this way twice: regarding ordination and regarding marriage. This means our denomination grants the legitimacy and Christian faithfulness of directly opposing views of what Jesus Christ calls us to in one of the basic elements of human life. As far as our denomination is concerned, it is equally faithful to proclaim that God calls Christians to sexual relationship in the context of the marriage of a man and a woman or to proclaim that God calls Christians to sexual relationship in the context of the marriage of two people, regardless of their gender.... *As a denomination* we have no uniform standard for ordination with regard to sexual relationship. We affirm that it is

equally appropriate for the councils of the church to apply different, even opposing, standards in this area.¹⁴

This is a remarkable statement on a number of levels, acknowledging the difficult road of struggling how to live together with mutually contradictory theological positions on matters of great importance, but I'd like to concentrate on one particular issue: this decision has resulted in a massive hemorrhage of church members. When I was ordained in the PC(USA) in 1983, there were over 3.1 million members. By 2016, that number has shrunk now to under 1.5 million members, including the loss of almost 400,000 members since 2012, the year ordination and marriage standards were changed.¹⁵ And it's not just attrition and lack of evangelistic passion that is fueling the decline. In the last four years, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has seen more than 656 congregations depart for other denominations in the last five years, virtually all of them leaving for the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and ECO.¹⁶

This story is very painful to me personally because I have old friends and colleagues who have left the PC(USA), including my home congregation where I was ordained, the First Presbyterian Church in Seattle; and others who have remained, including my parent's congregation, a large and vital congregation near Portland, Oregon. And this involuntary separation between fellow evangelicals over matters of church doctrine and polity is painful to watch, even from a distance. Some have left, and others have stayed.

In the **majority world**, where the church is growing rapidly across Latin America, Africa and Asia, the vast majority of Presbyterian and Reformed churches ban the ordination of LGBT clergy or the validity of same-sex marriage because they view the practice of homosexuality to be incompatible with Biblical teaching and traditional Christian morality. The only exception to this is in South Africa, where the Dutch Reformed Church is engaged in the same debate as we are here in the PCC. And lest we downplay the significance of our majority world brethren in this matter, let's remember that the Presbyterian Church in East Africa alone, with its 4 million members, ranks far larger than all Presbyterian and Reformed churches in North America put together. The National Presbyterian Church in Mexico is double the size of the once-mighty PC(USA). The Presbyterian Church in Cameroon is more than ten times the size of our PCC, despite having a population much smaller than Canada's. The Mizoram Presbyterian Church in the tribal regions of northeast India claims 600,000 members. And on I could go. So when we speak of the bulk of people who call themselves Presbyterian and Reformed today, let's remind ourselves that we're more likely to be speaking Spanish or Korean or Swahili than English or Dutch or German. And that trend will only accelerate as we continue through the rest of the 21st century. And our majority world brothers and sisters are resolutely conservative on these issues.

¹⁴ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/theology-and-worship/our-challenging-way-faithfulness-sex-ordination-and-marriage/#introduction>

¹⁵ <https://www.layman.org/pcusa-2015-membership-loss-95107/>

¹⁶ <https://www.layman.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/churches-seeking-discernment.pdf>

In **Western Europe**, the situation is almost the reverse. Most denominations affiliated with the Reformed tradition in France, Germany, Holland, Switzerland and Italy allow for gay ordination and the blessing of same-sex couples, although there remains strong resistance to these trends among more conservative segments of all these Reformed denominations, and this is particularly so in Holland with its many small Reformed families of churches. Without exception, they are in numerical decline.

In the **British Isles**, the situation is mixed. The Free Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland has retained a traditional stand on these matters, the latter declaring at its most recent General Assembly that all marriage ceremonies must include an explicit statement that such a union can only be between a man and a woman.¹⁷ But in both the United Reformed Church – the old Presbyterian Church in England and Wales – as well as the Church of Scotland, the situation is more complex. Both denominations have given congregations and local kirk sessions a local option on these matters, and this requires a bit more explanation, as it appears to be one of the recommendations that is coming to our own General Assembly in Kingston next month.

