

Moving Toward Full Inclusion

2nd edition



Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in The United Church of Canada

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L'Église Unie du Canada



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Introduction

In 1988, the United Church's 32nd General Council made two statements about sexual orientation, church membership, and church leadership. General Council declared that

- “all persons regardless of their sexual orientation who profess faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to him, are welcome to be or become full members of The United Church of Canada,” and
- “all members of The United Church of Canada are eligible to be considered for ordered ministry.”¹

The same meeting articulated a partnership policy for The United Church of Canada. “Seeking to Understand ‘Partnership’ for God’s Mission Today” described ways to work with other churches, non-governmental organizations, and social movements.² Partnership was affirmed as “becoming involved with others in God’s mission for wholeness of life, especially on behalf of the poor and powerless.” There was recognition that partnership “brings people together in community for mutual empowerment through the sharing of gifts, recognized as gifts freely given by God for the benefit of all, not possessions which some may control.” Our understanding of partnership continues to evolve: in 2008 the Executive of the General Council approved a new partnership statement that articulated the quest for “right relations” (already familiar from the church’s work for reconciliation with Indigenous people and from feminist theological reflection) as integral to partnership practice.

In 2003, 15 years after the statements on sexual orientation, membership, and leadership, General Council voted to support changes to Canadian civil law that effectively recognized marriage between persons of the same sex.³

In between those landmark decisions on sexual orientation and inclusion, the United Church’s Division of World Outreach (DWO) stated its commitment to gender justice *and* partnership. At the close of the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women in 1998, DWO approved “Gender Justice and Partnership Guidelines.”

Gender justice analyzes relationships between men and women, particularly those relationships that are oppressive. It looks at how these relationships are affected by other factors, such as class, ethnicity and sexual orientation. The ultimate goal of gender justice is to support the creation (or strengthening) of transformative, non-oppressive relationships which we believe to be expressive of the Reign of God.⁴

The document drew on work done by the World Council of Churches on gender issues related to resource-sharing. The World Council of Churches Unit IV (Sharing and Service) defined gender as referring to the socially defined roles of men and women, and boys and girls. In contrast, sex roles refer to the male and female biological functions.⁵

This definition was incorporated into the guidelines and continued to inform the work of DWO and, after the restructuring of the General Council Office in 2002, the work of the new Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit (JGER).

1 “Overview: Historical Timeline,” retrieved March 4, 2009, from www.united-church.ca/history/overview/timeline#80.

2 Retrieved March 7, 2009, from www.united-church.ca/files/partners/appendixa.pdf.

3 *Record of Proceedings of the 38th General Council, 2003*, 75.

4 “Gender Justice and Partnership Guidelines,” Division of World Outreach (The United Church of Canada, 1998), 10. Retrieved March 4, 2009, from www.united-church.ca/files/partners/genderjustice.pdf.

5 Cited in Myra Blyth and Wendy S. Robins, *No Boundaries to Compassion? An Exploration of Women, Gender and Diakonia* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Programme Unit on Sharing and Service, 1998). Retrieved March 4, 2009, from: www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/regional/compas.html.

With the guidelines, the Gender Justice and Partnership Monitoring Committee was established. The committee facilitated and tracked the implementation of the Gender Justice and Partnership Guidelines. To do this, the committee developed resources and tools to support staff in enacting the commitments that were made through the guidelines.

A cornerstone of The United Church of Canada's approach to partnership has been its commitment to systemic justice. The living out in partnership of a commitment to systemic justice may be enriching for all concerned, but it may also present significant challenges, strains, and even sharp tensions in relationships.⁶ The United Church's approach to partnership focuses on long-term accompaniment of ecumenical, interfaith, and global partners, not the imposition of the United Church's theology or analysis. Our focus is on the sharing of resources—not just financial ones, but also people and ideas—and the affirmation of all contributions.

From our practice of partnership, some questions emerge: Does the above approach stand in the way of functioning as real partners that can challenge one another as we work on systemic justice issues? Does our partnership approach temper our advocacy of systemic justice issues in areas like sexual minority rights and gender issues with partners who may have different perspectives?

Motivated in part by a sense that dialogue with partners about sexual orientation and gender identity questions had lagged behind other aspects of dialogue about gender justice, in 2006 the Gender Justice and Partnership Monitoring Committee began work to develop a resource that would enable mutual dialogue with partners (Canadian and global) regarding sexual orientation. This work was prompted by the following factors (among others):

- experiences by United Church representatives in global, regional, and ecumenical partner settings where the fact that they were gay or lesbian became an issue
- lack of safe opportunities for openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual members of the United Church to serve with partners overseas
- the desire to share more forthrightly with global and ecumenical partners this part of the identity of the United Church in a manner that was respectful of partner positions
- identification by regional program coordinators of the need for a resource to support dialogue, particularly as debate develops in other denominations around the world and as sexual minority groups in other countries call for human rights protection and inclusion

A further reason for developing such a resource was identified in 2003 by the Moderator at the time, the Rev. Marion Pardy. She wrote that it “may be confusing to the rest of the world” to find that “for The United Church of Canada, a diversity of views and practices within our denomination is the norm, rather than the exception.” We need a resource that explains how the people of the United Church have been able to “live together faithfully, in the midst of diverse opinions.”⁷

The intent of this resource is to

- enable mutual dialogue with partners regarding sexual orientation
- enable the respectful sharing with partners of The United Church of Canada's understandings of sexual orientation and the struggles it has encountered in this area

6 “Commitment to Systemic Justice and Implications for Partnership,” The United Church of Canada Partnership Consultation: Division of World Outreach, 2000.

7 Marion Pardy in “Moderator Calls for ‘Holy Manners’ in the Same-sex Marriage Debate: The United Church of Canada and the Civil Recognition of Same-sex Partnerships” (August 2003). Retrieved March 4, 2009, from www.united-church.ca/communications/news/moderator/030801.

This resource is not intended to impose upon or to convert partners to the official United Church position regarding the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in the church, but simply to say: this is what happened here. We are also aware that movement toward full inclusion is not over. Even as preparation of this resource neared completion in mid-2009, sensationalistic media coverage of the situation of a South African runner drew attention to a variety of intersex conditions that have little in common except that the people who live with them are deemed abnormal by society.⁸ At almost the same time, the United Church's 40th General Council declared that

in matters respecting doctrine, worship, membership and governance, The United Church of Canada is opposed to discrimination against any person on the basis of age, ancestry, colour, disability, ethnic origin, gender identity, language, marital status, place of origin, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic status or any other basis by which a person is devalued.⁹

In 2009 the 40th General Council also affirmed the participation and ministry of transgender people within The United Church of Canada, and encouraged all congregations of the church to welcome transgender people into membership, ministry, and full participation.

In 2012, the Executive of the General Council passed a motion affirming that the United Church acknowledges the distinction between gender identity (referring to a person's innate, deeply felt sense of being male, female, both or neither) and sexual orientation (having to do with the gender to which one is emotionally and physically attracted); and that gender identity is not a barrier to membership and ministry in The United Church of Canada.

Definitions evolve and we are constantly informed by the contributions of people whose sexual minority or gender identity status has led to their marginalization in church and society.

We recognize that from our diverse religious, cultural, and legal traditions, we have different experiences to share. A draft of this resource was reviewed by partners and representatives of the United Church during the church's Partnership Consultation in June 2008. Partners agreed that the document was a worthy contribution to dialogue on a topic that has often proved divisive among churches. As a result of partners' comments, efforts have been made to present the document as an invitation to dialogue; to reflect a broader variety of views from within the United Church, partners, and other churches; and to provide more study suggestions.

Since this work began, this resource has been identified as one that may enable dialogue within intercultural (or ethnic minority) congregations in the United Church,¹⁰ and with ecumenical and interfaith partners in Canada that struggle with the official position of the United Church regarding the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons in the life and ministry of the church. This resource may also be helpful for congregations and/or ministry personnel of other denominations seeking to be admitted to The United Church of Canada.

A useful background reference on the United Church's approach to scripture is *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (1992), which is available online at www.united-church.ca or by order from United Church Resource Distribution.

We welcome your comments and questions, either in person as you encounter representatives of The United Church of Canada, or by email: justice@united-church.ca.

8. Intersex Initiative. Retrieved September 26, 2009, from www.ipdx.org/articles/intersex-faq.html.

9. The United Church of Canada, 40th General Council 2009, Arctic Commission #6, "The United Church of Canada Commitment to Inclusion."

10. The United Church is racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse. The phrase "ethnic ministry congregations" has been used to refer to congregations that do not belong to the dominant culture within Canada and the United Church.

Chapter 1

Who We Are and How We Work

From its founding in 1925 to the first decade of the new millennium, The United Church of Canada has evolved in its understanding of sexuality and marriage. In 1925, Article 20 of our Basis of Union stated, “We believe that it is our duty...to preserve the inviolability of marriage and the sanctity of the family.”¹

Almost 80 years later, on August 14, 2003, the church’s 38th General Council voted to call on the federal government to recognize same-sex marriages in the same way that heterosexual ones are recognized. In 2005, Canada became one of a very few nations to recognize same-sex marriages, even while some of our ministers and congregations refused to perform them.

How did this happen? How did we get to this point?

These questions and others about our decisions and process have come from global and Canadian partners, denominations, and political and social allies, as well as from some of our own members.

The discussion has also to do with the United Church’s welcoming and accepting men and women who identify themselves as other than heterosexual. “Sexual minorities” may include people who are homosexual (gay men and lesbian women), bisexual, transgender (people who identify as one sex physically, spiritually, emotionally but are physically of the other sex), or gender variant (those who do not conform to dominant gender norms). In Canada, we generally understand homosexuals to be those who are attracted to people of the same sex. But there are other perspectives.

The idea of a gay identity is not universal. To suggest that it is, can be seen as a piece of Western ethno-centricity. Many people in the South do indeed identify as “gay”...But many more people in the South actually engage in same sex activity without identifying as gay at all. They *do* homosexuality, if you like, without *being* homosexuals.²

What are developing among sexual minorities in the global South (and perhaps among marginalized groups in northern countries) are ways of thinking and speaking about sexual diversity that are highly contextual.³ This is reflected as well in theological reflection about sexual orientation and gender identity in the global South.⁴

This small book is a summary of the United Church’s story. From some partners we hear about oppression and homophobia in their denominations or nations, and they ask us how we have dealt with the same issues in our church. We offer this resource in the spirit of invitation to dialogue, but also with caution, knowing that it might be seen as defensive about what we have done, or as us saying we have all the answers and solutions, or even be received as an unwelcome imposition. But this isn’t a “how to” manual or a guide for reaching a certain stage in the discussion. This is simply a record of what we have done so far.

No other nation is like Canada. Our history, our culture, and our day-to-day living are uniquely ours.

1 Basis of Union, Doctrine, Article XX. Retrieved March 2, 2009, from www.united-church.ca/files/manual/2007_manual.pdf, 18.

2 Vanessa Baird, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Sexual Diversity* (Toronto: New Internationalist Publications and Between the Lines, 2001), 14. Used with permission.

3 See, for example, “Gender Roles and Identities in Post-Colonial Polynesia—*Fa’afafine*: The Pacific’s ‘Third Gender,’” *Tok Blong Pasifik*, vol. 6, no. 3 (Fall 2008). Retrieved February 26, 2009, from www.pacificpeoplespartnership.org/media/TBP.Fall.08.pdf.

4 Terry Brown, ed., *Other Voices, Other Worlds: The Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality* (New York: Church Publishing, 2006), 1.

Likewise, the United Church is different from other churches in Canada. It was incorporated by a legal act of the Canadian Parliament. It is a combination of at least four theological streams (Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregationalist, and Evangelical Brethren), and it has a structure that is different from most of our brother and sister churches.

