

A STUDY GUIDE FOR
Policy Statements and Recommendations
from the 1978 report “The Church and Homosexuality.”

This study guide, prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, is written at the request of the 217th General Assembly, Item 04-05:

. . . a brief study guide prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship and commended for use by sessions and congregations for study of this authoritative interpretation. The study guide shall be written in a manner sympathetic to the standards and intention of the Authoritative Interpretation of 1993, commending it to congregations as the historic policy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It shall be sent to congregations no later than one year prior to the convening of the 218th General Assembly (2008). [Electronic communication will be used as a means of savings costs.]¹

OVERVIEW OF THIS STUDY GUIDE

The study guide offers material for a four-week session. The materials include background for discussion and questions for reflection. If you choose to invite guest speakers in, then you may want to extend the study to five to eight weeks.

<p>Session One: The purpose of this session is to set the Policy Statement of 1978 in its historical and cultural context.</p>	<p>Session Two: This session studies the biblical and theological rationale for the church’s decision not to ordain practicing homosexuals.</p>	<p>Session Three: This session invites participants to explore the constitutional implications of the 1978 Policy Statement for today’s church.</p>	<p>Session Four: This session gives participants an opportunity to assess the current practices of congregations within the denomination in light of 1978 Policy Statement conclusions.</p>
<p>Option of an additional week: Invite a guest with expertise in current medical and/or social-science research on human sexuality. Hearing a review of recent data will help to illuminate the comparable data presented in the 1978 Policy Statement.</p>	<p>Option of an additional week: Invite a guest with expertise in biblical and theological studies. Learning about the exegetical methods and practical application of the passages presented in the section <i>Scripture and Homosexuality</i> will help to deepen an understanding of the conclusions that were drawn in the 1978 Policy Statement.</p>	<p>Option of an additional week: Invite a guest with expertise in the constitution and polity of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Understanding how our denomination is bound by the constitution and confessions will awaken us to the connectional nature of our church and to our unity in Christ.</p>	<p>Option of an additional week: Invite a guest who can summarize the work of the Peace, Unity and Purity, Task Force and present a synopsis of the task force’s report. Understanding the 2006 report gives a contemporary voice to the virtues of Christian unity expressed in the 1978 Policy Statement.</p>

For ease of use, references to the relevant General Assembly documents will be to the form in which they appear in the book, *Definitive Guidance: The Church’s Statements on Homosexuality*, forward by Clifton Kirkpatrick and Study Guide by Jack L. Stotts (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2004).

¹ For a clearer definition of “authoritative interpretation” as it relates to “definitive guidance” please see Session Three, Part E.

SESSION ONE

The purpose of this session is to set the Policy Statement of 1978 in its historical and cultural context.

A. Read the *Introduction*:

Introduction

The General Assembly was asked by the Presbyteries of New York City and of the Palisades to give "definitive guidance" concerning the eligibility for ordination to the professional ministry of persons who openly acknowledge homosexual orientation and practice. One thing has become very clear in consideration of this request. The church must respond to this issue. Numbers of persons both within the church and outside it experience homosexuality, either as a transient part of their growth as persons or as a continuing force in their own lives or in the lives of family members and friends. New data in psychology and the social sciences have appeared that challenge the church's traditional posture on this matter. The time has come for the church to confront this issue, to reexamine and refresh its theological understanding of homosexuality in the light of God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ, and to renew its practical approach to mission and ministry among homosexual persons.

The issue submitted to this General Assembly is a call for guidance to individual Christian persons, congregations, and presbyteries concerning the status of self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons within the church. Specifically, the presbyteries seek guidance on the matter of ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Difficult questions are involved in this request. Should the General Assembly foster the creation of a new situation in the church, in which practicing homosexual persons would be free to affirm their lifestyle publicly and to obtain the church's blessing upon this through ordination? Or should the church reaffirm its historic opposition to homosexual behavior? These questions must be dealt with in the context of the whole life and mission of the church. To answer them, we must examine the nature of homosexuality according to current scientific understandings, interpreted within the context of our theological understandings of God's purpose for human life. To this purpose, in all its rich variety, the Scripture attests. Church membership, ordination, pluralism and unity in the church and the Christian response in ministry and mission must then, in turn, be examined.

B. Discuss the historical setting and cultural context of the 1978 Policy Statement.

(Background for Discussion) In contrast to the social activism of the 1960s, the 1970s was a decade of introspection and a search for greater self-fulfillment. There was a principle of "anything goes" so long as it doesn't hurt anyone else. One writer captured the mood of the 70s, describing it as the "Me Generation." *Happy Days* and *All in the Family* were at the top of the television viewing charts. It was also the decade that introduced big screen sensations such as *Star Wars* and *Rocky*, and Alex Haley released his immensely popular novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. The energy crisis and the crumbling war in Vietnam were the darker side

of the 1970s. President Nixon resigned in the wake of the Watergate scandal that served to dispirit the American people and stifle the economy.

1. Use the time line below and insert significant events you recall from your local church or community during the 1970s.

1979 Iran Hostage Crisis and the Energy Crisis

1977 First mass market of personal computers

1976 Jimmy Carter is elected President

1975 Bill Gates and Paul Allen start Microsoft Corp.

1974 President Nixon resigns after Watergate scandal

1973 US withdraws last ground troops from Vietnam

1973 Roe vs. Wade

1972 Terrorism at the Munich Olympic games

2. On a more personal level, consider what you remember about your own life in the mid- to late-seventies. (E.g. How old were you? What kind of music did you listen to? What was your relationship with the church?) Those under age 40 can respond with their impressions of the seventies.
3. What important decisions were you wrestling with in your personal life or your career during the late 70s? How did the choices you made then influence who you are now? If you were not yet born in the 70s, then consider how this decade helped to shape contemporary political or cultural values in the 21st century.

C. Consider the ways in which the overture from the presbyteries of New York City and Palisades are a response to what was happening in the broader American culture.

(Background for Discussion) The presbyteries were asking the church's help in wrestling with issues that were facing society at large. The 1969 riot at the Stonewall Inn in New York City did much to bring the discussion of homosexuality into the open.² Many historians view the Stonewall riot as the event that set the course for the gay rights movement throughout the 1970s. During this decade many countries decriminalized homosexuality and began to repeal laws against sodomy. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association discontinued its classification of homosexuality as a psychological disorder.

1. In hindsight, how might today's church understand the relationship between the 1978 overture from the presbyteries of New York City and Palisades and the concurrent issues facing the surrounding culture?
2. What is the role of the church in helping Christians understand their faith so that it is relevant and practical to the world in which they live?

D. Read the first half (seven paragraphs) of the section titled *Homosexuality within a Theological Context*.

Homosexuality within a Theological Context

New data and hypotheses in psychology, sociology, endocrinology, and the other secular disciplines cannot in themselves determine a shift in the church's posture on this issue. Very frequently these disciplines shed new light upon our understanding of homosexuality and how the church should respond to it. Frequently the results of scientific inquiry are tentative and inconclusive, neutral in their theological and ethical implications, or even weighted with unspoken values and assumptions that are misleading against the background of biblical faith. Therefore, we must address the task of theologically interpreting these extrabiblical data, while at the same time renewing our understanding of Scripture and tradition in the light of those data in the sciences.

Medical and psychological theories concerning homosexuality and its causes are complex and often contradictory. Among the multitude of hypotheses and conclusions currently being entertained, a small but significant body of facts emerges that enlarges our understanding of what homosexuality is and how we should respond to it. It seems clear that homosexuality is primarily a matter of affectional attraction that cannot be defined simply in terms of genital acts, although the homosexual orientation may be so expressed.