Debate within the Church of Scotland on these matters has been going on for about 10 years, beginning with conflict over the call to the Rev. Scott Rennie, a minister in a homosexual partnership, to serve at Queen’s Cross Church in Aberdeen. The 2009 Scottish General Assembly set up a Special Commission on Same-Sex Relationships and the Ministry, with the task of “examining whether the church should permit ministers to bless same-sex relationships involving life-long commitment, and whether the church’s ministry of Word and Sacrament should be open to those who have entered into a civil partnership.”¹⁸ In a subsequent report in 2011, it was noted how delicate for the unity of the church this issue of same-sex relationships and the ministry was, including the comment that while most people wished to remain a part of the Church of Scotland, there were “significant minorities at either end of the spectrum of views who would consider leaving the church if it were to decide the question... in a way which was contrary to their views.”¹⁹

Discussion of these matters continued over the years, up to the General Assembly in 2013. At that assembly there were two options presented for adoption by the church; the **revisionist** option, arguing that the church had been on a ‘trajectory’ which allowed people in same-sex relationships to serve in any role within the church, including the ministry of word and sacrament, but allowing for freedom of conscience for those churches and ministers who could not agree to the change; and a **traditionalist** option, affirming the historic position of the church that sexual activity was only permissible within heterosexual marriage, and those involved in other forms of sexual activity should not be ministers, nor should there be the blessing of same-sex unions provided by the church.²⁰

¹⁷ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/presbyterian-marriage-ceremonies-must-renoounce-same-sex-unions-1.2677522>

¹⁸ Johnston McKay, “The General Assembly of 2015,” *Theology in Scotland* 22:2 (2015), 59. This article is a superb description of recent events in the Church of Scotland by the former Editor for Religious Broadcasting of BBC Scotland.

¹⁹ McKay, 60.

²⁰ McKay, 62.

This either/or choice was deeply challenging for many, and a former Moderator, a self-confessed traditionalist on sexuality, put forth a third option which was eventually approved. It argued that the Church of Scotland affirm the traditional view of the church that marriage is between a man and a woman, but that local congregations, through their Sessions, be permitted to call ministers in a covenanted same-sex relationship and be allowed to bless same-sex relationships without fear of discipline.

One can argue that this is a muddled compromise that made no one happy. But it was carried, in large measure, due to the argument put forth by Professor David Fergusson of Edinburgh, who argued for a “mixed economy” model, as the only way the two factions within the Church of Scotland could continue to work together despite their profound differences.

The rationale was made as follows: for the sake of the unity of the church, the Church of Scotland would avoid changing its historic “default” understanding of Christian marriage and sexuality, but “was willing to accommodate a constrained diversity on the appointment of gay ministers in a civil partnership.” Parallels were drawn to previous pastoral accommodations on divergent belief and practice that the church had made regarding the re-marriage of divorced persons, liberty regarding the practice of baptism, and freedom in interpreting certain sections of the Westminster Confession. “In each case,” it was argued, “the Church of Scotland opted to maintain a traditional ‘default’ position but nevertheless to accommodate a greater diversity in belief and practice.” These concessions can rightly be criticized as logically incoherent; yet it provided a way of remaining together in a time of theological division.²¹

In 2015, after sending down the matter under the Church of Scotland’s Barrier Act to the presbyteries for approval or disapproval, this new model of constrained diversity became the law of the church, with 31 out of 45 presbyteries approving the proposal, although the vote of individual members of Presbyteries was considerably narrower – 1381 for and 1161 against.²²

Evangelicals in the Church of Scotland have responded to these changes in one of three ways:

Some congregations and ministers have left the Kirk and affiliated with the Free Church or have become independent congregations, including numerous churches in the Highlands and Islands, and most notably the great St. George’s Tron Church in the heart of Glasgow, Gilcomston South Church in Aberdeen, the centre of a long, vital preaching ministry to university students under Rev. William Still, and three of the larger congregations in Edinburgh.

Others have stayed to work for change within the Kirk, banding together to form what is called the “Covenant Fellowship,” whose stated intention is to seek “the reformation and renewal of the Church of Scotland, in accordance with the Word of God and by the empowering of his life-giving Spirit.”²³ It is led by the Rev. Dr. Andrew McGowan, Minister of Inverness East Church and Honorary Professor of Reformed Doctrine at the University of Aberdeen.