What follows is not a blueprint for others to follow—or avoid. It is a presentation of how we prayed, debated, fought, protested, pleaded, reflected, studied, heard, and moved within our context and faith.

As our story unfolds, you may find similar spaces in your context, your faith setting, and your culture. On the other hand, you may not identify with our journey and you may still wonder how we got it so wrong. So be it. Even where our contexts touch or overlap each other, how we respond to the issues will differ because of our cultures.

This is simply a humble attempt to explain our history. We understand that it cannot be duplicated precisely in any other place.

In June 2008, a draft of this document was shared with some global partners at the United Church's Partnership Consultation. Partners said the document was useful, but some added that it had not shifted their opinion: they still disagreed. But now they know our story. The consultation modelled the kind of respectful dialogue the church seeks to have with partners about this and other issues.

Our Social and Political Heritage

It should be remembered that Canada is made up of former colonies of the British and French empires. Our history begins with First Nations people having British and French culture imposed upon them. Our laws and Christian understanding of faith and ministry were based on European systems. Governments and churches collaborated in “civilizing” Aboriginal people (the First Nations) by making them Christian citizens.

Victorian principles governed us as well. Sexuality was seldom discussed, especially publicly. Under English law, sodomy was declared a crime punishable by hanging in 1533. This was still the law when Canada created the Consolidated Statutes of Canada in 1859. The United Kingdom maintained the offence but removed hanging as punishment in 1861; Canada did not do so until 1869. In 1892, Canada introduced laws against gross indecency, which prohibited all forms of homosexual behaviour. That law was retained until 1969.⁵ Some will ask why we discuss sexuality even now. Whether biological or social or both, isn't this a private and individual matter and not a public one?

The answer to this lies in the compulsory heterosexuality that is built into our society through institutions such as marriage and family. It is through these institutions that fundamental rights and privileges such as free citizenship, health care and insurance coverage, retirement pensions, property inheritance and old age security are denied to a section of the population.⁶

5 Similar laws still exist in many countries that were once British colonies. See article at www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sodomy_law. Retrieved March 2, 2009.

6 Sanjukta Ghosh, “Myths on Sexual Minorities—II” in *Facts against Myths*, vol. VI, no. 4 (2000): 2–3. Used with permission.

Decision-Making Processes in the United Church

Before we look at the history of sexuality and marriage, we will look at how decisions are made in the United Church. In the United Church, there are four bodies (or “courts”) that have the power to make decisions within the areas for which they have control.

The local body is the pastoral charge, which can include one or more congregations. The pastoral charge deals with the care, education, worship, and the needs of its members. It is governed by an elected board or council. Their authority over worship is a key element in our story.

The presbytery (or “district” in Newfoundland and Labrador) is a gathering of pastoral charges. Presbyteries supervise the local pastoral charges, helping them find ministers as well as overseeing the behaviour of both ministers and pastoral charges. When it is needed, they provide educational training for the pastoral charge. All ministers are members of presbytery, and pastoral charges each send at least one layperson to presbytery. The members of presbytery elect an executive to help coordinate the work.

A Conference is a gathering of presbyteries. We have 13 Conferences. Twelve are based on geography, but the All Native Circle Conference is open to any First Nations (Indigenous) congregations or presbyteries across the country that choose to join it. Conferences usually meet once a year. All ministers are members, and presbyteries also send lay people. This group elects a president who works with staff and Conference committee volunteers. Conferences have staffs that are paid by the national church. Conferences have major roles in selecting, training, ordaining, and commissioning ministers; administering Mission and Service grants (funds collected and disbursed to Conferences by the national church); and assisting presbyteries with their work, especially taking care of ministers and finding trained ministers.

General Council is the national governing body that meets every three years. It has an equal number of ministers and lay people. Conferences receive nominations from presbyteries and elect the volunteer representatives to General Council at their annual meeting. Those elected to General Council are called commissioners. General Council and the Executive of the General Council are where national policies are decided.

The United Church believes that these groups are guided by God through the Holy Spirit, who communicates not only with individuals, but also, in our “collegial process,” with the whole community of God’s people.

It is the General Council decisions that are United Church of Canada positions. These policies are statements about what the United Church as a whole believes. But, because we are an inclusive church, there are members of the United Church who will not agree with General Council decisions. That is their right. The same is true for pastoral charges and presbyteries. They may not agree with a national position and they are not required to.

How can this be?

The United Church has a heritage of radical openness, of being inclusive of people in our church family despite significant disagreement. It is possible, for example, for the General Council to declare publicly that the United Church supports ordination of women, but individuals and pastoral charges can privately disagree. In the process of call (choosing a minister to covenant with), the pastoral charge may consistently choose a male over a female and cite other reasons than gender for doing so. The same applies to decisions concerning race, culture, orientation, and abilities.

Same-sex (or same-gender) marriage, however, is different. The pastoral charge deals with worship and all of its forms within its bounds. This includes marriage. The pastoral charge decides policies on marriage, including

who can perform the ceremony and who can be married. It can, therefore, choose publicly not to perform same-sex marriages.

The decision on who may be married in and by The United Church of Canada is made by the congregation through its Session or equivalent. Some congregations have been celebrating same-gender covenants for a long time. For them, the move to same-gender marriage may be a seamless one. Some congregations will be lamenting the passage of the legislation and will find it to be against conscience to permit same-gender marriage in the church.⁷

The United Church's Understanding of Biblical Authority

One of the tools brought to us by our Methodist forebears in our foundation is John Wesley's quadrilateral for decision-making: scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. The Bible—both testaments—is the source of God's truth. But tradition, experience, and reason help us interpret scripture and reveal the truth.

“Tradition” means the history of Christian thought from the time the scriptures were written until the present. Our thoughts about God, Christ, and the Spirit have changed over the years because as we learn more about the truth contained in scriptures we add that new knowledge to our understanding. Tradition, in turn, is influenced by our personally lived “experience” of being Christian. Our experiences of what we encounter in ourselves and in our churches and communities raise questions about past teachings. Using “reason,” we connect experience with tradition and Biblical interpretation. Reason includes using all resources available to us: history, science, philosophy, culture, politics, cross-cultural exposure, etc.

All three—tradition, experience, and reason—have a role to play in seeking the truth of God contained in scripture. At different times in our journey one of the three took precedence or influenced another, which in turn influenced the others. In the 1992 United Church of Canada document *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture*, the Wesleyan quadrilateral was used but “tradition” and “reason” were respectively referred to as “heritage” and “understanding.”⁸

In 1925, the three founding denominations all recognized the power, authority, and significance of the Holy Bible but had different understandings of what that meant. In very broad terms, for Congregationalists, the Bible was “the authoritative witness to the word of God”; to Methodists it was “the primary source for Christian doctrine”; while for Presbyterians it was a “witness without parallel to Christ, but in human words reflecting beliefs of the time.”⁹

The first “renewal movement” (in the sense of renewed commitment to theological orthodoxy) within the United Church was created in 1966, partly due to debate over perceptions about the authority of scripture. As Laurie-Ann Zachar put it in a paper for the Ontario Theological Seminary, “There was an increasing liberalization in the surrounding culture as well as the church.... There was also a growing rebellion against the authority of

7 See Moderator Peter Short's “Pastoral Letter Following the Passage of Same-Sex Marriage Legislation.” Retrieved March 2, 2009, from www.united-church.ca/communications/news/moderator/050629.

8 Theology and Faith Committee for the General Council of The United Church of Canada, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1992).

9 Scott Douglas and Nanette McKay, eds., *The (Un)Official United Church Handbook* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2007), 78–81.

Scripture, and the church, through its longstanding liberal theological training, *adapted* to this easily with the 1964 New Sunday School Curriculum.”¹⁰

The United Church Renewal Fellowship stated that one of its primary goals was to hold the church accountable to its Basis of Union and to the authority of scripture. It stated that the New Curriculum showed that ministers had for many years been taught to look critically at the scriptures rather than accepting them as the authoritative word of God and seeking God’s message in them.¹¹

The second renewal movement also involved an understanding of the authority of scriptures. In 1974, Dr. Graham Scott and others formed Church Alive. When Dr. Scott was asked why the members of Church Alive didn’t join United Church Renewal Fellowship, he replied that the UCRF was inclined to see the scriptures as infallible, which he could not accept.¹² The two renewal groups had other concerns with United Church actions and attitudes but scripture was a key element.

The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture was the end result of work begun in 1985 by the church’s Theology and Faith Committee. The committee submitted its report in 1988 to the General Council. By a motion, the report was received and commended for study. Later, at the same Council, in the midst of debate on the report *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientations, Lifestyles and Ministry* the motion was expanded to include a national study on the theological and cultural premises that inform our reading of the scriptures. How do we hear God’s word in our day and age as good news for ourselves, our brothers and sisters, our culture, our nation, and our planet?

Over a 15-month period, more than 1,200 responses from meetings and United Church members were submitted basically answering the question, “What authority, then, does [the Bible] have with us and how does that authority arise for us?”¹³ The report points out:

When we read or hear or say the phrase “The Bible says,” we must remember that we are dealing with interpretation: what one reader or community understands the Bible says. Thus, the question of the authority of the Bible becomes interwoven with the question of a particular interpreter’s authority. The interweaving of authorities is unavoidable, but it is worth keeping in mind when we discuss questions of power and authority.¹⁴

In 1992, when accepting this report, the 34th General Council offered the following insights to congregations:

- Engaging the Bible is not optional for the Christian community.
- When we engage the Bible, individually and collectively, we are deeply influenced by and entangled in the world-views of the particular nation/community/family in which we live.
- Our interpretation of scripture is most clearly shown in the way we live.
- Interpretation is unavoidable when we are engaging the Bible.
- Each interpretation is an invitation to ever new discoveries and insights into God’s covenant with life and the earth.¹⁵

10 Laurie-Ann Zachar, “The Renewal/Reform Groups of the United Church of Canada: The Spirit of Methodism,” Ontario Theological Seminary, December 11, 1997. Retrieved March 2, 2009, from www.igs.net/~tonyc/ucrenewal.html.

11. Lloyd G. Cumming, *The Uncomfortable Pew: Committed to Renewal* (Barrie: UCRF, 1990), 25.

12. Michael Riodan, *The First Stone: Homosexuality and the United Church* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990), 35.

13 *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture*, 2–3.

14 *Ibid.*, 11–12

15 *Record of Proceedings of the 34th General Council*, 1992, 109.

Not everyone welcomed the new document. The National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations (NACC), which was formed in 1991, stated on its website:

We find the “Authority and Interpretation of Scripture” document produced by The United Church of Canada to be such that it undermines the faith upon which it was founded. It does this by describing Holy Scripture as a book among other books, commanding only the authority that any individual wishes to grant it. It reduces Christ from the Divine Son of God, to a caring and loving man who set an excellent example for us to follow. As such we find the document not only lacking but destructive in matters that are central to our faith.¹⁶

Scripture

1 Corinthians 13:8–12

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

Psalms 25:4, 5

*Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.*

Story

This story can be understood as an example of the United Church first “seeing dimly,” and then seeing more clearly and acting on the newer vision. John Wesley’s quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason are all involved. Mostly, though, it is a story of accepting diversity within the body of the United Church. We are one.

At the 36th General Council, held in 1997 in Camrose, Alberta, commissioners debated two petitions: the “Residential School Apology” and “An Apology from St. Andrews United Church for Harm Caused by ‘Indian’ Residential Schools.” Commissioners (the elected delegates to General Council) considered presentations by the First Nations, heard table group responses, consulted widely with resource people and First Nations commissioners, and listened to the story of a former student of a residential school as well as that of a former Christian educator in a residential school.