² The Stonewall Inn was often raided by the police because it was a well-known gay bar. On June 27, 1969 the patrons of the Inn as well as many of the residents of the surrounding area opposed a police raid. Almost 2000 people gathered outside the bar to shout support for gay rights and a riot ensued which was finally dispersed when police backup came and the crowd was dispersed.

Most human beings experience occasional homosexual attraction, although not always consciously. It is reasonably certain that somewhere between 5 and 10 percent of the human population is exclusively or predominantly homosexual in orientation. Exclusively homosexual persons appear to be remarkably resistant to reorientation through most psychiatric methods. Most exclusively homosexual persons believe that their condition is irreversible. Some secular therapists working with those motivated to change report some success in reversal, and counselors employing both the resources of Christian faith and psychotherapeutic techniques report a higher rate of success. It appears that two critical variables are involved. First, do therapist and client believe that change is possible? Second, how convinced is the client that change is desirable?

The causes of homosexuality now appear to be remarkably numerous and diverse. There is no one explanation for homosexual affectional preference, and thus neither the persons involved nor their parents can be singled out as responsible for the homosexual orientation. Most authorities now assume that both heterosexuality and homosexuality result primarily from psychological and social factors affecting human beings during their growth toward maturity, with some possible influence from biological factors. Most homosexual persons do not consciously choose their affectional preference, although they do face the choice of whether to accept it or to seek change, and of whether to express it in genital acts or to remain celibate. However, although homosexual affectional preference is not always the result of conscious choice, it may be interpreted as part of the involuntary and often unconscious drive away from God's purposes that characterizes fallen human nature, falling short of God's intended patterns for human sexuality.

Human sexuality has a dynamic quality. Within the constraints of nature, nurture serves to transform both sexual identity and intersexual preference. Our sexuality is vulnerable to shaping influences from many directions.

As the embryo develops, the single root organism unfolds and differentiates, sometimes making a boy, sometimes a girl, sometimes a sexually ambiguous being. Following an initial gender assignment, we believe and nurture ourselves and one another into authentic or inauthentic sexual beings.

We find here a parallel to the Genesis account of the creation of humankind, which speaks of the precious and precarious balance of male and female life together, that perpetually needs both our affirmation and God's upholding grace. Genesis offers polemic against deviations from the wise separation of humankind into man and woman. It is this separation that makes union possible. In creation, God separates woman from man so that they are constituted with yearning for each other. Becoming one flesh they portray the glory of his image in the earth.

E. Discuss the data considered in writing the Policy Statement of 1978.

(Background for discussion) In view of data from fields of psychology, sociology, endocrinology and other sciences, the conclusion of the 1978 Policy Statement was "that both heterosexuality and homosexuality result primarily from psychological and social factors affecting human beings during their growth toward maturity, with some possible influence from biological factors."

[quote from "Homosexuality within a Theological Context," see excerpt above] In other words, sexual orientation is the result of a combination of biological and environmental factors that a person does not deliberately choose.

1. What are the virtues and limitations of the church's willingness to consider the results of scientific inquiry?
2. What are points of friction that generally exist between scientific reason and biblical faith?
3. How can faith and science cooperate? (Discuss this as a general question as well as a question with specific reference to sexual orientation.)

Option of an additional week:

Invite a guest with expertise in current medical and social-science research on human sexuality. Hearing a review of recent data will help to illuminate the comparable data presented in the 1978 Policy Statement.

The research into human sexuality over the past 30 years is too vast to distill in the space of this study guide, and yet in many ways, a survey of all of the findings of the intervening years might draw a conclusion similar to that which was drafted in 1978: "our understanding of the nature and cause of homosexuality is inconclusive." In order to interpret the 1978 report with integrity, however, the church may do well to look at the current scientific data before assuming that there is nothing new to learn.

If a professional person with expertise in human sexuality is not a member of your own congregation, then you might find it helpful to look in your local phonebook to see if there are listings for doctors or psychotherapists who specialize in sex therapies or counseling. If you live near a research hospital or medical school, you might also consult with someone on the faculty who would have such expertise.

Let your guest know that the purpose of the invitation is to hear what new scientific data has emerged in the field of human sexuality since 1978. You are not asking the speaker to advocate for a moral position or response to the data. The speaker will be more comfortable in presenting information if he or she knows ahead of time that the group will not press for answers beyond the speaker's area of expertise.

The purpose of inviting such a guest is to allow participants in the study to gather information about new scientific data that has emerged in the field of human sexuality since 1978. The one who facilitates the study should steer participants away from questions that ask the speaker to comment on the ethical or theological implications of the research. Such discussion should be reserved for a future session. The one who facilitates the study should also steer the speaker away from comments that go beyond presenting a full account of the scientific data that has emerged since 1978. The speaker should be chosen with care, to ensure that she or he will be able to present scientific developments in a way that is not biased toward advocacy of a particular moral stance extrapolated from scientific data. While perfect neutrality is impossible, it is possible to strive toward neutrality – the very quality this study asks study participants to embody to the best of their ability. We should not expect less of invited speakers. At this point, any questions the group might ask or remarks the speaker makes should focus on scientific data.

SESSION TWO

This session explores the biblical and theological rationale for the church's decision to refuse ordination to practicing homosexuals. Because of the weight of the biblical/theological material you may want to look at this material over more than one session

A. Read the closing segment of the section titled *Homosexuality within a Theological*

Context. (Begin reading with the paragraph that opens "To say that God created humankind male and female...")

To say that God created humankind male and female, called man and woman to join in partnership as one flesh, and commanded them to multiply (Genesis 1:27-28; 2:24) is to describe how God intended loving companionship between a man and a woman to be a fundamental pattern of human relationship and the appropriate context for male-female genital sexual expression. However, to say that God created humankind male and female, called man and woman to join in partnership as one flesh, and commanded them to multiply is not to state that God intended to limit the possibility for meaningful life to heterosexual marriage. Jesus' own celibate lifestyle and his commitment to his own ministry rather than to the biological family (Matthew 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21) demonstrates the blessing of God upon life lived outside the covenant of marriage.

This biological and theological argument has implications for homosexuality. It appears that one explanation of the process in which persons develop homosexual preferences and behavior is that men and women fall away from their intended being because of distorted or insufficient belief in who they are. They are not adequately upheld in being male and female, in being heterosexual, by self-belief and the belief of a supporting community.

Therefore, it appears that what is really important is not what homosexuality is but what we believe about it. Our understanding of its nature and causes is inconclusive, medically and psychologically. Our beliefs about homosexuality thus become paramount in importance. Do we value it, disvalue it, or find it morally neutral? Do we shape an environment that encourages movement toward homosexuality or one that nurtures heterosexual becoming?

We conclude that homosexuality is not God's wish for humanity. This we affirm, despite the fact that some of its forms may be deeply rooted in an individual's personality structure. Some persons are exclusively homosexual in orientation. In many cases homosexuality is more a sign of the brokenness of God's world than of willful rebellion. In other cases homosexual behavior is freely chosen or learned in environments where normal development is thwarted. Even where the homosexual orientation has not been consciously sought or chosen, it is neither a gift from God nor a state nor a condition like race; it is a result of our living in a fallen world.

How are we to find the light and freedom promised to us by our Lord through the Holy Spirit in such a world? Where do we find norms for authentic life, which in truth transcend the conditioning of history and culture, and the power to live by them?