²¹ McKay, 63-64.

²² McKay, 66.

²³ <http://www.covenantfellowshipscotland.com>

And there is another group, the Church of Scotland Evangelical Network, whose intent is to promote and encourage an evangelical theological position in the larger national church. It is less concerned with overturning recent decisions by the General Assembly than in providing a theological home for evangelicals who want to focus on evangelism, discipleship and church renewal. This is the position of the renowned preacher Eric Alexander, former minister at the Tron Church.

In effect, the conservative wing of the Kirk has fragmented into three distinct groupings. And this is the same basic pattern that has emerged over recent events in the PC(USA); some churches leaving to the EPC or ECO; and others staying within the PC(USA), and finding a network within either the Presbyterian Lay Committee or the more moderate Fellowship Community.

I have taken the time to narrate this matter in such detail because it bears striking similarity to the journey our own Presbyterian Church in Canada seems to be taking – and if you have read the newly published Church Doctrine Report for this year’s General Assembly,²⁴ you will note that the three options suggested by the committee in its “Where From Here?” section, are nearly an exact replica of the options that the Church of Scotland has wrestled with over the last decade. And perhaps the fragmentation of the conservative stream into three different groups in both Scotland and the USA is a sign of what’s to come for us in Canada.

Lessons from history and scenarios for the future

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul urges the believers to “*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*” (Eph. 4.3). But that’s easier said than done. As Protestant Christians, and as Presbyterians in particular, we do not have a very good track record when it comes working through our differences in theology and practice in a manner that fulfills the apostle’s admonition.

My own American denomination has split at various times over revivalism into Old School and New School factions; over slavery into northern and southern churches; at the time of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy over the boundaries of orthodoxy in relation to the Westminster Confession of Faith; and now in our day over issues of sexuality and church leadership. And a moment of reckoning is now looming on the horizon of the PCC.

I perceive three different scenarios that may play themselves out in the coming years as we wrestle with these matters. Each option is problematic and has advantages and disadvantages.²⁵

²⁴ See the *Book of Reports for the 2017 General Assembly*, 20.1.59-62. It can be accessed at <http://presbyterian.ca/2017/05/04/book-reports-2017-general-assembly-now-available/>

²⁵ I will use some categories and descriptions here that comes from an article on similar tensions within the United Methodist Church. See G. Jeffrey MacDonald, “The Methodists After Unity: Will the UMC Split or Restructure?” *The Christian Century* 133:24 (2016), 28-31.

First, **we can strive for victory**. Over the last two decades we have witnessed numerous denominations battling it out at their annual meetings in which one side seeks to triumph legislatively or procedurally over the other. While genuine theological debate is normal and healthy, the life and energy of the church is diminished when it remains in a state of "perpetual war." Our collective energies go to winning the next round, but Christ's larger mission inevitably suffers.

But let's assume that existing bans on the ordination of practicing gay persons and on same-sex marriage *could* be upheld, and that the courts of the church and our theological colleges and our denominational leadership *will* truly enforce these policies. (That's a big stretch!) Do we have the patience and energy to explain and defend our position with those who disagree with us within the courts of the church? And do we as a denomination – having settled the matter - have the fortitude to exercise church discipline and potentially expel a significant portion of our clergy and congregations who may continue to defy and resist the mind of the church on this issue? I don't know.

Second, **we can divorce** (but probably not amicably). One side or the other could choose to leave the PCC. This is what has happened in the PC(USA), where hundreds of evangelical congregations – many of them large and influential - have left the denomination in the past five years. We could go down this road of division. Indeed this seems to be the gist of the "gracious dismissal" overtures that are coming to Assembly from many of our churches. There is a certain relief and attractiveness to this option. Breaking out of an unhealthy, dysfunctional relationship can be worth the pain. For the sake of getting on with Christ's mission, it might even be within the permissive will of God. But I am loathe to further fragment the body of Christ, because the unity of the church is just as important as its purity.

