

Session Statement on Human Sexuality

In 1994, the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada adopted a lengthy statement on human sexuality, which was the result of the study and work of the Committee on Church Doctrine over a period of several years. This statement explored various aspects of human sexuality and studied the Scriptural witness. It affirmed the God-given blessing of sexual relations within the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman, and concluded that homosexual practice is not an option consistent with Christian profession.

In 2015, several overtures addressed to the General Assembly urged that the church revisit this issue, and these were referred to the Committee on Church Doctrine and to the Justice Ministries department of the Life and Mission Agency. Twenty-seven different sessions and presbyteries were involved in either initiating or transmitting the overtures. Six seek substantial change to the church's current position. Sixteen request affirmation of the church's current position; three desire further study; one advocates pursuit of the unity of the church; and one reminds the church of proper procedure.

The General Assembly in 2015 resolved "that all congregations, sessions, presbyteries, synods and denominational committees be encouraged to engage in a year of prayerful conversation and discernment and Bible study on the topics of human sexuality, sexual orientation and other related matters raised in the overtures."

The Presbytery of Ottawa organised a study day on February 20, 2016 to which three speakers were invited. Fifteen persons from Parkwood Church were among the approximately 100 in attendance. Dr. Clyde Ervine, Minister of Knox Church, St. Catharines, ON and former Director of Pastoral Studies, Presbyterian College, Montreal; Dr. J. Kevin Livingston, Professor of Pastoral Theology at Tyndale Seminary, Toronto and former minister of Knox Church, Toronto; and Ms. Beth McCutcheon, a doctoral student at the Toronto School of Theology and formerly minister at St. James Church, Winnipeg presented papers and fielded questions in a panel discussion.

There has been a flood of books on human sexuality and the church's teaching in recent years. Two of the most straightforward to read are: (a) *What does the Bible really teach about homosexuality?* by Kevin DeYoung, who is pastor of University Reformed Church, East Lansing, Michigan (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2015) and (b) *God and the Gay Christian* by Matthew Vines, who is founder of the Reformation Project (New York: Random House, 2014). The first upholds the church's historic biblical understanding, and urges the church to be faithful and gracious in its witness and welcome; the second argues for a revisionist understanding of Scripture which claims that the prohibitions of Romans 1 are about excess passion rather than any same-sex attraction, and argues that the Bible therefore would affirm God's blessing on committed same-sex relationships. The second places a much greater emphasis on experience and argues that the experience of those drawn to same-sex attractions must lead to a revisiting of Scripture and its re-interpretation. The first approach counsels faithfulness to what has been seen to be the plain teaching of scripture, understood with a high level of consistency throughout the history of Christian Church.

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In our present context, a humanist and human-centred ethic has for many replaced the God-centred and Christ-centred one which has shaped much of our western world. In Canada, the broadening of the definition of marriage by the civil courts and the failure of the national parliament to uphold the understanding of marriage as the life-long union of one man and woman has opened the way not only for widespread acceptance of same-sex unions, but also for the increasingly widespread advance of the idea that gender is not fixed but fluid, with the result that children as young as preschoolers are being encouraged and enabled to explore self-identities different from their biological sex. What the result of such uncharted experiments in human engineering will be remains to be seen, but the challenges for the Christian church and for individual disciples of Jesus Christ to be both welcoming in the name and the spirit of Jesus and at the same time faithful in reflecting and teaching the truth of God's original design in creating us male and female will only increase.

The session of Parkwood Church, at a recent meeting, adopted the following resolution:

The session of Parkwood Church, Ottawa, by way of reply to the remit of the 141st General Assembly for study and reflection upon matters of human sexuality, sexual orientation and other related matters raised in recent overtures to the General Assembly, resolves: (a) to re-affirm our conviction that the witness of Scripture is normative and determinative as the only sure rule for faith and life, and that our understanding of the Scriptural witness is that we are called to share the love of God found in Jesus Christ with all persons, regardless of how they may self-identify and regardless of whatever fallen or sinful condition or circumstance in which they may be, gently and lovingly pointing to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Redeemer, Shepherd and Lord of all, and at the same time call the whole Church to hold to the revelation of God in Scripture that marriage to be blessed by God is to be affirmed as a life-long covenant between one man and one woman, and that those called to leadership as ruling and teaching elders within the Christian Church are called to practice either faithfulness within such marriage or chastity in singleness, acknowledging that confession and repentance for departure from such norms enables the humble and contrite to receive the forgiveness of Jesus Christ; (b) to re-affirm that as a consequence of our biblical and confessional position, the church cannot seek to invoke the blessing of God upon same-sex unions or to ordain to office those living in such unions; (c) to recognise immediately that to do contrawise will result in irreparable harm to the peace, unity, and witness of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and to take such actions as will enable the church to concentrate afresh on the primary mission entrusted to us as set forth in the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

All members and adherents are encouraged to pray for the 142nd General Assembly, which is scheduled to meet in Toronto June 3-6, 2016, and for the official nominee for moderator, Douglas Rollwage, who is minister of Zion Presbyterian Church, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.

- submitted by James T. Hurd,
Minister