We dare begin no other place than with the living Word, Jesus Christ, who in risen power transcends time and space and the limitations of our values, norms, and assumptions to confront, judge, and redeem us. It is here that all theological confession and affirmation must begin—in the light of God as revealed to us in the incarnate and living Word, Jesus Christ. It is his exposure of our sin, his obedient sacrificial love, and his being raised in power to continue his activity of redemption of this world (I Cor. 15:20-28) that brings

us new light. This same God in Jesus Christ comes to make us whole, to redeem creation, and to restore it to the goodness proclaimed at creation. Yet the prelude to this redemption is divine judgment.

To look at the Christ is to see at once the brokenness of the world in which we live and the brokenness of our own lives. This comes as the supreme crisis in our life.

Yet, in the moment of this crisis, the Spirit of God brings the confirmation of divine forgiveness, moves us to respond in faith, repentance, and obedience, and initiates the new life in Christ.

Jesus Christ calls us out of the alienation and isolation of our fallen state into the freedom of new life. This new life redeems us as sexual beings but is impossible without repentance. To claim that God's love for us removes divine judgment of us is to eliminate the essence of divine love and to exchange grace for romantic sentimentality. There is a necessary judgment in God's love—else it cannot redeem. It was this Christ who said to the woman in adultery, "Go and sin no more" (John 8:1-12), and to the rich young ruler: "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor...and come, follow me." (Luke 18:22 and parallels.)

Jesus Christ calls us out of the alienation, brokenness, and isolation of our fallen state into the freedom of new life in Christ. We deny that this new life liberates us to license and affirm that it frees and empowers us for lives of obedience whereby all of life becomes subject to his Lordship.

B. One of the closing paragraphs of this section reminds us that “to look at the Christ is to see at once the brokenness of the world in which we live and the brokenness of our own lives.

This comes as the supreme crisis in our life.” Thank God that “Jesus Christ calls us out of the alienation, brokenness, and isolation of our fallen state into the freedom of new life in Christ.”

What are the benefits of beginning a study of Scripture by confessing that all of us are subject to God’s judgment and mercy?

C. Read the section titled *Scripture and Homosexuality*.

Scripture and Homosexuality

We have already indicated that we must examine scientific data but must move beyond them in order to understand what our sexuality means and how it should be expressed. We anchor our understanding of homosexuality in the revelation in Scripture of God's intention for human sexuality.

In order to comprehend the biblical view of homosexuality, we cannot simply limit ourselves to those texts that directly address this issue. We must first understand something of what the Scriptures teach about human sexuality in general. As we examine the whole framework of teaching bearing upon our sexuality from

Genesis onward, we find that homosexuality is a contradiction of God's wise and beautiful pattern for human sexual relationships revealed in Scripture and affirmed in God's ongoing will for our life in the Spirit of Christ. It is a confusion of sexual roles that mirrors the tragic inversion in which men and women worship the creature instead of the Creator. God created us male and female to display in clear diversity and balance the range of qualities in God's own nature. The opening chapters of Genesis show that sexual union as "one flesh" is established within the context of companionship and the formation of the family. Nature confirms revelation in the functional compatibility of male and female genitalia and the natural process of procreation and family continuity.

Human sin has deeply affected the processes by which sexual orientation is formed, with the result that none of us, heterosexual or homosexual, fulfill perfectly God's plan for our sexuality. This makes it all the more imperative for revelation to make clear for us how our sexual relationships are to be conducted so as to please God and challenge us to seek God's will instead of following our own. Though none of us will ever achieve perfect fulfillment of God's will, all Christians are responsible to view their sins as God views them and to strive against them. To evade this responsibility is to permit the church to model for the world forms of sexual behavior that may seriously injure individuals, families, and the whole fabric of human society. Homosexual persons who will strive toward God's revealed will in this area of their lives, and make use of all the resources of grace, can receive God's power to transform their desires or arrest their active expression.

Within the context of general biblical teaching on human sexuality, a number of passages dealing specifically with homosexuality are significant for our response to this issue. These are, of course, complementary to the wider biblical themes of creation, fall, and redemption.

Three Scriptures specifically address the issue of homosexual behavior between consenting males: Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, and Romans 1:26-27. Romans 1:26-27 also addresses the issue of homosexual behavior between consenting females. These three passages stand in an integral and complementary relationship. Leviticus 20:13 regards homosexual behavior as an "abomination."

In the Reformed tradition, the Leviticus passages are considered part of the moral law and thus are different in kind from Levitical proscriptions against certain foods, for instance, which belong to the ritual law. Jesus declared "all foods clean" (Mark 7:19)-one declaration among many that the ritual law of the Old Testament is transcended and fulfilled in him. Moral law in the New Testament is not the means of salvation, for that is Christ alone. Rather, obedience to the moral law is a fruit of grace and salvation.

Genesis 19:1-29 and Judges 19:16-26 show that homosexual rape is a violation of God's justice. II Peter 2:6-10 and Jude 7 suggest a wider context of homosexual practice in Sodom, implying that such rape was but one expression of prior homosexual practice in the population.

Romans 1:26-27 speaks to the problem of homosexual passion, describing it as "dishonorable," as well as to homosexual behavior, which is described as "unnatural." By "unnatural" the Scripture does not mean contrary to custom, nor contrary to the preference of a particular person, but rather contrary to that order of universal human sexual nature that God intended in Genesis 1 and 2. We emphasize that Paul here includes homosexual behavior in a larger catalog of sins, which includes pride, greed, jealousy, disobedience to parents, and deceit. Homosexual behavior is no greater a sin and no less a sin than these.

Two other texts, I Corinthians 6:9-10 and I Timothy 1:9-10, show further New Testament opposition to homosexual behavior. I Corinthians probably distinguishes between the more passive partners or catamites (*malakoi*) and the more active partners (*arsenokoitai*). Homosexual relationships in the Hellenistic world were widespread. We may safely assume that some were characterized by tenderness, commitment, and altruism. Yet the New Testament declares that all homosexual practice is incompatible with Christian faith and life. No Scriptures speak of homosexuality as granted by God. No Scriptures permit or condone any of the forms of homosexuality. In Matthew 19:1-12, Jesus reaffirms God's intention for sexual intercourse, enduring marriage between husband and wife, and affirms godly celibacy for those not entering the marriage covenant.

The biblical revelation to Israel, reaffirmed in the teaching of Jesus and Paul, portrayed in the *theology and human* creation, specifically reflected in the ethical teaching in both the Old and New Testaments, and confirmed in nature, clearly indicates that genital sexual expression is meant to occur within the covenant of heterosexual marriage. Behavior that is pleasing to God cannot simply be defined as that which pleases others or expresses our own strong needs and identity; it must flow out of faithful and loving obedience to God. Sin cannot simply be defined as behavior that is selfish or

lustful. Many unselfish deeds ignore God's expressed intentions for our lives. Homosexual Christians who fail to recognize God's revealed intent for sexual behavior and who move outside God's will in this area of their lives may show many gifts and graces. They may evidence more grace than heterosexual believers who so readily stand in judgment over them. This does not mean that God approves their behavior in the area in which they are failing to be obedient.

To conclude that the Spirit contradicts in our experience what the Spirit clearly said in Scripture is to set Spirit against Spirit and to cut ourselves loose from any objective test to confirm that we are following God and not the spirits in our culture or our own fallible reason. The church that destroys the balance between Word and Spirit, so carefully constructed by the Reformers to insure that we follow none other than Jesus Christ who is the Word, will soon lose its Christian substance and become indistinguishable from the world. We have been charged to seek "new light from God's Word," not "new light" contrary to God's Word.