As I was pondering this topic, I came across a blog reflecting on denominational division by a theologian named John Newton. Let me read a portion of his blog as he pondered the recent conflict in Scotland that we've been talking about. I think it has something to say to us in Canada. John writes:

So is this division in the Church of Scotland *good*? In many ways, yes. The COS is being forced to deal with the very relevant issue of homosexuality and must examine what it believes. And a large group has taken a stand for orthodoxy (historical truth). Both of these are good. And, personally, I hope that out of this a new fire will ignite in Scotland for searching for truth and finding it in God's Word. Maybe these dissenting churches will form the nucleus for spiritual change that sweeps the country and sees younger generations seeking the Lord and finding Him, with young believers fellowshiping with one another in love and unity.

Is it *bad*? For the Church of Scotland, yes. Any time a denomination splits it grows weaker. And with church involvement on a steady decline in Scotland, a church split certainly would not be very welcome. Division that becomes public also hurts the church's witness to the communities around it. In an age where Christians are fighting to remind Scots that Christ is real and worth following, division hurts the cause.

But can good come from the bad? Our God has a track record of bringing forth just that result. This is where trust comes into play. Stand for truth and, despite the immediate pain, let God work out the details.

I write this as someone wanting the church in Scotland to be united behind biblical truth and on mission for the Lord. The more fractured we are, the harder it is to shine the light of Jesus Christ into the dark places. But we must be cognizant of maintaining truth.... Pray for unity but stand for truth. Gracefully. In love.²⁶

I think we can echo much of what John Newton writes here for our own situation in the PCC. We feel torn of course, because there's no easy answer. Striving to balance the unity and the holiness of the church, trying to hold the grace and truth of the gospel, is always difficult and particularly so in our day with the issues we face. But as I close let me speak about a third way.

We can acquiesce to the “local option” model, allowing for greater diversity of belief and practice on issues of homosexuality. In other words, we could move in the direction the Church of Scotland has taken, and try to live together while disagreeing on these matters. This scenario may be the most challenging way of all. We could agree to affirm our church's historic doctrine and practice regarding matters of human sexuality but give permission to individual ministers and church sessions who wish to depart from the church's stance the freedom to do so without fear of church discipline, appealing to the principle of freedom of conscience in these matters. Providing a “local option” within every congregation and session would mean that as a denomination, we would agree to disagree with one another, and remain together despite our profound differences. This would preserve a semblance of unity in the PCC, at least for the short term.

But can the PCC live with two substantially different visions of God's intent for humanity and for what best contributes to human flourishing? Is this approach sustainable in the long term, or does it merely prolong the pain? Is this a wise compromise, or does it deny the heart of our Presbyterian polity and turn us into Congregationalists, where each session and congregation and minister does what is right in their own eyes? As one observer put it:

A church that's of two minds on sexual ethics might not be one worth preserving, especially since progressives regard the local option only a stepping-stone to eventual churchwide support for same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBT people.²⁷

In this scenario, neither viewpoint “wins.” To some, we will be undermining Scripture and condoning sin. To others, we would be perpetuating an injustice by compelling the whole church to change. But it *might* provide a witness to the world that the unity we have in Christ outweighs our diversity on this important – but not all-important - subject.

If we take the unity of the church seriously, we should soberly ponder this option. As Latin American theologian Rene Padilla has written:

²⁶ <https://johnnewton.wordpress.com/2012/06/23/can-church-division-be-healthy/>

²⁷ MacDonald, 29.

Membership in the body of Christ is not a question of likes and dislikes, but a question of incorporation into a new humanity under the lordship of Christ. Whether a person likes it or not, the same act that reconciles one to God *simultaneously* introduces the person into a community where people find their identity in Jesus Christ rather than in their race, culture, social class, or sex...”²⁸

This means that we should continue with all our energies to exhort, encourage and seek to convince our brothers and sisters of the truth of the historic Christian perspective on marriage and ministry, but *do so in critical solidarity with them* – even in what we perceive to be their grave error -- because they are still a part of the body of Christ to which I belong. And I have no right to abandon them over this matter.

Let me close by highlighting the example of my beloved mentor David Bosch, the South African mission theologian. Bosch was a brilliant missiologist, a world-renowned scholar and church leader, who not once but twice was offered the chair of mission at Princeton Seminary but refused to leave his beloved South Africa.