¹⁶ National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations, “Authority and Interpretation of Scripture.” Retrieved March 2, 2009, from www.unitedrenewal.org/issues_and_topics/authority_and_interpretation_of_scripture.html. Used with permission.

The Council passed a motion that included the phrase “express our deep regret and sorrow to the First Nations of Canada for the injustices that were done and for the role of The United Church of Canada in the native residential school system.”¹⁷

The former student was suing the United Church for its role in the residential school he attended. Both he and the former Christian educator, one of his teachers and supporters, were commissioners from British Columbia. When the motion passed, the former student thanked his fellow commissioners for what they had done, expressed sorrow that they had not moved as far as he hoped, and then crossed the stage and embraced the Moderator, the elected head of the United Church. This is the church in which he was a member and the church that he was suing.

We are diverse and yet we are one.

Questions

1. What are the structures of authority for decisions around gender issues, marriage, and sexuality in your community or agency or organization?
2. When there are challenges to decisions, how are they answered?
3. What authority does the Bible have in your decision-making? In what ways do tradition, experience, and/or reason, as described above, have a role in your decision-making?

¹⁷ *Record of Proceedings of the 36th General Council, 1997, 894.*

Chapter 2

Gender, Ordination, and Marriage

There is not the slightest possibility of women ever displacing men in this calling [ordination].... Those who urge this change in our polity do so, no doubt, with the thought that it would be in most unusual cases...that ordination would be asked for or thought of...¹

As this quotation from a 1935 *New Outlook* magazine (now *The United Church Observer*) illustrates, ordination and marriage have been controversial, complex, and constant topics in the history of the United Church. This chapter explores ordination and marriage in relation to the role of women, whose struggles set the stage for subsequent debates over sexual orientation, gender, and inclusion. Ordination moved from being an impossibility to being reluctantly accepted and, finally, to being a common occurrence. In marriage, the role of a wife and mother were examined thoroughly, and the tasks of parenting, housekeeping, and financially providing for the home are being reconsidered in a way that moves us closer to equality.

Because we are a collegial church, we are not simply a democracy. We listen to those who cannot vote; we pray for guidance; we read scripture; and we debate. When we vote, the majority does win. But, as in all cases of expanding understanding, it is always those with the power who will open the way to greater inclusion. Our understanding of authority—scriptural, political, and personal—has shifted.

From its birth, [The United Church of Canada] has had to accommodate a diversity of theological beliefs. It has had a history of tackling publicly the really tough social issues. Some cynics might say that they have a continual urge to shoot themselves in the foot, or to form a circular firing squad. It can be argued that they lose membership whenever they enter into one of these debates.²

At the very first General Council after church union in 1925, the commissioners (who were predominately, if not totally male) were faced with Lydia Gruchy's request to be ordained. Women in Canada had been given the right to vote in 1917 but were not yet "persons" equal to males.

The Canadian government had refused to allow women in its Senate, as it argued that women were not persons and a non-person could not be in Senate. Four women, including a United Church member, Nellie McClung, went to court and fought the issue to the top courts. In 1929, women were declared persons. The position of those who favoured the ordination of women was strengthened. Lydia Gruchy's request took on a new, challenging dimension. For the church, debate over the role of women and the tasks appropriate to each sex began at this point, as did the debate over what ministry is and who does it.

¹ *The New Outlook*, June 23, 1935, 76. Used with permission.

² "Denominations and homosexuality: The United Church of Canada and Homosexuality." Retrieved March 2, 2009, from www.religioustolerance.org/hom_ucc.htm.

Gruchy's request divided members of the church because of the prevailing understanding of the role of women. Paid accountable ministry was for men. Women might help but were expected to be primarily wives and mothers. In the midst of this discussion, the United Church made some very progressive statements. At the General Council of 1932, there was a report titled *The Meaning and Responsibility of Christian Marriage*. This report acknowledged that the subordination of women existed in the past, and encouraged their emancipation. Gruchy was not a wife or a mother. She had done very well in her theological studies and had served a six-point charge in Northern Saskatchewan. Could she, and women in general, be ordained ministers?

In 1936, Gruchy was finally ordained; she was among the first women ministers of major denominations in North America. And yet, she was seen as an exception to the rule. The United Church's national magazine at the time, *The New Outlook*, said, "There is not the slightest possibility of women ever displacing men in this calling.... Those who urge this change in our polity do so, no doubt, with the thought that it would be in most unusual cases, something like Miss Gruchy's, that ordination would be asked for or thought of and that the dangers that some people see are never likely to exist anywhere else than in their own imaginations."³

But women were being ordained. Women had also served in the Second World War and those who remained in Canada took on roles formerly reserved for men. How did this affect marriage and the role of women in the church?

In 1946, another General Council report, *Christian Marriage and Christian Home*, provided a new interpretation of Genesis. It repudiated St. Augustine's understanding of the male/female relationship and declared that the Genesis story is about equal companionship, not dominance of one over another. The United Church of Canada was called to be a community of equality.⁴

In major reports to General Councils in 1960 and 1962, the Commission on Marriage and Divorce described marriage as a mutual relationship. The first report, *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sex, Love, Marriage*, defined marriage as "an intimate personal union to which a man and woman consent, consummated in sexual intercourse, and perfected in a lifelong partnership of mutual love. Marriage is also a social institution recognized and regulated by the laws and customs which a society develops in order to safeguard its own continuity and welfare. A Christian marriage is one in which husband and wife have publicly covenanted together with God..."⁵ The commission recommended that the church "provide preparation for marriage and family responsibility by providing study courses on Christian marriage and sex education, pastoral training of ministers, and education for Christian family life and responsible parenthood."

It also reaffirmed that sexual union is not for procreation only. "The sexual act which consummates marriage is an expression of mutual love; it partakes of the nature of creation for the marriage union, and is for the perfecting of husband and wife, quite apart from its relation to procreation."⁶ The same report supported birth control as a decision for an individual's conscience.⁷ While it rejected homosexual activity as sin, it called for attitudes of fairness, "untinged with prejudice and always charitable," toward homosexual people.⁸

3 *The New Outlook*, June 23, 1935, 76.

4 Shirley Davy, ed., *Women, Work, and Worship* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1983), 185.

5 *Record of Proceedings of the 19th General Council, 1960*, 183.

6 *Record of Proceedings of the 19th General Council, 1960*, 156.

7 *Ibid.*, 164. See also the 28th General Council (1980) statement on abortion and contraception, retrieved March 9, 2009, www.united-church.ca/beliefs/policies/1980/c511.

8 *Ibid.*, 162–64. In 2000, the 37th General Council renounced the 1960 statement on homosexuality: *Record of Proceedings of the 37th General Council, 2000*, 166–67.

Scripture

Genesis 2:18–25

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken."

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Questions

1. How is this passage interpreted in your community or organization? Has it changed over the years?
2. How would you characterize the relationship between male and female in the passage?
3. If the story isn't taken literally, what do you think this passage is meant to tell us about the role of women and men, as well as husband and wife?

In retrospect, the 20th General Council of 1962 seems to have been a very busy, if slightly confusing, event. A commission had carried out sociological research on women and work. It found that many women were single parents earning a minimum wage and that many felt guilty about having to leave their family in order to work. In *Gainful Employment of Married Women*, it recommended daycares and education within the United Church and the wider community to remove the guilt women felt.⁹

But this same Council recommended that ordination for women, as well as those working as deaconesses, be open only to those who were unmarried, widowed, or no longer required to be mothers at home and only if a suitable place could be found that would not interfere with the stability of the marriage and their work as wives.

In the 1950s and '60s, deaconesses were "disjoined" from ministry for getting married. Disjoining, symbolized by the requirement to pass back their deaconess pin, was the term applied to deaconesses who married.¹⁰ It was also expected that if an ordained woman married, she would be suspended from her ministry work until her family duties were completed.¹¹ The idea that ministry was not meant for married women created tension over salary and work conditions as well. The church's treatment of women ministers (ordained or named as

9 Shelagh Parsons, "Women and Power in The United Church Of Canada," in Davy, 185.

10 Caryn Douglas, "Ministry or Marriage," in *Tapestry* (Spring 2006): 10. Used with permission.

11 Sharon Davis, "Equal? Since When?" in Jim Taylor, ed., *Fire and Grace* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1999), 119.

deaconess) seemed to contradict the previous document in which the church petitions for better working conditions for women. Caryn Douglas quotes Mary Anne MacFarlane:

Requests to address the pressing issues of work-load and inadequate remuneration of deaconesses were easily brushed aside or seen to be low in priority... It was argued that in the short term, poor working conditions and salaries were not a serious problem because marriage, the real vocation, was not far ahead for most women. The lack of adequate pensions for Deaconesses was not taken seriously..

Deaconess work became seen by many as some kind of preparation period for real life (that is, marriage), and the women who were deaconesses were perceived as a group of young, immature workers, less experienced than their ordained colleagues, and less serious about their work.

Notions like this prevented any comparisons of salaries or working conditions with male professional workers, and kept sexism hidden in the church.¹²

It had always been difficult for a married woman to be ordained, and the 1962 General Council recommendations followed a dramatic action taken in 1957. London Conference had ordained Elinor Leard, who was not only married but also a mother, against the recommendation of its own Committee on Colleges and Students and despite a telegram from the Moderator.¹³

Further, the 1962 Council also approved the second report of the Commission on Divorce and Marriage. The new document, *Marriage Breakdown, Divorce, Remarriage: A Christian Understanding*, encouraged ministers to do marriage preparation work and counselling of marriages that are in crisis. The United Church admitted that some marriages fail.

Ministers could now marry divorced couples, but “no minister of the United Church is required to officiate at the remarriage of a divorced person against his [sic] own conscience.”¹⁴ There was further evolution in 1974, when the General Council directed in *The Permanence of Christian Marriage* that in any marriage service there must be a vow expressing the intention to be together for life. This report was written by Dr. David Lochhead to address contemporary questions of marriage and to deal with some of the rising feminist theology that saw marriage as oppressive to women. In the document Dr. Lochhead wrote:

Marriage is not essentially contractual. It offers men and women not a relationship of mutual bondage, but an opportunity to be free for and with each other. Consequently the marriage vows must not be read as if they were terms of a contract. What happens in marriage vows is not that conditions are made, but that the parties express their hope for and expectation of a fulfilled life together that is not dependent on external conditions.¹⁵

12 Douglas, 10.

13 Alan L. Hayes, “Theological Evolutions since 1960.” Retrieved March 2, 2009, from individual.utoronto.ca/hayes/Canada/theological.htm. Hayes cites Valerie J. Korinek, “No Women Need Apply: Ordination in the United Church, 1918–1965,” *Canadian Historical Review* 74 (1993): 473ff.

14 *Record of Proceedings of the 20th General Council, 1962*, 249.

15 David Lochhead, *The Permanence of Marriage* (Toronto: Division of Mission in Canada, The United Church of Canada, 1975), 7.

Scripture

One of the passages David Lochhead studied in preparing *The Permanence of Christian Marriage* was Ephesians 5:22–33.

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

In discussing these verses, *The Permanence of Christian Marriage* addresses feminist concerns:

It is immediately evident that the writer [of the epistle] assumes the subordination of woman to man. This has led many feminists to find a prime source of Western anti-feminist ideology in the New Testament.

While it is true that the acceptance of the New Testament as sacred scripture in the West contributed to the perpetuation of anti-feminism, what is glossed over in the feminist critiques of the New Testament is that, generally, the New Testament writers are reflecting rather than creating social conventions.