D. The ultimate norm for Christians is God's self-revelation in Scripture, and yet a denomination that is committed to "always being reformed by the Holy Spirit according to the Word of God," continually reassesses its understanding of Scripture in light of issues that emerge in each generation. Reflect on one or two issues over which the Presbyterian Church has reformed its theological stance. (Examples might include: confessing one's sin to a priest, using lyrics for our hymns other than what is in the Psalms, using instruments to accompany our worship, the ordination of women). Conversely, reflect on issues over which the church has wrestled and held its conviction. (Examples might include: rejection of polygamy, affirmation of the saving Lordship of Christ, Trinity.)

Reformation often means reclaiming an ancient practice. A contemporary example of this is the sacramental renewal we see in many congregations that are choosing to shape their worship on the pattern of ancient liturgical practices. To reclaim the significance of baptism, for instance, many churches are making the font more visible in the sanctuary and even drawing attention to it at specific points in the Lord's Day worship. Congregations are also moving toward more frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper.

1. What principles of discernment guide us in differentiating God's direction to hold fast to our convictions and God's direction to respond to the winds of the Spirit that lead us in new and sometimes surprising ways?
2. Have someone read G-2.0100 in the *Book of Order*. How does our constitution guide the church in its use of the historic confessions and creeds of the church when discerning God's will as it is expressed through Jesus Christ and declared to us in Scripture?
3. When have you experienced God's leading the church toward new understanding? How did the movement toward change meet with both agreement and resistance? How have you experienced God leading the church to affirm its existing belief and practice? How did the movement toward affirmation of established Christian beliefs and practices meet with both agreement and resistance?

E. Read Lev. 18:19 – 19:18, Lev. 20:6 – 16, 22 – 26. Read the background for discussion (below) and then discuss the following.

1. What principles of biblical interpretation help us understand how Leviticus is authoritative for Christians today (see the essay by Rev. Gary Demarest provided as background for discussion below)?
2. What does "holiness" mean in these passages. According to these passages, why is "holiness" important?
3. Why is holiness important for the church today? What does it mean to be "holy" in a culture in which "holy" is often a negative term (e.g. holier than thou, holy roller) and "sin" is used as an enticement (advertisements for deserts that are "sinfully delicious")?

(Background for discussion.) The essay offered here is an excerpt of a bible study written by The Reverend Gary Demarest, a member of the Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity

of the Church. Access to the entire essay is available on line at

www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity

Leviticus

by The Reverend Gary Demarest

Whatever else may be said about the current status of Leviticus, it is widely neglected and frequently misused or abused. An example of our neglect is found in the *Book of Common Worship*. In the three-year cycle of the lectionary, only one passage from Leviticus is used—twelve verses from Chapter 19—which we will use for this study.

This neglect of Leviticus stands in sharp contrast to its place in the history of the Hebrew community. For centuries, Jewish children began their education at age three with the memorization of Leviticus. Nearly forty percent of the Talmud bases its guidelines for life and worship upon texts from Leviticus. By the time of Jesus, 247 of the 613 commandments affirmed by rabbinic Judaism are found in Leviticus.

When not neglected, Leviticus is frequently abused or ridiculed. Texts of Leviticus are often quoted entirely out of context to establish a statement of absolute truth. Or, worse, a practice such as requiring the death penalty for both parties in an adulterous act is used to question the validity of the whole book.

All of this points to a basic problem that may be at the root of our current conflicts that called for the creation of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. Continuing neglect and misuse of Leviticus must be challenged and corrected. A starting point is Douglas John Hall's urging that we refer to our Scriptures as "Older" and "Newer" Testaments, rather than Old and New, particularly in a culture that regards what is old with suspicion or rejection.

Engaging the gospel in the writings of the Newer Testament requires knowledge of the meanings of sacrifice and atonement, of law and grace, of sin and obedience. Even the meanings and practices of the priesthood, tabernacle, and, later, Temple are essential to our understanding the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Leviticus lays the foundation upon which Christian worship and practice must be built.

Eugene Peterson has translated the Bible in contemporary language, published as *The Message*. In his introduction to Leviticus, he states:

Because the core of all living is God, and God is a holy God, we require much teaching and long training for living in response to God as he is and not as we want him to be. . . . Leviticus is a start at the "much teaching and long training" that continues to be adapted and reworked in every country and culture where God is forming a saved people to live as he created them to live—holy as God is holy. (*The Message*, p. 174)

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Chapters 17–26

The last ten chapters of Leviticus are often referred to as the Holiness Code, again a misleading title. In recent correspondence, a friend I hold in high esteem, who is an attorney and a theologian, shared some insights about this section of Leviticus that I find helpful:

This terminology (Holiness Code) is misleading. Hebrew legal reflection does not function with the same precision of a modern "code." Nor does it operate through the generalizations of a Constitution. The Levitical law is much more particularized than a constitutional document. This is an extremely important interpretive point. Levitical law is closer to our Anglo-American case law, which is to say it is always subject to interpretation, to exceptions, to the reflective act of distinguishing one case from another. Every law has value as precedent . . . Some have few, if any, exceptions, but most precedents are subject to being distinguished when new and different circumstances present themselves.

Seldom does anyone deal with this passage as a whole in our current conflicts surrounding human sexuality in general and same-sex affection in particular. Most of the focus is upon the two passages dealing with these subjects in Leviticus 18 and 20, with particular efforts to use them to buttress particular positions.

The central themes of Leviticus are the holiness of God, the holiness in worship, and the holiness in living. God invites men and women to walk in obedience to him with love and care for each other. Some commentators suggest that Leviticus 1–16 is an expression of what it means to "love the Lord your God," and 17–26 is an expression of what it means to "love your neighbor as yourself."

F. Read Matthew 5:14-21; 1 Corinthians 7:1-40; Ephesians 5:1-5.

How might these New Testament texts inform our way of understanding and applying the laws prescribed in Leviticus?

(Background for Discussion) While the Reformed tradition holds that most of the ceremonial and judicial laws of Leviticus are no longer authoritative for Christians, the New Testament persuades us that Leviticus is still relevant to Christians in its understandings of sexual morality. Most Christians uphold this line of reasoning when considering offences such as rape or bestiality, but the church has chosen to depart from Levitical practice with other issues. What we regard as proper grounds for divorce, for example, is clearly not in agreement with what Leviticus offers as the proper grounds, and yet our denomination has found a way to interpret Scripture faithfully that allows divorced people to pursue ordination. Some argue that the case of homosexuality is analogous to the church's wrestling with divorce. There are biblical scholars who reaffirm traditional interpretations of the texts and conclude that homosexuality is not God's best intention for humankind. There are also those who conclude the New Testament's condemnation of homosexuality is not an essential or permanently authoritative part of the church's witness but an expression of a traditional attitude toward a particular form of homosexual activity. Some have also argued that the church is inconsistent in refusing ordination to monogamous homosexuals, when ordination is granted to heterosexuals who engage in sexual activity outside marriage.

1. How do we understand Leviticus' authority for determining the church's views of sexual morality?

2. What inconsistencies do you observe in cultural attitudes toward sexual morality?
Who in our culture is given a wink and a nod when publicly acknowledging his or her sexual promiscuity and whom does the culture hold to a different standard?
3. In what ways do we allow God's Word and will to hold us to a higher standard? In what ways does the church mirror cultural inconsistencies?
4. Read Romans 1:16-32. Discuss the ways in which God works to convict us of sin and move us toward a right relationship with Christ and others.