Bosch was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church during the worst days of apartheid. And you need to know that the DRC was the influential Afrikaner church body that gave theological justification for the practice of apartheid and the multi-faceted racism that the apartheid system created. Bosch worked tirelessly against apartheid and for unity between the various racially segregated Reformed churches. And for his public stand in advocating that church membership be open across racial barriers, and that blacks and whites should celebrate communion together, Bosch was charged with heresy, and numerous attempts were made to “discipline” him in the DRC. He was marginalized in his own church and forbidden to teach in its seminaries, despite being one of the most renowned theologians in southern Africa.

And yet Bosch remained a loyal member of the DRC despite its gross theological error and despite the persecution he suffered from critics within the DRC and from outside too. What made him do that? Why did he stay in the DRC? He did so out of a *prophetic faithfulness to the gospel of reconciliation* and a *deep love for his own people*. Here’s how Bosch put it:

Believe me, it would be very easy for me to do as Boesak and Naudé and others say, and just resign and walk away from this.... I would be quite happy in a black ... church. But I am sorry, I think that would be self-indulgent. Who can read his own heart aright? It may be, as they say, that my reluctance to leave is tied to group loyalty, ethnic solidarity, and so forth. But I do believe that I see in the Dutch Reformed church that more general, more catholic, Christianity which holds my primary allegiance. I am not ready to give the Dutch Reformed church over to the devil.²⁹

For Bosch, the central issue was *prophetic solidarity*, identifying with the guilt of one's people in order to speak to them in a credible way. He put it like this:

²⁸ Rene Padilla, *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 146.

²⁹ Richard Neuhaus, *Dispensations: The Future of South Africa as South Africans See It* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 161-162.

The true prophet identifies himself with the sin and guilt of the church. He knows that he himself is no better. That is, by the way, the difference between the critic and the prophet: the critic criticises from the outside, the prophet confesses from within. The critic accuses, the prophet weeps. Criticism is easy, but also cheap; prophecy is costly, because it flows from solidarity.³⁰

It is inappropriate to pass judgment on whether remaining within the DRC as Bosch did was the most *faithful* response to the demands of the gospel in South Africa. No doubt there are mixed motives in all human decisions. Perhaps in the final analysis, the two options of resigning from the DRC or remaining within it were somehow *complementary* in the slow process of change that the gospel of reconciliation demands. Those who work on the "inside" for change and those who work on the "outside" for change, are, after all, both working to change the status quo. The final judgment on this issue, however, must be reserved for a higher court.

Speaking personally, I feel called to follow Bosch's example and stay within the PCC to speak God's Word to his people no matter what. I would like to counsel us to retain the long view of history and the virtue of godly patience as we pray and work for theological renewal in the PCC. I am deeply encouraged by the amazing current phenomenon that the principals of all three of our theological colleges are broadly evangelical in their theological outlook: Richard Topping at St. Andrew's Hall/Vancouver School of Theology; Dale Woods at Presbyterian College, Montreal, and John Vissers at Knox College. I would urge us, before making any irrevocable decisions, to read again Book IV, chapter 1 of Calvin's *Institutes*, his moving chapter on the character of the Church and his warnings against schism.³¹

But wherever we may end up as we wrestle with the matters currently before us in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and whether we end up working *inside* or *outside* the current denominational structures for the advancement of God's kingdom, may we leave the final judgment on these matters in the hands of our gracious God, whose glory alone we seek to serve.

³⁰ David Bosch, *The Church as the Alternative Community* (Potchefstroom: Instituut vir Reformatoriese Studie, 1982), 26.

³¹ Calvin argues: "Just as we must believe, therefore, that the former church, invisible to us, is visible to the eyes of God alone, so we are commanded to revere and keep communion with the latter, the visible church." (Inst. IV, 1, 7). Although the church is manifestly imperfect and contains numerous hypocrites, Calvin insistently stresses the sinfulness of schism: "For the Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments." (Inst. IV.1.10). For more on Calvin's understanding of the church and its unity, see Italian Reformed theologian Emidio Campi's "Calvin's understanding of the Church and its relevance for the ecumenical movement." It can be found at <http://www.john-calvin.org/en/calvin-theo2/theology/calvin-theo-texte-en/unity-of-the-church.html#sdfootnote11sym>