

More Light Presbyterians Recommended Overture Language for 2006, and Overture FAQ (frequently asked questions, with answers)

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This document provides information to supporters of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) equality within the Presbyterian Church USA by answering your questions about actions that you can take at a local level to support legislative reform within the PCUSA.

Q: What is the overture language that More Light Presbyterians (MLP) recommends for overtures that seek to remove anti-LGBT discrimination from the Presbyterian Book of Order and other Presbyterian policies?

A: Here is the official overture language that MLP recommends:

The Presbytery of _____ respectfully overtures the 217th General Assembly (2006) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to do the following:

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

Shall G-6.0106b be stricken?

2. Approve the following authoritative interpretation, which shall take effect immediately upon the affirmative vote of the 217th General Assembly (2006):

"Interpretive statements concerning ordained service by homosexual persons by the 190th General Assembly (1978) of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, the 119th General Assembly (1979) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and all subsequent affirmations thereof, shall be given no further force or effect."

However, when you use this language to write an overture, you should also supply your own rationale. See the next few questions for more information on rationales.

Q: So are you saying that MLP wants grass roots supporters to bring this "delete-B" overture language to our presbyteries?

A: Yes. The movement for LGBT equality within the PCUSA is driven by ordinary Presbyterians nationwide, Presbyterians who take action within their churches and presbyteries for change. We depend on all of our supporters to ask their respective presbyteries to send a "delete-B" overture to GA.

Q: If I want to have my presbytery send this overture to the 2006 General Assembly (GA), what should I do?

A: The process for getting a presbytery to send an overture to GA can vary somewhat depending on your local situation and the politics of your presbytery, however here's one process that usually works well:

- Convene an overture-drafting meeting of LGBT supporters from various churches in your presbytery. Invite the people within your presbytery who care about and want to take action on LGBT issues, and try to bring in many active session members as possible.
- Draft some rationale language to go with the overture language. A rationale is introductory text which precedes the overture language given above. You can write a rationale in formal "whereas" style, with a series of "whereas..." clauses that lead up to "therefore, the Presbytery of _____ respectfully overtures the 217th General Assembly...", or you can write a less formal rationale.
- Agree at your meeting on a strategy for getting church sessions to take the overture to your presbytery for a vote. A proposal to have a presbytery send an overture to General Assembly doesn't normally come from an individual. Although individual motions from the floor of presbytery are technically possible, realistically the request to your presbytery needs to come from a church session, so you have to get sessions to ask your presbytery to send the overture to GA. One common approach is to have multiple church sessions all pass a motion that asks the presbytery to send the overture. This approach provides "strength in numbers" and can make it easier to get the overture passed by the presbytery. Make sure that all of your cooperating churches use the *same* overture and rationale. The point here is to bring a single proposed overture and rationale text to your presbytery, backed by as many churches in your presbytery as you can have lined up in advance.
- Research the timing and logistics so that you know when your presbytery meets, how you get an item onto the agenda for presbytery, how far in advance you need to submit your overture to presbytery, and so on. Some presbyteries have a "first reading" policy in which any GA overture for consideration must have a public reading at the presbytery meeting that *precedes* the actual vote to send the overture. This type of policy can add months to your schedule for asking your presbytery to send the overture. Make sure that somebody from your LGBT-supportive group is watching out for these types of procedural issues so that you don't miss any deadlines.
- Assign somebody to "own" the overture document and the coordination process. Stay in touch with each other so that you know which church sessions are scheduled to vote on the overture on which dates, when you need to get information to the stated clerk of your presbytery, and so on.
- Prior to the presbytery meeting at which your overture is scheduled for a vote, call another LGBT supporters meeting to plan your floor strategy. Questions that you need to resolve include who will bring the motion, who will be prepared to speak to the motion from the floor, what will they say, what are your key messages, etc.

Q: Why do you ask local groups within a presbytery to write our own rationale? Can't MLP provide a complete "cut-and-paste" overture document that we can take to our presbytery to get them to send to GA?

A: The approach of using a different rationale for each presbytery is strategic. The general practice at General Assembly is to grant official "Overture Advocate" standing as well as time on the appropriate GA committee agenda to each presbytery whose rationale is different from that of the presbytery that proposed the same overture. So if many presbyteries send the same overture with *different* rationales, our movement gets more committee testimony and education time as a whole. If presbyteries use the *same* rationale, GA practice doesn't give Overture Advocate standing or committee testimony time to everyone. Therefore, we ask that your group write its own rationale and use it with the recommended overture language of this FAQ.

Q: Why does MLP provide suggested overture language at all? Why shouldn't my presbytery come up with its own pro-LGBT overture and try to send that to General Assembly?

A: Presbyteries are of course always free to do what they want. However, the problems with having many different pro-LGBT, or ostensibly pro-LGBT, overtures show up at the same General Assembly are numerous. It causes confusion, it can divide our movement when some people support one overture and others support a different one, and it can result in the passage of a "feel-good" overture that says nice things but actually doesn't change anything. The overture language that MLP recommends in this document has been officially and repeatedly held by the PCUSA's Advisory Committee on the Constitution to be the language that will effectively accomplish the Presbyterian LGBT equality movement's goals.

Q: What if I want to arrange for a concurrence, rather than getting my presbytery to pass the overture itself?