(Background for discussion.) It is human nature, even for those who desire to live holy lives, to overestimate our goodness and downplay our guilt. Such was the transgression of the Jewish Christians in Rome who considered themselves morally superior to the Gentiles who wanted to convert to Christianity. Paul was concerned to teach the Roman Christians proper humility about their place in the church and remind them that no one is exempt from the effects of sin. All of us are sinners, justified by God's grace bestowed upon us through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:23-24).

The opening chapters of Romans paint a picture of a world in which evil has run amok. It is crucial to keep Paul's intention in mind when we examine 1:26 – 27. These verses are perhaps the most straightforward words in the New Testament concerning sinfulness and homosexual behavior. In 1977 a "Preliminary Study" was offered to the General Assembly that prepared the way for the Policy Statement of 1978. The study offered the following comment on Romans 1:26-37:

"Paul's argument is thus that when people's relationship with God is wrong, their relationships with each other, including specifically their sexual relationships, will also be wrong. Homosexuality is not just a moral but a profoundly religious problem." (p. 15 of *Definitive Guidance: The Church's Statements on Homosexuality*.)

The truth is that sin is always marked by brokenness and alienation from God and others. Because every one of us is marked by sin, it is also the case that every one of us experiences some form of brokenness in our relationships. Statements like these indicate that sexual brokenness is not an exclusively homosexual problem:

- After 44 years of marriage I wouldn't care if I ever had sex again.
- I always wanted to wait until marriage before having sex but I'm 36 and no prospects for a partner. I'm not sure if I want to wait any longer.
- My spouse blames me for our infertility and the truth is that I blame myself as well.
- I really love my spouse and want to be faithful but I can't stop fantasizing about this other person I work with.
- I feel really aroused but as soon as I go to act on it I lose my erection. My wife takes it personally and I can't convince her otherwise.
- I'm sure everyone's sex-life must be better than what we share. Intimacy is so stressful and disappointing.
- I can't believe we're pregnant. We do not want this baby.
- I want to love someone but can't get over the sexual abuse I endured as a child.
- We said we loved each other but as soon as we slept together our relationship changed for the worse.

1. The redemption God offers us in Christ includes redemption of our sexuality. Before continuing this discussion, allow participants some time for personal prayer and reflection. During this time of silence ask participants to seek the Spirit's help in recognizing places of sexual brokenness in their lives. Affirm the healing power of God's love and grace.

After allowing time for personal prayer and reflection, continue the group discussion. Discuss what guidance or support the church offers Christians as they seek to find healing in their relationships.

2. Discuss various ways sin's brokenness manifests itself in our relationships (include business, church, and family relationships as well as more intimate relationships). Use Rom. 1:26-33 to inform the discussion.

3. When or where might Christians have an occasion to talk about the biblical and spiritual aspects of their brokenness in relationships, but more importantly, where do Christians go to talk about their sexuality? What is (or would be) the virtues and limitations of this sort of frank discussion in the context of a Bible study or small group discussion?
4. What guidance from Scripture have you found useful for understanding sexuality in connection to spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being?

Optional guest speaker:

Invite a guest with expertise in biblical and theological studies. Learning about the exegetical methods and practical application of the passages presented in the section Scripture and Homosexuality will help to deepen an understanding of the conclusions that were drawn in the 1978 Policy Statement.

As with the previous session, the purpose of inviting such a guest is to allow participants in the study to gather information about scholarly biblical studies of particular relevant biblical passages. The one who facilitates the study should steer participants away from questions that ask the speaker to comment on the ethical or theological implications of the research. Such discussion should be reserved for a future session. The one who facilitates the study should also steer the speaker away from comments that go beyond presenting a full account of developments in scholarly biblical studies. The speaker should be chosen with care, to ensure that she or he will be able to present developments in scholarly biblical studies in a way that is not biased toward advocacy of a particular moral stance extrapolated from such scholarly studies. While perfect neutrality is impossible, it is possible to strive toward neutrality – the very quality this study asks study participants to embody to the best of their ability. We should not expect less of invited speakers. At this point, any questions the group might ask or remarks the speaker makes should focus on developments in scholarly biblical studies.

SESSION THREE

This session invites participants to explore the constitutional implications of the 1978 Policy

Statement for today's church.

A. Read the sectioned titled *Church Membership*.

Church Membership

Persons who manifest homosexual behavior must be treated with the profound respect and pastoral tenderness due all people of God. There can be no place within the Christian faith for the response to homosexual persons of mingled contempt, hatred, and fear that is called homophobia.

Homosexual persons are encompassed by the searching love of Christ. The church must turn from its fear and hatred to move toward the homosexual community in love and to welcome homosexual inquirers to its congregations. It should free them to be candid about their identity and convictions, and it should also share honestly and humbly with them in seeking the vision of God's intention for the sexual dimensions of their lives.

As persons repent and believe, they become members of Christ's body. The church is not a citadel of the morally perfect; it is a hospital for sinners. It is the fellowship where contrite, needy people rest their hope for salvation on Christ and his righteousness. Here in community they seek and receive forgiveness and new life. The church must become the nurturing community so that all whose lives come short of the glory of God are converted, reoriented, and built up into Christian maturity. It may be only in the context of loving community, appreciation, pastoral care, forgiveness, and nurture that homosexual persons can come to a clear understanding of God's pattern for their sexual expression.

There is room in the church for all who give honest affirmation to the vows required for membership in the church. Homosexual persons who sincerely affirm "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior" and "I intend to be his disciple, to obey his word, and to show his love" should not be excluded from membership.

B. Reflect on what church membership means to you. Questions such as these might guide your discussion and reflection:

1. What does it mean to you that God claims you as a beloved son or daughter?
2. How does God's claim on you guide your choices?
3. What picture or image might you use to depict your relationship to a local congregation?
4. The "body" is an image that the New Testament uses to depict church membership (Romans 12:1-5; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:1-13; Eph. 5:29-31; Col. 1:18). What is helpful about this image to your own understanding of what it means to belong to a congregation and to a denomination?

C. Discuss the concept that the “church is not a citadel of the morally perfect, it is a hospital for sinners” (see third paragraph of “Church Membership” excerpt above). Questions such as these might guide your discussion.

1. What joys and struggles have you encountered in pursuing a way of life that is true to your identity as a child of God? What growth have you experienced as a result?
2. How was the church able to celebrate with you in good times and/or weep with you in difficult times?
3. In what types of crises has your congregation found it difficult to offer appropriate support? In what types of crises has your congregation graciously (perhaps even heroically) responded to the needs of members?
4. How can the church improve its visibility as a place of healing, support and encouragement to people in every season of life?

D. Read the section titled *Ordination*. Also, read Part I of the section titled *Conclusion*.

Ordination

To be an ordained officer is to be a human instrument touched by divine powers but still an earthen vessel. As portrayed in Scripture, the officers set before the church and community an example of piety, love, service, and moral integrity. Officers are not free from repeated expressions of sin. Neither are members and officers free to adopt a lifestyle of conscious, continuing, and unresisted sin in any area of their lives. For the church to ordain a self-affirming, practicing homosexual person to ministry would be to act in contradiction to its charter and calling in Scripture, setting in motion both within the church and society serious contradictions to the will of Christ.