A crucial question is whether the analogy of Ephesians 5 can be freed from its assumption of the subordination of wife to husband in marriage. If not, we would seem to be left with a scriptural model of marriage which would be inherently antithetical to contemporary concerns for the equality of women to men in society... It is our conviction that the analogy of marriage to the relationship between Christ and the church contains an important theological insight into the nature of marriage. The attempt to use the analogy to justify the eternal subordination of wives to husbands is a misapplication. First, it is not necessary to apply the analogy so that Christ is always identified as having a superior role. Elsewhere in scripture (e.g., Matthew 25:31–46) we are encouraged to recognize Christ in the weaker, subordinated member.

Second, we believe that the analogy is best interpreted as reciprocal. Husband and wife share equally in a relationship which represents and reflects Christ's relationship to the church. While the husband may be Christ to his wife as church, so also may the wife be Christ to her husband as church. It is the relationship of marriage rather than the defined role of either partner that is sacramental.¹⁶

¹⁶ Ibid, 5–6.

Questions

1. How is the passage from Ephesians 5 interpreted in your community or organization? In what ways has that interpretation changed over time?
2. How do you see the marriage relationship reflective of the Christ and church relationship?

The roles of women in society and in the church continued to be of concern to The United Church of Canada. It was struggling to define how its members were to relate to each other with equality and justice. It struggled with traditions and scripture. Just as feminism and genderism were being faithfully examined, the church was about to examine more closely other “isms” that kept us from being fully equal and fully just.

From the time of union in 1925 to the early 1960s, the church taught its members what it believed as clear, directly given, and with a tone of accepted authority.

However, theological shifts focusing more on a God of mercy than on a God of judgment, on the participation of all in the ministry of Christ, and on a new understanding of liberation in Christ, led to a more open environment. The opinions of the whole Church on faith issues were sought, heard, and considered more than previously expected or permitted.... Coincident with this, there has been a significant shift in the educational process in the Church from memorizing Bible passages to reflecting on these passages in the light of our life experiences; and the developing [of] our beliefs rather than adopting those from a catechism. Decision making in the Church has also become more consultative rather than authoritarian and directive.¹⁷

As the United Church continued to study marriage, gender equality, women in ministry, and the purpose of sexuality within and outside marriage, an event in the United States in 1969 would eventually broaden discussion of sexuality and of committed relationships of all sorts.

On June 28, 1969, the New York Public Morals Squad once again raided a gay bar called the Stonewall Inn. But that night, the people in the bar, mostly men in “drag” (dressed as women) fought back. The riot lasted a week. This event became the rallying point for the North American gay liberation movement.

The 1960s had been a decade of radicalism. The influence of the Black Civil Rights and Women’s movements was tremendous. As feminists examined and challenged sexism, and black activists fought racism under slogans such as “Black is Beautiful,” it was indeed time to challenge the prejudice against homosexuals.¹⁸

17 *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientations, Lifestyles and Ministry* (Report to 32nd General Council from Division of Ministry Personnel and Education and the Division of Mission in Canada, 1988), 15–16.

18 Baird, 21. Used with permission.

Chapter 2: Gender, Ordination, and Marriage

The Stonewall Riots were significant to the gay liberation movement in the United States, Canada, and eventually around the world. That same year, the Canadian Parliament approved changes to the Criminal Code, decriminalizing certain sexual practices (gross indecency, sodomy) committed between consenting adults (21 years of age) in privacy and not restricted to homosexual people. This followed the 1967 life sentence given Everett George Klippert of Pine Point, Northwest Territories, for being homosexual; he was released in 1971.

Seeds of further change were being planted. The struggles of the Black community in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the growing influence of feminism in awakening the church to its sexist attitude affected decision-making in The United Church of Canada.

The feminist slogan “the personal is political” was an eye-opener for many and made legitimate raising issues of inequality that were previously easy to dismiss as “personal” or “private.”

Feminism encouraged both women and men to depart from gender stereotypes.¹⁹

Gender roles were again being questioned in the community, marriage, and church, and these changes were reflected in church documents.

In 1977, the church affirmed that responsibility for the marriage service rests with the local congregation and the minister.

Story

As the church’s awareness of oppression grew, other painful lessons were learned:

During my internship in a United Church in downtown Vancouver, I was appointed to ask Aboriginal people how the church might be in relationship with them in that part of the city. After many conversations with people who were too angry at the church to come to one, we found a group of people who followed traditional teachings and were willing to come to the church to talk in spite of their anger. I booked space in the sanctuary. Folks arrived and made a circle, saying that it was very hard to come into the part of the church that was worship space. As we were talking about the space the congregational minister arrived and asked if he could talk to me. I stepped out of the circle. The atmosphere was awkward and very tense. The minister asked, “What are you doing here? I have a rehearsal for a covenanting service for a lesbian couple and we have to practice.”

“I booked the space,” I replied, but he retorted, “No one has ever booked this space before. This is a couple who has been alienated from the church. This is their first time back into the church and they’re trying to make a connection here. I can’t go to them and tell them that they can’t have a rehearsal.”

“Well, the people I’ve got here are in a similar situation,” I responded. We stood there, dumbfounded and frustrated because each of us was standing up for an issue that was very personal, but we also recognized that we were in solidarity. We found a

¹⁹ Ibid., 26.

compromise but it didn't feel like a whole solution at any rate. It felt awkward and messy, and it took us a good week to stop being frustrated with each other. Now we tell this story to show how hard it is to be in a church that's on the margins of the church.²⁰

Scripture

Exodus 2:23

The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.

Questions

1. In the story, who were the people crying out?
2. In your denomination or organization, whose voices do you hear crying out? Who might not be heard?
3. When you are aware that there is more than one voice expressing pain, what do you do?

²⁰ Nanette McKay, in Loraine MacKenzie Shepherd, ed., *Story after Story* (Winnipeg: On Edge Publishing, 2003), 121. Used with permission.

Chapter 3

Membership and Sexual Orientation

Differences run deep and in some cases are not reconcilable.... Yet we all agree that the church must have a moral centre and that this core must guide our actions and decisions. How then shall we live, act and decide together when there is no universal agreement about these core values?¹

Marriage, ordination, and commissioning continued as serious topics in the United Church but the focus moved from the role of women to that of homosexuals—gay men and lesbian women. Bisexuals and transgender people slowly made an appearance in the study of sexuality. While the discussion and exploration of sexuality focused primarily on ordination, it had an effect on the ongoing question of marriage. In 1978 the Division of Mission in Canada's Working Unit on Sexuality, Marriage and Family established a 10-member task force to work on a comprehensive statement on human sexuality.

The task force procedure was

1. to identify privately our individual sexual experiences, and especially the residue of influential feelings and the meanings of these experiences in our lives
2. to test these meanings against the reality of Christian faith and biblical experience as we have learned them in the church
3. to explore the implications of modern biological, psychological, and social sciences as they clarify, explain, and describe sexual experience
4. to attempt to do this as persons of Christian commitment seeking to recognize and respond to the sexual dilemmas and possibilities of today while learning and growing in the process²

In broad terms, these four steps reflect Wesley's quadrilateral—scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

The task force looked at sexuality, sexism, and sexual orientation. In its comments on sexual orientation, this report was the first United Church document to consider Alfred Kinsey's 1948 study on sexual response. Kinsey used a continuum from 0 (exclusively heterosexual) to 6 (exclusively homosexual), with 3 representing those who are bisexual. An additional category, 7, was created for those who are asexual.

How many homosexuals are there in our world? More than 60 years ago, Dr. Kinsey stated that 4 percent of males and 1 to 3 percent of females were exclusively homosexual. Including those who may be primarily but not exclusively homosexual, the popularly accepted figure today is 10 percent of the population.³

1 *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientations, Lifestyles and Ministry*, 11.

2 The Division of Mission in Canada for the General Council of the United Church of Canada, *In God's Image... Male and Female: A Study on Human Sexuality* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1980), vi.

3 *Ibid.*, 56.

The task force report also made some important statements about sexual orientation. It objected to labelling homosexuality as a physical or mental disease, and to the idea that homosexuals are likely to be paedophiles, exhibitionists, and sexually violent. It stated that heterosexuals are more likely to be so, and argued that we should not use the word “preference” when discussing orientation. The Kinsey study used the word “preference,” but there is little evidence that one consciously chooses to be heterosexual or homosexual. The task force stated, “Orientation, whether heterosexual or homosexual, would seem to emerge as the result of a complicated interaction of biological, environmental and emotional factors.”⁴ It also pointed out that The United Church of Canada in 1976 and 1977 had submitted briefs to the Ontario and federal governments respectively in support of including sexual orientation in their human rights legislation. The report went on to say that they had already encountered gay and lesbian couples wanting church blessing and legal recognition of their unions. They also saw no reason to ban mature, self-accepting homosexuals from the ministry of the United Church.

The task force report was released in 1980 as *In God’s Image... Male and Female: A Study on Human Sexuality*. It was presented as a “request from the 28th General Council to the people of the United Church,”⁵ not as policy but rather as an approved resource for dialogue and debate.

Scripture

One of the scriptures that *In God’s Image... Male and Female: A Study on Human Sexuality* looked at was Romans 1:26–32.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

In discussing the passage, the authors made two points about its interpretation. First, Paul and his world knew nothing about sexual orientation as we have come to understand it. The men Paul refers to as acting contrary to nature were assumed to be heterosexual men performing homosexual acts. Homosexuals argue that it would be against their nature to perform heterosexual acts.

Second, Paul’s anger about homosexual behaviour is due to its strong connection to idolatry. He sees the behaviour he describes to be a result of idolatry, but there is no indication that homosexuals are any more idolatrous than heterosexuals.

It is unclear what Paul means when he refers to women who exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural. Modern theologians believe it refers to lesbianism but pre-twentieth-century Christians believed it referred to non-procreative sexual activity.

4 Ibid., 57.

5 Ibid., ii.

If one looks at the wider context of this writing, Paul was denouncing the judgmental and self-righteous behaviour of persons who were insisting that Christians must follow Jewish laws regarding diet and male circumcision. He was condemning judgmental behaviour, yet the passage is now being used to judge homosexuals.⁶

Questions

1. How does your community or organization respond to scientific theories of natural (or genetic) occurrence of homosexuality? Does it believe that sexual orientation can be changed?
2. There was a pamphlet being circulated around 1980 called "What Jesus Said about Homosexuality." When the pamphlet was opened, it was blank inside. The back page affirmed that Jesus said nothing about homosexuality. What do you think about this pamphlet?

After the release of *In God's Image*, discussion on sexuality and marriage became very serious and more widespread across the church. Sexual orientation, when discussed, was meant to refer to both heterosexuality—attraction to a person of the opposite sex—and homosexuality—attraction to a person of the same sex. Was one more blessed than another? Why? Was sex only for procreation?

However, because of the cultural bias that heterosexuals were superior to homosexuals, "orientation" was often used to mean only homosexuality. Asking the questions, "How is orientation decided?" and "Can it be changed?" was really intended to ask what causes homosexuality and whether homosexuality could be changed. No one publicly asked or studied what causes heterosexuality and whether it could be changed. And, in that era, "homosexuality" meant gay (men) and lesbian (women) only. There was no meaningful discussion of the situation of people who were bisexual, transgender, or belonging to other sexual minorities.

In 1982 a new group arose both to challenge The United Church of Canada and to support it in its advocacy for gay and lesbian people. During the General Council in Montreal that year, 18 gay and lesbian people gathered in the upper room of the Newman Centre. They were all United Church members and involved in local gatherings that supported gay and lesbian equality. The group was called Affirm (now known as Affirm United). One of the founders recalled:

We didn't look like insurgents/radicals/outcasts bent on overthrowing the *powers*. But, in that moment and place, and for the solemn purpose laid upon us, our clandestine gathering felt that way. The only powers we wanted overthrown were our fears and those of others that kept us from freely serving the church we already loved and served. We began modestly enough: our agenda, to support lesbian and gay folk in the church, to worship together whenever we could.⁷

⁶ Alyson C. Huntly, *Of Love and Justice* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2003), p. 23.

