

An overview of the LGBTQ discussion in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

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NOTE: The following is intended as a quick introduction. For a full understanding of this complex issue, the reader is encouraged to explore the reports in full. A guide to sources can be found at the conclusion.

Selected history

- 1987 Presbytery of Westminster (Vancouver area) overtured General Assembly to define the PCC's position on sexuality. (Acts & Proceedings 1987, page 468)
- 1989 Presbytery of Peace River asked for a "clear and definitive scriptural statement" from Assembly to declare, among other things, the "humanity of the celibate, virgins, and chaste married, and the distortion of and sinfulness of genital-sexual activity outside the God given norm of marriage between a man and a woman." (A&P 1989, p. 516)
- 1989-93 At the direction of GA, the Committee on Church Doctrine (CDC) studied the issue. During this period, hundreds of responses to the above overtures were received from presbyteries, sessions and individuals.
- 1994 The CDC produced a detailed statement which addressed several aspects of sexuality, including homosexuality. The committee's aim was to "provide a biblically-based and theologically-sound guide to members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada." The report included the following statement: "Is homosexual practice a Christian option? Our brief, exegetical review of biblical texts set within the 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." Assembly adopted the report, but it was far from unanimous, with many commissioners registering their dissent. (A&P 1994, p. 251-273)

The report also called on Assembly to repent of homophobia. "The Church is called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supportive community, a true church family, where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported. Sadly, the Christian Church has frequently shunned homosexuals and failed to minister to them and with them. The Church as a whole must repent of its homophobia and hypocrisy." (A&P 1994, p. 267)

- 1996 Assembly overturns the decision of the Presbytery of Montreal to approve the call and ordination of a ministry candidate in a same-sex relationship. The report of the investigation team stated: “The scriptures, church tradition, custom and practice, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (chapter 24), and at least five General Assembly statements made between 1969 and 1994 together form the basis of our denominational policy and practice, namely, that sexual intercourse properly takes place within a heterosexual marriage, and that homosexual practice is not a Christian option.” At the same time, the investigation team noted: “Neither scripture nor Church prohibits ordination on the basis of one’s sexual attraction to others, whether homosexual or heterosexual.” (AP& 1996, p. 435-450)
- 1997 The Session of Pineland Church in Burlington, Ontario, asked Assembly “to clarify the limits of the role that homosexual and lesbian people play within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.” The Special Committee on Sexual Orientation was formed. (A&P 1997, p. 503)
- 2003 The Special Committee issued its report, which examined the issue from scientific, biological, psychological, historical, Biblical and pastoral perspectives. Among its conclusions: “Is the homosexual person entitled to the same rights, privileges and pastoral care as any other church member? We believe this to be so. The right to acceptance and to privacy surely belongs to the homosexual person as much as to any other, and none should ever feel that there is a risk of exposure of their private lives in the church or elsewhere. . . . The Presbyterian Church in Canada has never limited the roles of its members on the basis of their sexual orientation. These roles include church school teachers, musicians, youth leaders, ruling elders, teaching elders and members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries. No legislation has ever existed for this purpose and, following six years of study, the Special Committee on Sexual Orientation finds that none is needed.”
The committee neither reaffirmed the 1994 position nor called for doctrinal change, stating: “We realized early in our discussions that if any one position were to ‘win’, the church would inevitably be the loser. We have tried hard to present a balanced report that respects and includes all of God’s people. We have also tried to maintain unity within our denomination. We do not believe this will be or should be the last word spoken on the topic. In fact, we are convinced that dialogue and study must continue. (A&P 2003, p. 526-549)
- 2014 A group calling itself “Hospitality and Justice for all in the PCC” started an online petition calling for full inclusion of those in same-sex relationships.
- 2015/2016 A total of 29 overtures on the issue were received. They were divided between those calling on the church to reaffirm its 1994 statement or to change doctrine

to allow same-sex marriage. At the request of the 2015 General Assembly, the CDC and the Life & Mission Agency cooperated to create a study document published in October 2015 entitled *Body, Mind and Soul: Thinking together about human sexuality and sexual orientation in The Presbyterian Church in Canada*. It outlined both perspectives. It was widely distributed to congregations, which were invited to respond. (A&P 2015, starting p. 572. A&P 2016, starting p. 499)

2017 Assembly finally acted on its 1994 decision to repent of homophobia with the following resolution: “That The Presbyterian Church in Canada repent of homophobia and hypocrisy by establishing a special committee to: 1) create a safe, respectful environment in which LGBTQ people can tell stories of harm done to them; 2) listen to the stories told by LGBTQ people; 3) draft an appropriate response regarding homophobia within the denomination; 4) name concrete actions that the General Assembly consider implementing; and 5) report to a future General Assembly within the next 3 years.” A formal letter of repentance was published in February 2018. (A&P 2017, p. 476-478, see also details of assembly’s discussion starting p. 17)

A divided CDC issued two reports, one upholding the traditional definition of marriage, the other attempting to justify “covenanted monogamous same-sex relationships.” Both were referred to congregations, sessions and presbyteries for comment. (A&P 2017, p. 474-554)

2018 The CDC concluded that “that there is insufficient exegetical, hermeneutical and theological support for a change in the denomination’s doctrinal position on human sexuality. The traditional teaching of The Presbyterian Church in Canada is also consistent with that of most of the global church and is the near unanimous view of Christian history.” However the CDC also issued a minority report calling for formal recognition of same-sex relationships. (A&P 2018, p. 444-464)

The CDC majority report was not formally debated. The report was tabled after the issue was referred to a Special Committee of Former Moderators tasked with finding a “way forward” through the deep division.