The repentant homosexual person who finds the power of Christ redirecting his or her sexual desires toward a married heterosexual commitment, or finds God's power to control his or her desires and to adopt a celibate lifestyle, can certainly be ordained, all other qualifications being met. Indeed, such candidates must be welcomed and be free to share their full identity. Their experience of hatred and rejection may have given them a unique capacity for love and sensitivity as wounded healers among heterosexual Christians, and they may be incomparably equipped to extend the church's outreach to the homosexual community.

We believe that Jesus Christ intends the ordination of officers to be a sign of hope to the church and the world. Therefore our present understanding of God's will precludes the ordination of persons who do not repent of homosexual practice.

Part I. Conclusion

Response to Overture 9 (1976)

The Presbytery of New York City and the Presbytery of the Palisades have asked the General Assembly to give "definitive guidance" in regard to the ordination of persons who may be otherwise well qualified but who affirm their own homosexual identity and practice.

The phrase "homosexual persons" does not occur in the Book of Order of the United Presbyterian Church. No phrase within the Book of Order explicitly prohibits the ordination of self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons to office within the church. However, no phrase within the Book of Order can be construed as an explicit mandate to disregard sexual practice when evaluating candidates for ordination. In short, the Book of Order does not give explicit direction to presbyteries, elders, and congregations as to whether or not self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons are eligible or ineligible for ordination to office.

Therefore, the 190th General Assembly (1978) of The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America offers the presbyteries the following definitive guidance:
That unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination set forth in Form of Government, Chapter VII, Section 3 (37.03): ... "It is indispensable that, besides possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired, everyone undertaking a particular ministry should have a sense of inner persuasion, be sound in the faith, live according to godliness, have the approval of God's people and the concurring judgment of a lawful judicatory of the Church." In relation to candidates for the ordained ministry, committees should be informed by the above guidance.

E. Discuss the ways in which these sections of the 1978 Policy Statement are reflected in the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

(Background for the Discussion)

The 1978 Policy Statement was framed as "definitive guidance" by the General Assembly of the UPCUSA. In that action the denomination was responding to a specific overture from the presbyteries of New York City and Palisades. The Policy Statement was offered as guidance for all presbyteries.

A few years later, in 1983, the PCUS and the UPCUSA were reunited to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The *Book of Order* guidance on ordination at reunion was framed as follows:

G-6.0106a. To those called to exercise special functions in the church—deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament—God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the

Christian gospel in the church and in the world. They must have the approval of God's people and the concurring judgment of governing body of the church.

This statement remains in our church's constitution; however, questions about ordination and homosexuality continued to come before General Assemblies. In order to answer any doubts about the interpretation of G-6.0106 with regards to ordination of openly gay and lesbian church members, the General Assembly in 1993 adopted the recommendations of the UPCUSA 1978 Policy Statement as the "Authoritative Interpretation" of the PCUSA. As an Authoritative Interpretation, the policy is binding on all governing bodies as an official interpretation of what the *Constitution* means. This Authoritative Interpretation reads:

Current Constitutional Law in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is that self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons may not be ordained as ministers of Word and Sacrament, elders, or deacons.

The 1993 "Authoritative Interpretation" was established in order to add constitutional weight to the "definitive guidance" of the 1978 Policy Statement. This decision, however, did not end the controversy, as there were those who argued that the decision of the General Assembly could be constitutionally binding only if it were an official statement of the Book of Order. The constitution requires concurrence of a majority of all presbyteries for any amendments to the Book of Order. In 1996 after presbyteries voted 97 affirmative, 74 negative, and 1 no action, the General Assembly adopted a new paragraph to section G-6.0106. Paragraph "b" reads as follows:

Those who are called to ordained 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.

1. What are the virtues and limitations of holding those who are called to ordained office in the church to a higher spiritual and moral standard?
2. According to such standards, who can be ordained?

E. Read the section titled *Pluralism and Unity in the Church*.

Pluralism and Unity in the Church

We of the 190th General Assembly (1978) realize that not all United Presbyterians can in conscience agree with our conclusions. Some are persuaded that there are forms of homosexual behavior that are not sinful and that persons who practice these forms can legitimately be ordained.

This is wholly in keeping with the diversity of theological viewpoint and the pluralism of opinion that characterize the United Presbyterian Church. We are concerned not to stifle these diverging opinions and to encourage those who hold them to remain within the church.

As Paul clearly teaches in Eph. 4:1-16, as members of Christ's body we desperately need one another. None of us is perfect. No opinion or decision is irreformable. Nor do we mean to close further study of homosexuality among the presbyteries and congregations. Quite the contrary, the action we recommend to the judicatories includes a firm direction to study this matter further, so that fear and hatred of homosexual persons may be healed and mission and ministry to homosexual persons strengthened and increased. The pluralism that can bring paralyzing weakness to the church when groups pursue their vision in isolation from one another can bring health and vigor when they practice pluralism-in-dialogue.

We want this dialogue to continue. Nevertheless, we judge that it cannot effectively be pursued in the uncertainty and insecurity that would be generated by the Assembly's silence on this matter at this time. On the basis of our understanding that the practice of homosexuality is sin, we are concerned that homosexual believers and the observing world should not be left in doubt about the church's mind on this issue during any further period of study. Even some who see some forms of homosexual behavior as moral are concerned that persons inside and outside the church will stumble in their faith and understanding if this matter is unresolved.

F. Discuss the biblical and theological basis for unity in the church.

(Background for Discussion) The assumption of this policy statement is that the denomination would remain united in the midst of intense disagreement, and that this unity required clarity about its conviction in the midst of questions and struggles. The Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture are the basis of the church's unity. While it is reasonable to expect disagreement with those persons who disregard the authority of Christ and Scripture, it can be disconcerting to find polarizing view points among people of faith who are equally committed to Christ and the study of the Word. Not surprisingly, the church in every generation has wrestled

with maintaining Christian unity in the face of polarizing issues of one type or another. Our denomination's most recent effort to resolve our current polarization came in the form of a task force formed by the General Assembly to study the church's "Peace, Unity, and Purity." The task force met together over a period of four years and presented their report in 2006. Here is an excerpt from the report:

943 The task force believes that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to hold together in one body. We do
 not deny that differences in the church are deep and important.
 944 Even in our small task force, we are far apart on some issues despite intense engagement together in
 945 discernment over nearly four years. At the same time, both in our own fellowship and in the
 946 church whose diversity we were chosen to represent, we have discovered more agreement
 947 than disagreement. Core convictions about the gospel draw Presbyterians together. The task
 948 force found it possible to state these core convictions in one voice. Our gratitude and joy for
 949 the privilege of confessing the faith together convince us that the Presbyterian Church
 950 (U.S.A.) must not let its differences pull it apart. Each of us on the task force still thinks that
 951 some positions others among us hold are incorrect, even damaging to the church and the
 952 clarity of its message. Yet we have come to respect the integrity with which theological views
 953 different from our own are held, and we have seen that many others in the church have the
 954 same capacity to perceive the biblical basis and Christian credibility of other perspectives.
 955 Therefore, the task force has concluded that, despite disagreements, the Presbyterian
 956 Church (U.S.A.) should make every effort to prevent schism. What protections are there
 957 against bitter division? The task force, diverse in its makeup, has gained some practical
 958 wisdom about what it required for unity while important differences remain. Our pattern of
 959 life together, our experiences of the results of sustained study and regular worship, and our
 960 review of history and the principles of polity have convinced us that there are Presbyterian
 961 traditions and habits, some of which have been underutilized, that may enable the
 962 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) not only to avoid a division, but to grow closer in Christ as its
 963 members struggle together to live out the gospel.³

1. It is interesting to take note of common themes in documents separated by a span of 28 years. What common threads do you observe between this excerpt from the 1996 task force report to the 2006 General Assembly and the "Pluralism and Unity in the Church" section of the 1978 Policy Statement?
2. In what way does Scripture guide the church's statements commending unity in the church? (See Eph. 4. Also provide link to Joe Small's article, "Unity and the Spirit" and Sheldon Sorge's article "Bearing With One Another.")