⁷ Don Ross, "Reflections from Affirm Pioneers," in *Consensus*, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition (November 2007): 16. Used with permission.

The 1980 General Council, in accepting *In God's Image* as a study resource, also approved two motions:

- to prepare a draft statement for presentation to General Council no later than its 30th session
- that a theological and regionally representative task force be convened, reflecting the range of theological and ethical opinion in this area, to draft a supplementary report which would be published and distributed for study⁸

The Division of Mission in Canada hosted a five-day event with 70 Conference-nominated people to train them on leading study sessions about *In God's Image... Male and Female*. It also prepared a response sheet for the study. Seven writers were then contacted; they agreed to write a report based on the responses. Four workshops were held across the country to be sure that all who wanted to speak were given an opportunity to do so.

The report, published in 1984 and titled *Gift, Dilemma and Promise: A Report and Affirmations of Human Sexuality*, was broken into five chapters: Sexuality and Selfhood; Marriage; Intimacy; Sexism, Society, Self; and Sexual Orientation. Each chapter included stories from real life and scripture insights, as well as descriptions of the contemporary situation, questions for reflection, acknowledgements, and affirmations.

Scripture

In the marriage section of *Gift, Dilemma and Promise* one of the scripture passages looked at is Exodus 4:10–12.

But Moses said to the Lord, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Then the Lord said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak."

This passage was used to refer to the Creator's wish that we act together to create the reign (or kin-dom) that God desires. "The Covenant relationship is thus one of partnership in which our full personhood is engaged. Marriage in which the Covenant is expressed will then be a relationship with the husband and wife as equal partners."⁹

Stories

Here is one of the beautiful stories that were shared in *Gift, Dilemma and Promise*:

After 25 years of marriage, Ruth and Gordon stand again before the communion table to recommit their vows. At their side, in quiet affirmation, are their adult children. Gordon speaks: "In the early years we shared the same schedule and worked often side by side—in the house, the barn, the yard, and the field. It's different now that we have help and the family's launched. While I am still occupied primarily with the affairs of the farm, Ruth has been able to pursue her own interests and career—with the store and her presbytery and Conference church work. It's a small miracle now when we are able to both be at home to share a meal together. But we've learned to make the most of these moments when they happen. There is so much to share and affirm in each other's lives. I guess the difference now is the preciousness of those stolen moments...like holding hands through a prayer in church."¹⁰

8 *Record of Proceedings of the 30th General Council, 1984: Gift, Dilemma and Promise: A Report and Affirmations of Human Sexuality*, 236.

9 *Ibid.*, 254–255.

10 *Gift, Dilemma and Promise*, 261–262.

In the chapter called Sexual Orientation, one of the stories shared was that of a man named Stewart:

Stewart heard a radio broadcast in which a minister said he felt that homosexual people were as normal as anyone else and that if they believed in Christ they were just as Christian as any other believers. He said that homosexual people who loved each other sincerely and faithfully were as Christian in their relationships as happily married couples.

Stewart could hardly believe his ears. Ever since he was 15 years old he had known he was a homosexual. For 25 years he had tried everything to cure himself. He had gone to doctors; he had gone to confession. He had repented in tears; he had made resolution after resolution. Everything had failed. He had resigned himself to his fate as a doomed man.

Now, suddenly, he felt there was hope. He phoned the minister in great excitement. Did the minister really think he could be accepted by God—just as he was? Was salvation for him, too? Was he, too, made in the image of God?¹¹

Scripture

The chapter on Sexual Orientation in *Gift, Dilemma and Promise* referred to only one scripture passage. It was about the early church and the challenge of knowing who was in and who was out and what members had to do to belong. Gentiles, who were God-fearers but not Jews, heard the stories of Christ and accepted the teachings of the apostles. Did they need to become Jews before they became Christian? Did the men need to be circumcised? Did they need to follow dietary laws?

Uncircumcised Gentiles joyfully embraced Christ, were filled with the Holy Spirit, worshipped and witnessed and shared together. How could anyone then come along and say: “Sorry, but you aren’t really Christians you know. You have to be circumcised. And you must obey certain dietary laws.”¹²

What happened in the church so that Gentiles were allowed “in”? Peter’s encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10:9–48 tells the story. Here is an abridged version:

Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance.

He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” The voice said to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This happened three times...

Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared... So Peter went down to the men and said, “I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?” They answered, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing

¹¹ Ibid., 290–291.

¹² Ibid., 295.

man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.”...

On Peter’s arrival Cornelius met him...and he [Peter] said to them, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?”...

Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all....

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter violated at least three Mosaic laws by meeting Cornelius. For one, he ate forbidden food with an uncircumcised male and a foreigner. Yet, Peter found that the Holy Spirit could come to the unclean, uncircumcised foreigners as powerfully as it could to ritually clean, circumcised Jews. God’s gift of the Holy Spirit did not require others to become the same as Jews. They were received and blessed just as they were. Therefore, homosexuals can also receive God’s gift of the Holy Spirit just as they are.

Questions

1. What emotions or feelings do you have reading about Ruth and Gordon? Does it seem like a good relationship? Why? Do you know people whose lives reflect the kind of equality Gordon is talking about? How are they welcomed in your culture or church?
2. In the story about Ruth and Gordon, do your feelings alter if Gordon’s name is changed to Naomi? Why? What happens in your culture or church if the couple is Ruth and Naomi?
3. In your experience and in the experience of your community or organization, were there groups or individuals who, like the Gentiles, were once excluded or not treated as equals but who are now welcomed as equals? How did that transition happen?

The church’s document *Gift, Dilemma, and Promise: A Report and Affirmations of Human Sexuality* was approved at the 30th General Council, held in Morden, Manitoba, in 1984. The report contained “affirmations on sexuality and selfhood; marriage; intimacy; sexism, society, self; and sexual orientation.”¹³ The document reaffirmed that marriage is a gift from God through which Christians make a covenant with each other and with God; that the couple offer each other the promise of a lifelong companionship, human affection, and sexuality, and provides for the nurturing of children. It also agreed that marriage offers stability to society and that the church needed to work to redeem and care for the institution of marriage.

¹³ “Chronology of Marriage and Equality Rights in the United Church,” retrieved March 9, 2009, from www.united-church.ca/humanrights/equal/chronology.

Chapter 3: Membership and Sexual Orientation

The report went on to recognize that marriages do sometimes fail. The United Church acknowledged that marriage can also be destructive, and that marriage as an institution is shaped by cultural norms that are patriarchal and oppressive. With regard to sexuality, the document stated that all human beings are created in the image of God, regardless of sexual orientation: we are all equal.¹⁴

It also discussed celibacy and intimacy between unmarried adults. Celibacy is the deliberate choice not to engage in genital intercourse but it does allow intimacy. The document states, “We affirm that celibacy, freely chosen, can be an expression of God’s will and can include emotional intimacy.”¹⁵ It goes on to say that the United Church has done little to understand, support, or provide pastoral care to those who have *chosen* celibacy. Because it is an individual choice, celibacy was never to be imposed.

So what about gays and lesbians? Could the church approve relationships of unmarried (because they could not be married) people of the same sex? In discussion, references to practising homosexuals meant those who were having intimate sexual relations with someone of the same sex. It was a derogatory comment, as no one referred to heterosexuals who were not married and who were having genital intercourse as “practising heterosexuals.” It was also meant to divide “good homosexuals” (celibates) from “bad homosexuals.”

The 1984 General Council offered two major learning opportunities for its commissioners. First, commissioners were given various possibilities for experiencing first-hand some of the topics they were debating. Among the options was participation in The Invisible Christian Weekend. Commissioners could spend the weekend with gay and lesbian couples, practising or not.

The second learning opportunity was provided in a tent near the main meeting room. The Very Rev. Lois Wilson, a former Moderator and later a Canadian Senator, wrote of this opportunity afterward that they were invited to drop in at any point to sit down in a relaxed atmosphere with gay men who were telling their stories for perhaps the first time, and exchange views.¹⁶

In addition, Affirm prepared a statement for the General Council commissioners. It asked to be named as a corresponding member but was denied by a small majority. It was also at this Council that another group, Friends of Affirm, was created to help support Affirm.

The United Church Renewal Fellowship gave a presentation to the commission dealing with the inclusion of homosexuals in ministry. The fellowship stated its belief that homosexuality can be healed through Jesus and that it is learned behaviour. It had three people present testimonials on being healed to the commission. The fellowship attributed defeat of a motion to allow homosexuals into ministry to the fact that commissioners heard, for the first time—from homosexuals themselves—how one could be turned away from the orientation.¹⁷

For the next four years, there were more debates, meetings, and sharing of stories that led to the major decision of 1988. During that time, in 1985, Moderator Bob Smith became the first Moderator to meet with Affirm and Friends of Affirm.

14 Huntly, *Of Love and Justice*, 37–38.

15 *Gift, Dilemma and Promise*, 277.

16 Lois Wilson, “Congratulations to Affirm United from United Church Moderators,” *Consensus*, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition (November 2007): 14. Used with permission.

17 Zachar.

Conferences had been asking for guidance on whether or not self-declared gay and lesbian persons could be ministers in The United Church of Canada. Susan Mabey, from Hamilton Conference, had been denied ordination because of her sexual orientation. The Division of Ministry Personnel and Education created a task group based in western Canada to research and study the question. In 1984, the report *Sexual Orientation and Eligibility for the Order of Ministry* was issued.

To do its work, the

Task Group solicited responses to the issue, studied the scriptures, traditions, and the theology of the United Church as well as other denominations, and consulted with individuals, groups, and congregations.... The Task Group also examined the experience of homosexual people in light of our understanding of God as a God of Justice, a God who Accepts, a God of Shalom (wholeness), and could find no biblical, theological, moral, or health arguments to support the exclusion of gays and lesbians.¹⁸

This report did look at celibacy and “practising” homosexuals. It urged that “whatever life style standards are adopted by the church...they must be based on similar underlying principles for *all* church members.... We would see longstanding fidelity, love and commitment among the key principles in any partner relationship, ruling out promiscuity for both heterosexuals and homosexual persons.”¹⁹ There could be no double standard. Celibacy is not to be imposed on one and not the other, nor can sexual expression be denied to one group but not to the other.

The task group also stated that in hearing the stories of gay and lesbian persons, they had met people who were fit for ministry. Not all United Church members accepted the report. The United Church Renewal Fellowship spoke openly against it and its interpretation of scriptures. The Renewal Fellowship cited “clear” scriptural condemnation of homosexual practice in passages such as Genesis 1:27, 2:24, 19:1–29; Leviticus 18:22, 21:13; Romans 1:18–32; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; and 1 Timothy 1:9–11, and spoke out against attempts to “wiggle out” of biblical authority by interpreting these passages as being too ancient to apply today, unclear or previously misunderstood, or insufficient in number.²⁰

18 *Sexual Orientation and Eligibility for the Order of Ministry*, report of the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1984), 3.

19 *Ibid.*, 15.

20 Cumming, 103.

Scripture

In *Sexual Orientation and Eligibility for the Order of Ministry*, the task group referred to the story of Peter and Cornelius under the heading, “The God of Shalom—Wholeness and Illness.” It also referred to Galatians 5:22–23.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

Among the scriptures studied was the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). Having looked at biblical scholarship on this passage, the task group agreed that this story did not condemn homosexual behaviour. It is a story primarily about inhospitality, violence, and gang rape. All biblical references to Sodom and Gomorrah, including a reference by Jesus, speak of inhospitality to strangers and violence on God’s messengers.