A: A "concurrence" is essentially a statement by a presbytery that says "we agree with what that other presbytery over there says". Concurrences on MLP's recommended overture language are OK, however the concurrence should use a *separate and unique rationale* - see the question about rationales for why. Some presbyteries like to do concurrences and not initiate overtures, others never do concurrences but love to initiate overtures. MLP suggests that when possible, you have your presbytery initiate the overture to GA on its own, however if a concurrence is a much easier path within your presbytery, then by all means convene your local pro-LGBT planning group and work for a concurrence on some other presbytery's delete-B overture, once one has been passed by another presbytery.

Q: Why does MLP's recommended overture language have two parts, one for G-6.0106b and the other about an "authoritative interpretation"? Isn't G-6.0106b the only problem?

A: G-6.0101b is not the only problem. Past General Assemblies have issued anti-LGBT "authoritative interpretations" of the PCUSA Constitution which presently have authority within the Presbyterian legal system. Both the authoritative interpretations and G-6.0106b need to be removed to eliminate institutionalized anti-LGBT discrimination.

Q: When should I get started on the process of getting my presbytery to send an overture to General Assembly?

A: Immediately. The postmark deadline for overture submission to the 2006 GA, for overtures that seek a change in the Book of Order, is Feb. 15 2006. If you work backwards from that date and consider the various steps that your local group will need to take to meet that deadline, the time to call your local organizing meeting is now (early 2005). Groups that wait until the fall to start their overture process could easily miss the national deadline.

Q: Shouldn't we wait for the results of the Theological Task Force before we do anything?

A: Absolutely not. The Theological Task Force on Peace, Purity and Unity of the Church was created by action of the 2001 General Assembly and charged to deal with a large number of issues, one of which is "ordination standards". You can find them on the web at www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity. Part of the charge to the Task Force is that it "develop a process and an instrument by which congregations and governing bodies throughout our church may reflect on and discuss the matters that unite and divide us". This charge to the Task Force begins with the assumption that what the denomination needs is more "process", perhaps discernment process, talking process, study process, etc. It's the position of More Light Presbyterians that what the PCUSA needs first, and immediately, is removal of all legislated forms of anti-LGBT discrimination. Only then can our denomination begin a process of healing and a process of working towards peace, purity and unity.

The Task Force report also isn't scheduled for release until the fall of 2005, at which point it will be extremely late, and possibly too late in some presbyteries, to begin the overture-sending process at the presbytery level. MLP recommends that all LGBT-supportive groups within pro-LGBT or middle-of-the-road presbyteries begin your organizing right now (early 2005) to ask your presbytery to send the recommended overture of the first question in this FAQ to the 2006 General Assembly.

More Light Presbyterians fully supports efforts to achieve the peace, purity and unity of the Church. By removing its anti-LGBT policies, the PCUSA will take a step towards peace, towards purity, and towards unity in Christ.

This question about the Task Force is a valid one, and you should expect this objection to come up during presbytery-level discussion of your overture proposal. You should come to your presbytery meeting prepared to address the "wait for the task force, don't do anything" argument.

MLP has also issued a separate position statement specifically on the question of the Task Force's resources. You can read that MLP statement here: www.mlp.org/article.php?story=20050321131714929

Q: What's the position of other LGBT-supportive Presbyterian groups on the question of legislative strategy for 2006? Do other groups support efforts to remove G6.0106b from the Book of Order in 2006?

A: Yes. Staff members of That All May Freely Serve (TAMFS, www.tamfs.org) have already started to work at the presbytery level to send one or more delete-B overtures to General Assembly. Similarly, Covenant Network (www.covenantnetwork.org) in a formal statement dated September 29, 2004, stated that "The church... has waited too long for change on this issue. *Now is the time* to move forward by removing G-6.0106b and any other impediments to ordination. We will work with others who share this vision of the church..." [Emphasis added.] The statement is available online as a PDF document at www.covenantnetwork.org/9-04TMF.pdf

Q: I'm in a consistently and strongly anti-gay presbytery. Should I try to get my presbytery to send a "delete-B" overture to GA?

A: The unexpected can of course happen, however if you're in a known strongly anti-LGBT presbytery, it's probably a more effective use of your time to organize some educational events or do other forms of prejudice-reduction outreach to the Presbyterians in your local area. MLP has many materials available to help you do this.

Q: Our local group of LGBT supporters plans to bring MLP's suggested overture to our presbytery, however we need to educate some of our presbytery voters in advance. What materials does MLP have to help us educate on LGBT discrimination issues within the PCUSA?

A: In addition to the wide variety of resources available from our web site at www.mlp.org, MLP now also has a special-release DVD which specifically raises the issue of the problems that LGBT seminary students and future Presbyterian leaders face. This special-release DVD is intended initially for More Light Sunday 2005 use (see www.mlp.org/morelightsunday), however copies are also available immediately to presbytery groups which want to do some educating of presbytery "swing" voters. The DVD includes a 25-minute interview with lesbian seminary student Heather Reichgott as well as a previously-released interview with MLP field organizer Michael Adee. Please email us at MoreLightSunday@mlp.org or MLP contact board member Bruce Hahne at 408-732-1698 for a copy.

Q: I need help! I don't know how to get my presbytery to send an overture to GA, or I have questions about language, questions about process, or other questions. What should I do?

A: MLP board members Mike Smith and Bear Ride are ready and waiting for your specific questions about overture strategy if they're not answered in this document. As the leaders of MLP's Legislative and Judicial Affairs (LJA) committee they want to help you, so please contact either one of them. Here's their contact information:

Mike Smith, 520-207-1825, mikesmith55@cox.net

Bear Ride, 626-398-9936, bears@usc.edu