³ Lines 943-963 of the PUP report: A copy of the full report and a study guide is available on the PCUSA web site: www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity.

3. In dealing with members of Christ's body whose sins may be more visible than your own, what practical humility does Christ require? What accountability is required?
4. As a part of the body of Christ, when finding yourself out of agreement with positions taken by the whole body, what practical humility does Christ require? What accountability is required?
5. What are the virtues and limitations of congregations remaining united in the face of serious disagreements?

Optional guest speaker:

Invite a guest with expertise in the Constitution and polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Understanding how our denomination is bound by the Constitution (Book of Order and Book of Confessions) will awaken us to the connectional nature of our church and to how that connectedness shapes our denomination's unity.

As with the suggestion to invite a specialist in the previous sessions, the purpose of inviting such a guest is to allow participants in the study to gather information about the Constitution and polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The one who facilitates the study should steer participants away from questions that ask the speaker to comment on their own judgments about the ethical and theological issues in our present struggles. Such discussion should be reserved for a future session. The one who facilitates the study should also steer the speaker away from comments that go beyond presenting a full account of PCUSA polity. The speaker should be chosen with care, to ensure that she or he will be able to present this information in a way that is not biased toward advocacy of any particular group's stance in our current debates. While perfect neutrality is impossible, it is possible to strive toward neutrality – the very quality this study asks study participants to embody to the best of their ability. We should not expect less of invited speakers. At this point, any questions the group might ask or

remarks the speaker makes should focus on the polity that shapes our life together in the PCUSA.

SESSION FOUR

This session gives participants an opportunity to assess the current practices of their local congregation in light of 1978 Policy Statement conclusions.

A. Read the section titled *Ministry and Mission* as well as the section titled

Decriminalization and Civil Rights.

Ministry and Mission

In ministry the church seeks to express and portray the grace and mercy of Christ in worship, nurture, evangelism, and service to those within the covenant community. In mission the church proclaims to all the good news of redemption and reconciliation, calls persons and nations to repentant faith in Christ, and promotes and demonstrates the advance of his rule in history through healing works of mercy and prophetic witness that aim at justice and liberation.

In its ministry and mission the church must offer both to homosexual persons and to those who fear and hate them God's gracious provision of redemption and forgiveness. It must call both to repentant faith in Christ, urging both toward loving obedience to God's will.

The church's grappling with the issue of homosexuality has already energized its membership in a remarkable awakening of prayer and theological study. Our study should continue with the aim of reaching harmony in our diverging positions on homosexuality and other crucial issues. Our prayer should now be concentrated upon this process of internal reconciliation and also upon the creation of ministry with homosexual persons. Great love and care must be exercised toward homosexual persons already within our church, both those who have affirmed their sexual identity and practice and those who have in conscience chosen not to do so. We urge candidates committees, ministerial relations committees, personnel committees, nominating committees, and judicatories to conduct their examination of candidates for ordained office with discretion and sensitivity, recognizing that it would be a hindrance to God's grace to make a specific inquiry into the sexual orientation or practice of candidates for ordained office or ordained officers where the person involved has not taken the initiative in declaring his or her sexual orientation.

The Christian community can neither condone nor participate in the widespread contempt for homosexual persons that prevail in our general culture. Indeed, beyond this, it must do everything in its power to prevent society from continuing to hate, harass, and oppress them. The failure of the church to demonstrate grace in its life has contributed to the forcing of homosexual persons into isolated communities. This failure has served to reinforce the homosexual way of life and to heighten alienation from both church and society. The church should be a spiritual and moral vanguard leading society in response to homosexual persons.

Through direct challenge and support the church should encourage the public media-television, film, the arts, and literature-to portray in a wholesome manner robust, fully human life expressing the finer qualities of the human spirit. It should call upon its members and agencies to work to eliminate prejudicial and stereotypical images of homosexual persons in the public media.

Decriminalization and Civil Rights

There is no legal, social, or moral justification for denying homosexual persons access to the basic requirements of human social existence. Society does have a legitimate role in regulating some sexual conduct, for criminal law properly functions to preserve public order and decency and to protect citizens from public offense, personal injury, and exploitation. Thus, criminal law properly prohibits

homosexual and heterosexual acts that involve rape, coercion, corruption of minors, mercenary exploitation, or public display. However, homosexual and heterosexual acts in private between consenting adults involve none of these legitimate interests of society. Sexual conduct in private between consenting adults is a matter of private morality to be instructed by religious precept or ethical example and persuasion, rather than by legal coercion.

Vigilance must be exercised to oppose federal, state, and local legislation that discriminates against persons on the basis of sexual orientation and to initiate and support federal, state, or local legislation that prohibits discrimination against persons on the basis of sexual orientation in employment, housing, and public accommodations. This provision would not affect the church's employment policies.
guidance.

B. Discuss the possibilities in living out the Policy Statement's "ministry and mission" to homosexual persons while at the same time holding to a position that does not ordain practicing homosexuals to positions of leadership in the church.

1. What are the virtues and limitations of carrying out both directives simultaneously?
2. What tensions exist for the church in taking a stance that accepts a person's sexual orientation, but cannot condone the behavior to which that orientation naturally leads?
3. What tensions exist for the church in calling people to repent of sexual impurity, while also claiming spiritual and moral leadership in society's response to homosexual persons?

C. Read Part II of the Policy Statement *Conclusion*.

Part II. Policy Statement *Conclusion*
Recommendations

Consistent with this policy statement and conclusions, the 190th General Assembly (1978):

1. Adopts this policy statement and directs the Office of the General Assembly to send a copy of the policy statement to all congregations, presbyteries, and synods and to provide it for widespread distribution.
2. Receives the background paper of the Task Force to Study Homosexuality as a study document, and directs the Office of the General Assembly to provide copies to all congregations, presbyteries, and synods and to make such copies available to others upon request.