The Holiness Code is a complex body of law outlined in Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus. The Code contains instructions and prohibitions concerning rituals that made a person “unclean”—unfit to enter the temple to worship. These included such things as wearing certain types of clothing, eating certain foods, and being in contact with blood or skin diseases. It also prohibited certain sexual contact. Some Leviticus passages are often used to condemn homosexual activity.²¹

Leviticus 18:22

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Leviticus 20:13

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

The passages clearly condemn anal intercourse, but they were written over 2,600 years ago. The condemnation of the act may have more to do with gender inequality than with God’s plan. This activity treated a man as a woman: it was understood as a form of humiliation and subjugation. Christians have rejected other sections of the Holiness Code: Why do some Christians feel the need to hold on to these laws but not others?²²

Questions

1. Have you ever known someone you thought was not a person of faith, but who was moved or used by the Holy Spirit to bring God’s word? If so, how did you react?
2. Does your community or organization follow the Holiness Code in Leviticus? Why or why not? If not, what parts do you follow and why these parts and not others?
3. How does your community or organization deal with the passage about Sodom and Gomorrah? How do you feel about the interpretation given above? Why?

²¹ Huntly, *Of Love and Justice*, 20.

²² *Sexual Orientation and Eligibility for the Order of Ministry*, 22.

In 1984, the task group report, *Sexual Orientation and Eligibility for the Order of Ministry*, was accepted by the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education. It was circulated throughout the church through the *United Church Observer* magazine as an insert paid for by the General Council. The 30th General Council followed up on the task group report, and asked for more study. This report is known as *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientations, Lifestyles and Ministry*. The two Divisions in 1984 created a National Coordinating Group of 13 people to receive comments from United Church members concerning the 1984 report *Gift, Dilemma and Promise*. More than 500 local study groups met and over 200 responses were received. A joint report by the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education and the Division of Mission in Canada was created.

There was not agreement among the members on proposed recommendations. The report *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientations, Lifestyles and Ministry* states:

Differences run deep and in some cases are not reconcilable.... Sometimes differences exist because of misinformation or misunderstanding or because different life experiences lead us to see the world differently.

Our process of study and dialogue has revealed that even when misunderstandings are resolved and misinformation is corrected, deep differences can remain; we discover that we are not reading the Bible the same way; we do not share the same understanding of ministry; we do not agree on how truth is known; our attitudes toward sex, ethics, and community are fundamentally different. Yet we all agree that the church must have a moral centre and that this core must guide our actions and decisions.

How then shall we live, act and decide together when there is no universal agreement about these core values?²³

The difficulty this group admitted to in its work was also the struggle that remained among the church's membership as a whole. Recommendations from 11 of the members were presented, and the report included two dissenting statements.

Among the report's recommendations were that all persons are made in the image of God regardless of sexual orientation (homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual); that anyone who professes Jesus Christ and obedience to him is eligible to be a full member of The United Church of Canada; that our understanding of marriage and family has evolved over time and that

heterosexual, gay, and lesbian adults can engage in sexual behaviour within a committed relationship with the intention of permanence that is morally responsible. The standards for discerning whether sexual behaviour is morally responsible are the same irrespective of orientation or marital status.²⁴

This report upset and angered many members of the church including the two renewal movement groups—the United Church Renewal Fellowship and Church Alive. Church Alive helped to form Community of Concern in early 1988 to directly challenge this document and its recommendations. Community of Concern sent a Declaration of Dissent signed by 32,000 lay people, 1,022 ministers and missionaries, and four past moderators to the 32nd General Council, which met in Victoria in 1988.²⁵ Prior to the meeting, a poll taken by the church revealed that only 28 percent of the membership favoured the admission of active homosexuals into the ministry.²⁶

23 *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientations, Lifestyles and Ministry*, 11.

24 *Ibid.*, 3–4.

25 Zachar.

26 "The United Church of Canada and Homosexuality." Retrieved March 7, 2009, from www.religioustolerance.org/hom_ucc.htm.

Chapter 3: Membership and Sexual Orientation

Both the *Sexual Orientation and Eligibility for the Order of Ministry* and *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientations, Lifestyles and Ministry* reports were given to a sessional committee at the 32nd General Council. After a long struggle, the sessional committee accepted the reports for information and prepared a new document for General Council approval. Marion Best, who later became a Moderator, chaired the session committee, and she recalled:

There were 24 of us, representing a broad spectrum of opinions. We agreed to try for consensus, with a vote only if consensus proved impossible.

We prayed together, reflected on scriptures and told stories of how we had come to our present positions, listened respectfully to one another. After meeting for three days, we asked Council's responses to several proposals. Considering the 1,837 petitions from across the church and responses from Commissioners, we presented our final formulation reached by consensus.²⁷

The sessional committee did not accept or reject *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientations, Lifestyles and Ministry*. The committee said it was a historic document but did not reflect the present position of the church. It dealt with all the petitions by producing its own statement.

It has often been reported that this document, *Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality*, stated that gays and lesbians had the *right* to be ordained and commissioned into ministry. What it really said was that all persons, regardless of orientation, who professed faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to him, were welcomed to be and become full members of the United Church. As members of the United Church, self-declared gays and lesbians were *eligible* to become ministers, in the same way that heterosexual members were.

Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality went on to say that we are not clear about God's complete intention regarding human sexuality, celibacy, and chastity. It also requested a "church-wide study of the authority and the interpretation of scripture and the theological and cultural premises that inform our understanding."²⁸

There was a long, serious, late-night debate and at 12:40 a.m. the General Council approved the *Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality* report²⁹ by a ratio of almost three to one.³⁰ There were 400 commissioners present, half clergy and half laity, and about five members from the national staff. Although weary, the commissioners continued to work, listening to comments from the Youth Forum and other motions dealing with marriage and orientation. At 2:25 a.m. there was a motion to adjourn; it passed even though 118 commissioners voted against it.³¹

A strange event had happened. The majority of delegates had come to the Council with a bias against ordaining [and commissioning] homosexuals, but with an open mind. They heard the heart wrenching testimonies of devout gay and lesbian church members; many probably met an openly homosexual person for the first time in their life; they debated little else among themselves; they searched their souls and prayed to learn God's will. And most changed their mind!³²

27 Marion Best, "Congratulations..." in *Consensus* (November 2007), 13.

28 *Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality*, 32nd General Council, brochure, General Council office (August 1988), 3.

29 The website archives of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation include a video report on the debate and decision. See: www.archives.cbc.ca/clip.asp?IDClip=1398&IDCat=363&IDCatPa=262.

30 "The United Church of Canada and Homosexuality."

31 Michael Riordon, *The First Stone*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990), 159–160.

32 "The United Church of Canada and Homosexuality."

In 1992, Tim Stevenson of British Columbia Conference was the first self-declared homosexual to be ordained and, in 1994, Ken DeLisle was commissioned in the Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario.

An important statement on marriage in *Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality* affirms “that God’s intention for all human relationships is that they be faithful, responsible, just, loving, health-giving, healing, and sustaining of community and self.” This is to apply to both heterosexual and homosexual couples.³³

Scripture

The reminder in *Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality* that God’s intention for all human relationships applies to both heterosexual and homosexual couples echoes a section in *Gift, Dilemma and Promise*. In its section on marriage, the latter document quotes John 15:9–12.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

This is Jesus reminding us of the covenant between himself, the Creator, and ourselves. Our relationships should express this love by treating one another with respect, care, equality, and justice. God, through the power of the Spirit, continues to call us into relationship and to live God’s love in the world. We are called into this relationship just as we are—male, female, sinner, saint, married, single, European, Asian, African, straight, or gay.

Story

Henri and Jim are both widowed and in their mid-80s. Diabetes has rendered Henri almost blind, while Jim finds both his memory and his legs a little unsteady. To the embarrassment of their assorted offspring they have requested permission to share a room in the nursing home where they live. With a candour unusual for both of them, they have declared to their respective families that they like each other very much, and wish to have the comfort of holding and hugging each other in the privacy of their space.

Questions

1. What are the conditions for full membership in your community or organization? Are all full members eligible to become ministers or leaders? If not, what are the criteria used to determine eligibility?
2. In the story above, why do you think Henri and Jim’s families are embarrassed? Should they be?
3. How would you relate the gospel passage to this story? In what ways does the story reflect God’s call for relationship?

33 *Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality*, 2.

Chapter 3: Membership and Sexual Orientation

In 1988, General Council dealt with another group that had been treated less than fairly. General Council continued looking at equality for all people and noted its failures in history. That same year, it passed a motion asking that The United Church of Canada:

Review our actions and acknowledge the silence of our church during the years 1933–1945 in relation to the Holocaust in Europe.

Prepare a church-wide study to develop awareness of the Christian roots of anti-Semitism with a view to seeking ways of becoming more sensitive to our Jewish sisters and brothers in our preaching and practice today.³⁴

Perhaps recognizing that we were less than perfect in relationship with one group helped some to see we were not in good relationship with our homosexual members.

Issues of racism, apartheid, and sexual orientation all came together in 1990 at the 33rd General Council, held in London, Ontario. After two years of much anger, frustration, and serious public discussion across the church, the 1988 statement *Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality* was reaffirmed. Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa was the guest speaker. He was asked if he wanted to make a comment on the United Church and its work on sexual orientation. After a chuckle he replied, “You won’t let me get out of it? Look, it is very hard to ask someone to be patient when your foot is on their head.”³⁵

1990 was also the year Affirm was invited into official dialogue with the Executive of the General Council. Affirm United has never been an official part of the United Church formal structure, but it has received grants and has been a working partner in various educational projects.

Scripture

Colossians 3:8–14

But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Story

In 1990, 26 people gathered for a few days before General Council to deal with the responses to the 1988 statement. Lay and ordained, they came from across the country and had different theological understandings, were of various ages, and had different sexual orientations. There were more than 1,250 petitions and letters to deal with regarding the *Membership, Ministry and*

³⁴ *Record of Proceedings of the 32nd General Council, 1988*, 163.

³⁵ Personal memory shared by Ken DeLisle, 2008.

Human Sexuality statement. This group continued to meet after General Council had started. They shared prayers, tears, hymns, laughter, frustration, and hope. There were many differences of opinion. Everyone wanted some change to the document. All petitions and letters were read and sorted by topic. The group named the concerns and how to respond to those concerns.

But in the end, when it came time to make the final report to General Council, the 1988 statement was affirmed by the majority of the committee. The question was posed: “What is God calling us to do now?” Everyone knew that if even one thing was changed in the document, the church would have another two to four years of angry debate, hurtful words, and growing division. That was not what God was asking the United Church to do.

Questions

1. How does your community or organization deal with conflict within its membership?
2. Does the passage from Colossians help in any way?
3. What resources and practices assist you in working toward “harmony” in your community or organization?

Chapter 4

The Choice for Marriage for All People

Although the rights and responsibilities associated with marriage can be extended through regimes such as civil unions or registered partnerships, this does not justify discriminating against same-sex couples by denying the full range of choices available to heterosexuals.¹

With the 1988 decision that a gay or lesbian orientation did not automatically prevent someone from entering paid accountable ministry, there remained the question of what relationship between same-gender couples would be acceptable to the church and to the country. Sexuality, orientation, and equality for all people are still complex issues. As the church and country studied and learned and as court decisions informed Canadians of new legal decisions, the United Church had a new challenge to face on the question of same-gender marriage. As the church continued working on orientation issues, it also continued to look at its positions in regard to other minorities. There would be more reports, motions, and comments concerning racism, sexism, and heterosexism over the next several years.

The 1988 decision and the 1990 affirmation of *Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality* ushered in a time when the United Church tried to calm fears; increase support for gay, lesbian, and bisexual members; deal with threats of congregations leaving; and deal with the repercussions when some did leave. It is clear that membership in the United Church declined in 1988 and 1989. It is unclear to what extent that decline is directly due to the 1988 decision. Membership had been declining prior to the statement, and it is also unclear how many new members came to the United Church because of the decision.