2019 The Special Committee presented three options: ‘A’ (tradition), ‘B’ (inclusion), ‘C’ (one denomination with three theological streams), ‘D’ (current practice but with a local option). Assembly was asked to vote by preferential ballot, ranking each option 1-4. Option ‘B’ emerged with majority support. (The results were secret.) Commissioners voted 129-91 to accept the outcome. (A&P 2019 p. 467. The discussion on the implications starts on page 47)

A majority of commissioners voted to refer the following decisions to presbyteries:

1. Remit 'B': "That The Presbyterian Church in Canada holds two parallel definitions of marriage and recognizes that faithful, Holy Spirit filled, Christ centred, God honouring people can understand marriage as a covenant relationship between a man and a woman or as a covenant relationship between two adult persons. That congregations, sessions, ruling and teaching elders be granted liberty of conscience and action on marriage."
2. Remit 'C': "That congregations and presbyteries may call and ordain as ministers and elect and ordain as ruling elders LGBTQI persons (married or single) with the provision that liberty of conscience and action regarding participation in ordinations, inductions and installations be granted to ministers and ruling elders."

In order to be adopted, each remit requires approval from a majority of the 45 presbyteries, as long as they represent at least half of the total membership on presbyteries. If presbytery approval takes place, then they go to General Assembly 2020 for final consideration.

As of Jan. 3, 2020, the remits had the support of 14 presbyteries, with 9 voting 'No.'

The current situation

The remaining 22 presbyteries are expected to decide by the end of March. Up-to-date results are posted at www.renewal-fellowship.ca.

At the direction of 2019 GA, the denomination's Life and Mission Agency is collecting "concerns, views and pain" of those in disagreement with the proposed changes, which will be reported back to the 2020 General Assembly before the report on remits is received and its recommendations considered. Anyone can make a submission. Deadline is Feb. 15, 2020.
<https://form.jotform.com/Presby/recommendation-5>.

There are many ministers, elders and congregants in fundamental disagreement with the remits and who are actively working on a response. Several gatherings have taken place across the country. Congregations have already experienced the pain of losing members. Some ministers and congregations are actively planning their departure from the PCC. Some congregations and presbyteries are preparing formal proposals to 2020 General Assembly calling for theological protection ("safe space" or a "firewall") for those who adhere to traditional views.

The Renewal Fellowship within The Presbyterian Church in Canada (RF) – created in 1983 to provide a voice for orthodoxy – is actively working to encourage those who are opposed to the remits.

www.renewal-fellowship.ca/category/response-to-the-remits

Presbyterians Standing for Apostolic Love and Truth (PSALT) also exists to provide an additional voice for classical theology. www.psalt.info

Eastern Han-Ca and Western Han-Can presbyteries, which represent Korean-speaking congregations, have hosted national and regional gatherings, and are working on a formal response to 2020 General Assembly. This might include a proposal to reorganize the PCC into separate theological synods of congregations which share similar theology. RF and PSALT, along with several other like-minded supporters, are in support of the Han-Ca efforts.

Ministers and individuals are free to leave the PCC, but not congregations. Their names and assets are owned by the PCC. A special committee is studying the feasibility of congregations leaving the fold, a concept known as “gracious dismissal.” Its report is expected to be made to 2020 General Assembly.

Implications

If the remits fail, the issue will not die. As history shows, there is a deep division in the PCC. Many ministers, elders and congregants see the goal of full inclusion of the LGBTQ community as a mission, and they won't stop the campaign.

If the remits pass, General Assembly will likely appoint a commission or committee to recommend how this will be implemented. What exactly does “liberty of conscience and action” mean in practical terms? To what extent will ministers, elders and congregations be required to uphold the new doctrine?

If gracious dismissal is allowed, how many congregations will depart? Experience shows that congregations which are substantially united on this issue, either in favour of the remits or against, are in the minority, perhaps only 10-15 per cent. Most congregations, and many sessions, are divided.

Will the PCC reform itself into two or three smaller entities, in which congregations can commune with others of similar mindset?

For more information

Reports to General Assembly, as noted in the history, can be found in the Acts & Proceedings of The Presbyterian Church in Canada: <https://presbyterian.ca/acts-and-proceedings/>

A wide variety of official PCC documents, including the 2017 and 2018 papers on sexuality, can be found here: <https://presbyterian.ca/sexuality/>