3. Urges judicatories, agencies, and local churches to undertake a variety of educational activities, using both formal and informal church structures and organizations.
 - a. Since homosexuality is one issue that helps clarify our general responsibility to God in the world and focuses many dimensions of belief and action, such educational activities should probe such basic issues as (1) the strengthening of family life; (2) ministry to single persons and affirmation of their full participation in the Christian community; (3) nurturing lifestyles in our families, congregations, and communities that celebrate the values of friendship with peers of one's own sex and the opposite sex, committed choice of life-mates, joyous and loving fidelity within marriage, the establishment of homes where love and care can nurture strong children able to give loving service to others, and the fashioning of an atmosphere of justice, truth, and kindness that signals Christ's presence; (4) understanding how to extend ministries of deep concern and challenge to those who through choice or circumstance are sexually active, homosexually or heterosexually, outside the covenant of marriage; (5) helping those whose ability to show loving concern is destroyed by homophobia-the irrational fear of and contempt for homosexual persons.
 - b. Workshops in synods and presbyteries should be conducted both to explore ways to help homosexual persons participate in the life of the church and to discover new ways of reaching out to homosexual persons outside the church.
 - c. Courses on sexuality should be initiated by seminaries, colleges, and churches to provide officers and members with a systematic understanding of the dynamics of human sexuality as understood within the context of Christian ethics.
 - d. Contact and dialogue should be encouraged among groups and persons of all persuasions on the issue of homosexuality.
4. Urges presbyteries and congregations to develop outreach programs to communities of homosexual persons beyond the church to allow higher levels of rapport to emerge.
5. Urges agencies of the General Assembly, as appropriate, to develop responses to the following needs:
 - a. Support for outreach programs by presbyteries and congregations to homosexual persons beyond the church to allow higher levels of rapport to emerge.
 - b. Encouragement of contact and dialogue among groups and persons who disagree on whether or not homosexuality is sinful per se and whether or not homosexual persons may be ordained as church officers.
 - c. Development of structures to counsel and support homosexual persons concerned about their sexuality and their Christian faith.
 - d. Development of pastoral counseling programs for those affected or offended by the decision of this General Assembly.
6. Urges candidates committees, personnel committees, nominating committees, and judicatories to conduct their examination of candidates for ordained office with discretion and sensitivity, recognizing that it would be a hindrance to God's grace to make a specific inquiry into the sexual orientation or practice of candidates for ordained office or ordained officers where the person involved has not taken the initiative in declaring his or her sexual orientation.
7. Calls upon the media to continue to work to end the use of harmful stereotypes of homosexual persons; and encourages agencies of the General Assembly, presbyteries, and congregations to develop strategies to insure the end of such abuse.

8. Calls on United Presbyterians to reject in their own lives, and challenge in others, the sin of homophobia, which drives homosexual persons away from Christ and his church.
 9. Encourages persons working in the human sciences and therapies to pursue research that will seek to learn more about the nature and causes of homosexuality.
 10. Encourages the development of support communities of homosexual Christians seeking sexual reorientation or meaningful, joyous, and productive celibate lifestyles and the dissemination throughout the church of information about such communities.
 11. Encourages seminaries to apply the same standards for homosexual and heterosexual persons applying for admission.
 12. Reaffirms the need, as expressed by the 182nd General Assembly (1970) for United Presbyterians to work for the decriminalization of private homosexual acts between consenting adults, and calls for an end to the discriminatory enforcement of other criminal laws against homosexual persons.
 13. Calls upon United Presbyterians to work for the passage of laws that prohibit discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, and public accommodations based on the sexual orientation of a person.
 14. Declares that these actions shall not be used to affect negatively the ordination rights of any United Presbyterian deacon, elder, or minister who has been ordained prior to this date.
- Further the 190th General Assembly (1978) calls upon those who in conscience have difficulty accepting the decisions of this General Assembly bearing on homosexuality to express that conscience by continued dialogue within the church.

D. Discuss practical means for members of The Presbyterian Church (USA) to live out the conclusions set out in the 1978 Policy Statement.

(Background for Discussion)

All of us has had the experience of putting up a good appearance when circumstances demand one's best behavior. Most of us understand the socially acceptable conduct for settings such as a job interview, or meeting one's new in-laws, or attending a funeral. There are also situations however, in which we feel like the acceptable behavior in a situation conflicts with our inward values. If this tension persists over time we might say we are living a "divided life," or in extreme cases we might say we are "living a lie." It is a very stressful and undesirable existence.

The divided life is just as stressful to communities as it is to individuals. An undivided life is as integral to the wholeness of the Body of Christ as it is to individual wholeness.

Presbyterians have studied homosexuality from many different angles: theological, biblical,

sociological, legal, and so on. For all our careful study, debate, reasoning, and prayer, however, the well-meaning people of God have time and again come to different conclusions. Do these various conclusions necessitate that we live as a divided community? It depends.

How serious are the theological and ethical disagreements that come to a focus in our disagreements over sexual ethics, and most particularly over homosexuality? Are these disagreements like our disagreements about what Bible translation or hymnal to use? Are these disagreements like our disagreements about what Bible translation or hymnal to use? Are these disagreements like our disagreements on the question of legal access to abortion? Are they as serious as the disagreements that lead us to keep our denominational existence apart from other denominations such as the Reformed Church in America, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Assemblies of God, the Roman Catholic Church and others? Are they as serious as the disagreements that keep us from merging our denomination with an Islamic or Hindu group? Part of our struggle in the present moment is deciding how deep and serious are our disagreements over homosexuality (among other issues).

1. Which of the Policy Statement Conclusions do you wholeheartedly embrace?
2. Which of the Policy Statement Conclusions seem to go against your personal convictions?
3. How do we live together as a denomination in the face of disagreement on matters of conscience, when our common life cannot be shaped by all sets of convictions?

E. Using a scale of 1 through 4 (see “Key” below) assess your congregation’s current level of response to the recommendations of the 1978 Policy Statement. After allowing some time for participants to work independently, bring the group to together and complete the assessment as a group exercise. Take some time to discuss what insights are gained from the assessment exercise.

KEY

- 1 = We offer no programs or resources to address this issue.
- 2 = We recognize the need but are not sure how to respond.
- 3 = We recognize the need and can helpfully guide people to appropriate resources in the local community.
- 4 = We provide visible and active support and resources to address this issue.

The following chart is a simplified version of the original statement that may be printed off and used as a handout to guide the discussion.

Assess your congregation

	1	2	3	4
3a) Educational programs that probe basic issues such as:				
i. family life,				
ii. singleness				
iii. healthy relationships,				
iv. ministries to those sexually active outside of marriage,				
v. homophobia.				
3b) Workshops in synods and presbyteries to help homosexual persons participate in the life of the church and reach out to those outside the church				
3c) Courses on sexuality understood with the context of Christian ethics.				
3d) Contact and dialogue on the issue of homosexuality.				
4) Outreach programs to communities of homosexual persons beyond the church.				
5) Urge GA to develop responses to the following needs:				
a. Support for outreach programs,				
b. Dialogue among groups who disagree on ordination question,				
c. structure to counsel homosexual persons concerned about their sexuality and their Christian faith,				
d. pastoral counseling programs for those affected or offended by the decision of the GA.				
6) Refrain from making inquiry into sexual orientation or practice of candidates for ordained office where the person involved has not taken the initiative in declaring his or her sexual orientation.				
7) Call upon the media to continue to work to end the use of harmful stereotypes of homosexual persons; and encourages agencies of the GA, presbyteries, and congregations to develop strategies to insure the end of such abuse.				
8) Reject the sin of homophobia which drives persons away from Christ and his church.				
9) Encourage persons working in the human sciences and therapies to pursue research that will seek to learn more about the nature and causes of homosexuality.				
10) Develop support communities of homosexual Christians seeking sexual reorientation or productive celibate lifestyles and disseminate information about such communities.				

11) Encourage seminaries to apply the same standards for homosexual and heterosexual persons applying for admission.

12) Work for decriminalization of private homosexual acts between consenting adults, and call for an end to discriminatory enforcement of other criminal laws against homosexual persons.

13) Work for the passage of laws that prohibit discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, and public accommodations based on sexual orientation.

F. The final statement of the Policy Statement encourages those who disagree to remain in continued dialogue with the rest of the PCUSA.

1. In what ways is your local church expressing its willingness to continue this dialogue? In what ways is your local church expressing its unwillingness to continue this dialogue?
2. As you complete this study, how do you sense God calls you to respond?

Optional guest speaker:

Invite a guest who can summarize the work of the Peace, Unity and Purity, Task Force and present a synopsis of the task force's report. Understanding the 2006 report gives a contemporary voice to the virtues of Christian unity expressed in the 1978 Policy Statement.