As a result of General Council's reaffirmation of *Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality* in 1990, the renewal group Church Alive had a "Day of Covenanting" in Burlington, Ontario, for congregations and individuals who were opposed to the inclusion of homosexuals. Community of Concern had similar meetings in Alberta and formed the National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations the following year.²

By 1991, Affirm had approved a new program called Affirming Congregations (now Affirming Ministries) that would enable and bring together those congregations that are publicly affirming of the participation of gay and lesbian people.³

In 1992, at the 34th General Council, sexual orientation was included in a motion concerning a new social charter.

1 Huntly, *Of Love and Justice*, 43.

2 Zachar.

3 "A Brief History of Affirm United," *Consensus* (November 2007), 15.

The 34th General Council calls upon the Government of Canada and all provincial and territorial administrations to ensure the enshrinement of a social charter in the Constitution of Canada; that this charter guarantee access to basic social, health care, and economic services regardless of gender, ability, race, age, sexual orientation or place of residency; and with a commitment from the federal government to the maintenance of national standards and federal funding to achieve the goals of such a charter.⁴

That same Council, working to help end all forms of discrimination, acknowledged the need for anti-racist initiatives and called for anti-racism resource material for worship and education.⁵ It also requested resource material for congregations to deal with liturgical and pastoral concerns around same-sex unions or covenants. As a response, in 1995, the Division of Mission in Canada provided *Together in Faith* for congregations that sought to be more inclusive of gays and lesbians, including the possibility of covenanting services for same-gender couples. It provided resources for study, dialogue, celebration, and action. Covenant was understood not as a legal marriage, but rather as a church blessing of two people who wished to make a lifelong commitment to each other and to God.

Affirm United was created in 1994 when Affirm and Friends of Affirm merged. That same year General Council officially thanked Affirm for its work on promoting justice.

Three years later, in 1997, the United Church released *That All May Be One*. This educational tool was aimed at ending racism. This was an issue on which, over the years, the church had a mixed record, as the document acknowledged.

The church was active in aiding Japanese Canadians interned during World War II, and by the war's end, called for an end to discrimination in citizenship legislation. However, Canadian churches were almost silent on the issue of Jewish refugees until 1946, when they acknowledged the evil of the Holocaust and called on their members to help those victimised and to combat anti-Semitism.

The past fifty years have brought a growing realisation of the equality of all peoples as evidenced by an increasing number of resolutions, policies, and staff responsibilities directed specifically to anti-racism. For example, it has been church policy to work collaboratively with all faith groups.

In the 1970s, General Council affirmed its support of Aboriginal peoples in their efforts to obtain justice through recognition of Aboriginal titles and rights. In 1986 it issued an apology to Native peoples for past wrongs, and began to try to live out the apology in action. The All Native Circle Conference (ANCC) was formed to support Native self-government in the church.

In 1998, the Moderator issued an apology for “the pain and suffering that our church’s involvement in the Indian Residential School System caused...” for Aboriginal and First Nations peoples.

In 1992, General Council declared that people of ethnic and racial minorities should participate and be treated equally in the church.

The Ethnic Ministries Council was created to equip all congregations to participate fully in the life and mission of the church. Among other programs, the Ethnic Ministries Council co-operates with the Division of Mission in Canada in supporting the work of anti-racism and education working groups.⁶

4 *Record of Proceedings of the 34th General Council, 1992*, 121.

5 *Record of Proceedings of the 36th General Council, 1994, That All May Be One*, 2.

6 *Ibid.*, 4.

Chapter 4: The Choice for Marriage for All People

That All May Be One also listed the following among its statements of belief:

We believe we are all equal before God.

We believe racism is a sin and violates God's desire for humanity.

We believe racism is present in our society and in our church, and throughout time has manifested itself in many forms in varying degrees.

We believe that the struggle against racism is a continuous effort. Therefore our anti-racism policy statement is only a first step. It provides the basis for the creation of a church where all are welcome, where all feel welcome, and where diversity is as natural as breathing.

We believe change is possible.

We believe in forgiveness, reconciliation and transformation and the potential to learn from stories and experiences.⁷

As other groups that have suffered discrimination in the United Church found their voices, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people also sought to be heard.

Ten years after the 1988 decision, the United Church's Division of Mission in Canada was concerned about stories and comments it was hearing from gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons in ministry or studying to become ministers. It met with the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education and together the two divisions sponsored a consultation in 1999 in Winnipeg.

This was the first and only time that members of The United Church of Canada who were gay, lesbian, or bisexual met together in formal consultation with the national church.⁸ Efforts were made to find transsexual representation but at the time no one identified themselves as such and only one person identified as bisexual. There was no record of who participated, as not all those present were public about their orientation. The consultation report, *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Persons in Ministry*, contained many stories and hopes and pains and celebrations.

Story

My partner and I had been driving for days laughing and enjoying our trip across the country when suddenly we both spotted it at the same time, the ominous road sign announcing the turn off for my new pastoral charge. It was a place, we knew, where at least one third of the people living there felt hatred toward us simply because we were women who loved women. A heavy silence filled the van. How could they call this a process of "settlement"? There was nothing settling about it!

Being an "out" lesbian in the settlement process created a particular series of difficulties for myself, my partner and the pastoral charge, difficulties that no one should have to entertain. I was being settled in a place where I was unwanted, not because of my lack of skills, but because of who I was as a person, something that was of my very essence and not changeable. The sting of being told, "It's not your abilities or skills that are weak or unacceptable, it's your lifestyle," was too

⁷ Ibid., 2–3.

⁸ Affirm United participated officially in the United Church's June 2008 partnership consultation, when an earlier draft of this manuscript was reviewed.

much, especially in light of the fact that the people who were saying it were doing so to make me feel better! I can learn new and different skills to meet the needs of others, I thought, but I cannot and will not change who I am.

Disappointingly, settlement for us was an immensely dehumanizing process influenced by the biting sting of homophobia, which continues to disable many of our church members and their ability to answer Jesus' call to love and respect all peoples. Approximately one third of the members of this charge became overt defectors failing to return altogether, while others have decreased their givings and active support. The emotional, spiritual and economic damage that resulted weighs heavy on the devoted remnant community and on myself. Wounded by their letters of hate, often frozen into paralysis with their icy stare during worship and meeting times, sitting at a UCW [United Church Women] gathering "feeling" the negative energy of others stealing little pieces of my soul, being blind-sided by their fear and that of others in the wider community, left me wondering if lesbians will ever be welcomed in the United Church.

Well, a year later, and it is with great joy that I report we have much to celebrate as a people of faith. We have worked diligently to rebuild the community, to sincerely enter in a ministry of inclusivity and respect for all. Sadly, however, a change of heart hasn't reached enough people. It is because of the unwillingness of the defectors to soften their hearts of stone, to lay down their words of pride and hatred and fear that we are now struggling with a severe financial crisis and the uncertainty of the future of our ministry in this pastoral charge.

With the traumatic experience of settlement, with the difficulties of the reality which we are living in this ministry, and without evidence of concrete support from the national Church, I wonder with concern about the continued uncertainty of the future of gays and lesbians being welcomed partners in ministry. I wonder...with hope.⁹

Scripture

In the report *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Persons in Ministry*, there was a petition directed to General Council dealing with language that was hateful and oppressive. It contained references to scripture to explain its purpose. The petition is an example of an oppressed group using scripture to seek liberation. It is reproduced here with its quotes from scripture and comments on the texts.

THEREFORE, be it resolved that:

1) Section 505 (b) of the [United Church of Canada] Manual be amended by inserting after (b) iv a new section (b) v stating that [all] Petitions and Resolutions [in all of the United Church structures] containing any hate or discriminatory language, either in the Whereas section or in the motion itself, shall be ruled out of order by all church courts.

Leviticus 19:15–16

*You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.*¹⁰

9 Anonymous author cited in Ken DeLisle, ed., *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Persons in Ministry* (Toronto: Division of Mission In Canada and Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, The United Church of Canada, 1999), 14–15.

10 The original petition used a different Bible translation. NRSV wording is given here.

Chapter 4: The Choice for Marriage for All People

Language is a tool that can comfort or challenge or incite. Language that is used to incite hatred or to oppress any group can lead to verbal and physical violence. It can also create such low self-esteem in the victim that they learn to hate themselves, to hate what God has created. Their only escape, it seems to them, is suicide.

Deliberately using language to put down others or discriminate against any group is sinful, as you place the lives God has created in danger.

Genesis 1:27–28

God created humankind in [God's] image, in the image of God, [God] created them; male and female [God] created them. God blessed them...

Psalms 139:13–16

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb...
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately wrought in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.*

As sons and daughters of God, created in God's images, each of us is deeply known and deeply loved by God. As brothers and sisters of Christ, we share in his life saving grace with all believers. To oppress or discriminate against a group redeemed by Christ and loved by God is to reject the command to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. God will give us strength to live this commandment fully.¹¹

Questions

1. When, if ever, has your community or organization experienced difficulty or struggle in welcoming someone new, particularly in a leadership position? What connection would you make to the experience of the lesbian couple coming to a place that was not welcoming?
2. If the language in your community or organizational processes has been hurtful to any one person or to any group, how was this addressed?
3. How do you respond to the comments made above concerning Genesis and Psalm 139?

The report of the 1999 consultation, *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Persons in Ministry*, stated:

In the years since the United Church 1988 decision, there has been considerable conflict within the church. Although the worst has died down, there is a residue of fear. This had created what might be termed a culture of silence—a reluctance to address justice issues around sexual orientation—for fear of reopening old divisions.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, and those who advocate on our behalf, are silenced.¹²

¹¹ DeLisle, 46.

¹² Ibid., 34.

Thirty-six recommendations dealing with training, call, settlement, and support in the work of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, candidates, and ministers, as well as educational resources for congregations, Conferences, and national committees were made by the consultation and sent to the two Divisions for discussion and implementation. Before action could be taken, however, staff and elected-member structures were redrawn in 2002, and the majority of the recommendations were lost or forgotten in the transition to the new Unit structure. Affirm United says that attempts to have the new structure deal specifically with the recommendations or to have a new consultation have not been successful.

Affirm United says that the new General Council Office structure failed to deal specifically with the recommendations or to have a new consultation. But in 2009, the 40th General Council approved a proposal to hold a consultation on gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and Two-Spirit¹³ members of the United Church to discuss homophobia and heterosexism in the church.

The church has made greater progress in the public policy sphere. In 1999, the United Church began to appear at federal standing committees and public meetings to support equal rights for homosexual couples, including pension, employment benefits, health coverage, and equality in their lifelong committed relationships. The 37th General Council, in 2000, affirmed that human sexual orientations, whether heterosexual or homosexual, are a gift from God and part of the marvellous diversity of creation.¹⁴ Following policy approved by the same General Council meeting, the church supported civil recognition of same-sex partnerships.

By 2002, courts and the provinces began to approve same-sex marriages. The United Church, in its quest for equality and recognition that same-sex covenants can be as sacred and meaningful as opposite-sex marriages, began to publicly support same-sex marriages, and this became approved policy in the 38th General Council in 2003.

That same year, *Of Love and Justice*, a congregational study guide, was released. A key contribution was its answer to the question so many were asking: Why marriage? Aren't civil unions or registered domestic partnerships enough?

