

OVERTURE TO THE 218th GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)
ON DELETING G-6.0106B, SUBSTITUTING A NEW PARAGRAPH IN ITS PLACE, AND
PROVIDING A NEW AUTHORITATIVE INTERPRETATION
THE PRESBYTERY OF NEW HOPE RESPECTFULLY
OVERTURES THE 218th GENERAL ASSEMBLY (2008) TO:

1. Direct the Stated Clerk to send the following proposed amendment to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes:

To replace the current text of G-6.0106b,

“Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.”

with the following:

“Those who are called to ordained service in the church are to lead lives of obedience to Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Scriptures, and interpreted by the Confessions of the church. Their suitability for the offices to which they have been elected is determined by the governing bodies where the examinations for ordination and/or installation take place, subject to review by the next higher governing body. By their assent to the Constitutional questions for ordination or installation, officers demonstrate their fidelity to the standards of the Gospel.”

2. Provide the following authoritative interpretation:
Interpretative statements concerning ordained service of homosexual church members by the 190th General Assembly (1978) of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the 119th General Assembly (1979) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and all subsequent affirmations thereof, have no further force or effect.

RATIONALE

1) POLITY

G-6.0106b contradicts the church’s understanding of membership in the church and presents a standard that refuses some, but not all members, their entitlement to “all the rights and privileges of the church...including the right to hold office.” (G-5.0202) G-6.0106b continues to relegate lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender members of the church to second class status, dishonoring their committed relationships, and placing on them a burden of celibacy that is not required of other members (Scots Confession, C-3.15). Current denominational policies regarding ordination, by calling almost exclusive attention to the

current G-6.0106b, place limits on the inalienable right of congregations to elect their own officers, (G-6.0107), and on their freedom of conscience in interpreting Scripture and the call of the Gospel (G-6.0108). G-6.0106b has not been a source of peace and unity in the church. It has not kept those who advocated these policies from schism. It has not silenced those who opposed them. The Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, after earnest study and prayer, was not able to come to a resolution of the divisive effects of G-6.0106b.

2) THEOLOGY

Our Reformed faith grounds us in faithful obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ, the "Head of the Church." We follow Christ faithfully by continual and grateful reference to the "unique and authoritative witness of the Scriptures" and the powerful interpretive framework of the Confessions. Most importantly, Scripture becomes God's living Word of guidance to us in "matters of faith and practice," both individually and corporately, through "the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit." The Presbyterian Church stays most faithful to its calling to be both reformed and always reforming when it honors this understanding of obedience. The proposed new language in this overture -- "...obedience to Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Scriptures, and interpreted by the Confessions of the Church..." -- better reflects the heart of our Reformed theological tradition concerning the authority of Scripture and the role of the Confessions.

3) CONGREGATIONAL WITNESS

"Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." (Ephesians 2:14)

Faith in Christ means building bridges where once there were walls. In 1994, after a two-year process of study, education, and intensive congregational discernment, we, the Church of Reconciliation in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, decided to answer the call of Christ's barrier-breaking Spirit and build a bridge to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons in our midst and in our community.

Coming to know the gay and lesbian members of our congregation, and hearing their witness has helped us understand how vitally important their faith is to them. We have been blessed by moving testimonies of faith and courage, stories of grace under pressure, and powerful sermons. We have also been deeply disturbed to learn that they have been rejected by Presbyterian churches and presbyteries, whether through outright prejudice or through being feared, judged, and unwanted.

We asked ourselves how we could respond compassionately to our brothers and sisters in Christ who have been turned away from the church (I Corinthians 12:12-26). We sought to repent of our own fears and judgments, to begin our own journey of transformation, and to do what Christ was all along urging us to do -- to extend the open arms of God's love and grace, and to become a sanctuary of acceptance where our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters would be neither disparaged nor excluded. We have done so, and found ourselves immeasurably blessed by a loving and gracious God. What we experienced

first as a “nudge of the Spirit,” we now understand to be nothing less than an opened door to the new life all Christians are offered in baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

We certainly understand the fears and concerns many in our denomination feel about opening their hearts and minds, and the doors of the church, to gay and lesbian believers. When we first began this process of exploration, several members of our congregation feared this issue would “split the church” or cause many of our members to leave. We faced these fears and kept talking, learning, and growing. A few of our members did leave, but the overwhelming majority stayed and benefited enormously from the increased diversity in the congregation. A steady flow of new members has come to us because they find our demonstration of Christ’s radical hospitality a compelling and sorely needed example in our divisive times. Over a decade after publicly declaring our openness and welcome, we continue to experience an upsurge in vitality, energy, and growth. We perceive “the new thing” God is doing and have seen it “springing forth.” (Isaiah 43:18-19).

It has been exhilarating to recognize our common humanity before God. The children of our congregation have led us to celebrate our oneness in Christ. Labels have disappeared. Our differences, neither hidden nor broadcast, have become insignificant compared to the faith and love in Christ that we hold in common. Our identity as brothers and sisters in Christ transcends everything else, binding us together as one. We are fully convinced the risen Christ accepts all, regardless of earthly differences, as full equals at the Table of God’s love.

We have no desire to be contentious, or to offend others in the Body of Christ. But we can do no other than to invoke the liberty of conscience which is a hallmark of our Presbyterian tradition, and to bear witness to what the Spirit and our congregational experience have shown us so clearly: that G-6.0106b is contrary to the spirit of Christ, hampers evangelistic outreach, diverts denominational energies, and denies the church the gifts of talented, devoted people of faith.

We believe that the same Holy Spirit that has enriched our worship and community is poised to revitalize the PC(USA). We submit that the hope of a renewed PC(USA) lies in our faithful response to Christ’s call to join Him in a redemptive future, not in clinging to the past. In the spirit of joyful thanksgiving, we respectfully request the removal of these impediments that we might live into the peace and oneness that Christ has prepared for us.