Although the rights and responsibilities associated with marriage can be extended through regimes such as civil unions or registered partnerships, this does not justify discriminating against same-sex couples by denying the full range of choices available to heterosexuals. So long as the federal government restricts marriage to heterosexuals only, it sends a message that same-sex couples are somehow inferior to their heterosexual counterparts. In addition, unlike marriage, civil union and registered partnership laws are not recognized outside the province in which they were enacted.¹⁵

Jackie Harper, then a national staff person involved with Family Ministries, was asked why The United Church of Canada supported gay marriages and what the consequences would be for congregations and other denominations who were not supportive.

A significant, unique contribution that the United Church brings to this debate is the denomination's own experience of making same-sex marriage ceremonies available to its members and, at the same time, respecting the right of those within the denomination who are

13 "Two-Spirit" is a term many First Nations are adopting to identify those in their communities who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

14 Cited in "The United Church of Canada and Homosexuality."

15 Huntly, *Of Love and Justice*, 43.

Chapter 4: The Choice for Marriage for All People

opposed to such services.... Religious marriage is not, and cannot be, affected by the proposed legislation. All faith communities in Canada, whatever their views on same-sex marriage, have the absolute right to determine for themselves who will be eligible for religious marriage within their communities. This includes the right to determine whether the community will offer religious marriages to interfaith couples, to divorced couples, or to couples who are not members of the community.¹⁶

In 2005, the church welcomed federal legislation that removed legal impediments to same-sex marriage. “Marriage will be enhanced, not diminished, religious freedom will be protected, not threatened, and Canadian society will be strengthened, not weakened, as a result of this legislation,” said Jim Sinclair, the general secretary.¹⁷

Not everyone in the United Church agreed. One dissenter was the National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations (NACC). In a letter to Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, the group invoked scripture as “the basis for our first, and over-riding, objection to altering the definition of marriage from the union of one man and one woman. A number of passages—e.g., Gen 2:24; Matt 19:4–5; Mk 10:7–8; Eph 5:31—make it clear that God intends marriage to be limited to heterosexual couples.”¹⁸ The NACC had earlier stated its affirmation of:

the idea of lifelong fidelity in marriage and loving chastity in singleness as set forth in the proceedings of the 19th General Council, 1960.

Having been created male and female, we hold Christian marriage to be a formally blessed bond of love between one woman and one man, in which sexual intercourse strengthens the bond and may beget new life to carry on the human race.

Knowing that some persons, because of their sexual preferences or other circumstances, are tempted to enter into relationships that include sexual intercourse outside marriage, we declare that our congregations do not condone such relationships, nor give them formal recognition, sanction or blessing.

While not blessing such relationships, we nevertheless include all people in our pastoral concern, and commend all people and all relationships to the mercy of Christ.¹⁹

On July 20, 2005, Canada became the fourth country to recognize same-sex marriages. There were challenges to the decision but the law remains in place.²⁰

One of the challenges came from a broad coalition of Canadian religious leaders, including the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, of which the NACC is a member. NACC signed a religious leaders’ appeal to the Canadian Parliament, dated November 9, 2006. It asked that the government revoke the decision to redefine marriage. Although it did not use the language of family values, it did address concerns about the nuclear family and children:

16 “Same-Sex Marriage Legislation Offers a Win-Win Solution, Says The United Church of Canada.” News release, February 1, 2005. Retrieved March 7, 2009, from www.united-church.ca/communications/news/releases/050201.

17 Ibid.

18 Letter from Geoff Wilkins, Chairman, July 21, 2003. Retrieved March 7, 2009, from www.unitedrenewal.org/archives/2003/07/pending_legisla.php.

19 Statement on Marriage, adopted at the Annual General Meeting of the National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations on March 27, 1992. Retrieved March 7, 2009, from: www.unitedrenewal.org/issues_and_topics/statement_on_morality_and_the_family.html.

20 *Marriage—A United Church of Canada Understanding* (2005) offers a history of marriage. It can be found at: www.unitedchurch.ca/files/exploring/marriage/understanding.pdf.

Marriage is society's real and symbolic affirmation of and commitment to a child's right to know and experience a mother and a father, as recognized in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Canada. Though not every marriage brings new children into the world, it is the context in which most children are born. Thus it is the state in which a woman and a man become responsible co-parents together, embodying the differences and complementarity of the sexes, and labouring in love to entrust the best that they are and have to their offspring. . . .

Redefining marriage as being "between two persons" eclipses the essence and full purpose of marriage; the inner connection between marriage, the complementarity of the sexes, procreation and the raising of children is lost.²¹

The United Church defines family as more than mother, father, and children. It recognizes a diversity of family types and offers support and encouragement for all families.

Scripture

1 Samuel 18:1–4

When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.

1 Samuel 20:16–42

Thus Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, "May the Lord seek out the enemies of David."

Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him; for he loved him as he loved his own life....

Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan. He said to him, "You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established..."

As soon as the boy had gone, David rose from beside the stone heap and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He bowed three times, and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more. Then Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the Lord, saying, 'The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever.'" He got up and left; and Jonathan went into the city.

2 Samuel 1:25–26

Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.

21 "Declaration on Marriage," Retrieved March 8, 2009, from www.files.efc-canada.net/si/Marriage%20and%20Family/DoM_English_Legal_Dec11.pdf. Used with permission.

Questions

1. What emotions do you feel after reading David and Jonathan's story?
2. Some scholars think they had a homosexual relationship. If they were gay or bisexual, does this change your feelings about the story?
3. Had you heard this story before? If not, why do you think it was not shared from the pulpit?

As it did in 1962 about marrying divorced persons, the national church ruled in September 2003 that no minister is required to officiate at a same-sex marriage against his or her own conscience. If the congregation wishes to approve same-sex marriage and the minister's conscience will not allow him or her to do so, he or she can refuse to perform the service, but must assist in finding a minister who will perform it.

On the other hand, if the minister is supportive and the congregation is not, the minister cannot perform the marriage. Part of the challenge is that ministers are commissioned, ordained, or recognized by Conferences and therefore are responsible to the whole United Church as well as to their congregation. At the same time, their licences to perform marriages come from governments that recognize same-sex marriages, so they have the legal authority to perform the marriage regardless of what the congregation says. The minister also is meant to serve the wider church and community.

Another argument is that:

[A] double standard is thereby created in which the ministry personnel who object to officiating at same-sex marriages, covenanting or blessing services are permitted to follow their conscience while ministry personnel who feel compelled to make themselves available to officiate at such services are not permitted to follow theirs.²²

In a long letter explaining the ruling, Moderator Peter Short and General Secretary Jim Sinclair called the church to deeper reflection:

Hope arises when churches, facing potentially divisive issues, take time to reflect on "What is the best way for us to be with one another?" This is a critical question in a denomination where there is a diversity of opinion, as well as a rich mix of different cultures with unique understandings of marriage. This denomination historically has valued freedom of choice. The struggle for justice is one of its cherished values and, again, part of "who we are..."

St. Paul talks about "the parts of the body" and their intricate and essential relationship. The United Church of Canada is a connectional church. As congregations and their pastoral leaders wrestle with the question of same-sex marriage, there will be obvious need for prayer and support from the wider church. We are aware of this happening already and are grateful that it is.²³

²² *Record of Proceedings of the 39th General Council*, 2006, 223.

²³ Commentary regarding same-sex marriage from Jim Sinclair and Peter Short, www.united-church.ca/communications/news/moderator/031008d. Retrieved June 9, 2009.

Chapter 5

Where Are We? Where Are We Going?

“For every Affirming congregation in the United Church, there are 70 others who have not yet made their welcome explicit or who explicitly exclude sexual and gender minorities.”¹

Issues of sexual orientation, sexism, racism, and abilities are not yet settled and equality is not yet lived. The General Council has passed motions and supports the inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, and Two-Spirit people in all forms of membership and ministry. It approves and supports same-gender marriage.

In 1997, the 36th General Council passed a resolution² requesting that all United Church Conferences urge all school boards in their jurisdictions to place the words “sexual orientation” in their non-harassment policies, and to have books and other resource materials sensitive to sexual minority issues as part of the resources of all libraries. The resolution urged all teachers’ unions and associations to provide education on sexual minority issues to promote tolerance. In 2003, the General Council Office published a booklet whose title aptly describes its content: *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Issues in Canada: Action Resources for United Church Congregations*.

At the same time, not all congregations support same-sex marriage. Congregations have the final approval for hiring ministers and setting their own marriage policy. If the congregation approves but the minister does not, the minister is not required to perform the ceremony but must find a minister who will. If a congregation does not approve, but the minister does, the minister is prohibited from performing same-sex marriages elsewhere.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and Two-Spirit people still have problems being settled (assigned to a congregation), called, or hired due to orientation. Discrimination remains but Conferences, presbyteries/districts, and the General Council staff are making efforts to improve equality.

Within The United Church of Canada, there remain organizations of diverse theological understandings. Church Alive, Community of Concern, the National Alliance of Covenanting Churches, and Affirm United all remain active. The last two have programs that involve congregational memberships. The United Church of Canada has 3,362 congregations.³ Forty-seven are named as Affirming through Affirm United,⁴ and the National Alliance of Covenanting Churches has 75 member congregations.⁵ More than 3,000 congregations have not made a public statement about where they stand on the inclusion of sexual minority people in their local ministry.

1 Alyson Huntly, “Alyson’s Angle,” *Consensus* (November 2007), 3. Used with permission.

2 *Record of Proceedings of the 36th General Council, 1997*, 710.

3 “Congregations and Courts of The United Church of Canada.” Retrieved March 2, 2009, from www.united-church.ca/organization/governance/structure#congregations.

4 “List of Affirming Ministries.” Retrieved March 7, 2009, from www.affirmunited.ca/english/ministries_list.htm.

5 “NACC Facts.” Retrieved March 2, 2009, from www.unitedrenewal.org/about_the_nacc/nacc_facts.html.

Chapter 5: Where Are We? Where Are We Going?

Within these struggles there remain stories of pain. Depending on local and personal concerns, The United Church of Canada loses people in all spectrums of this issue. Renewal groups have members who have grown weary and who have left the United Church for other denominations. Likewise, some gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and Two-Spirit people become tired of struggling for equality, and individuals have left the denomination.

On the horizon for the church is work dealing with transgender and Two-Spirit people. In 1999, no one working in the church identified as transgender and only one identified as bisexual. This is not so today; Affirm United now has bisexual and transgender representatives on its council. There is no Two-Spirit representative. In spite of advances by Two-Spirit people, it is still very difficult for some cultural groups, including some First Nations, to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity questions within their cultures.

In November 2008, the Executive of the General Council affirmed the participation and ministry of transgender people, and gave the go-ahead for further work. The General Council's Gender Justice Advisory Committee then created a task group of transgender people from within the United Church. The group will report on the development of education and advocacy concerning civil and human rights, and make additional suggestions to the 41st General Council in 2012. In August 2009, the 40th General Council also affirmed the participation and ministry of transgender people and supported their civil and human rights. It encouraged all parts of the United Church to "learn about the realities of transgender experience and expression" and to engage in dialogue with transgender people. It is likely that future General Councils will receive motions dealing with transgender concerns.

"Transgender" is easier to define than to understand. Gender identity refers to our innate, deeply felt sense of being male, female, both, or neither. It can be different from the biological sex we are assigned at birth. Many people who are living this experience refer to themselves as "transgender." What most people find difficult is to differentiate between gender and gender identity. Gender (masculine and feminine) is a social construct that socially defines roles for men and women. These may differ from culture to culture. Individual gender identity, however, is set in the brain before a child is born and guides the child in how to behave and interact with others. When the physical sex and gender identity do not match, it creates confusion, tension, and anxiety within and between the individuals and their surrounding culture. The means of resolving this tension varies. Some will be driven to seek relief through surgery (close to a 98 percent success rate), bringing body into harmony with the brain. Others will find that harmony through alternative means of gender expression.

Not everyone succeeds, often resulting in deepening depression and suicide attempts—frequently the first sign that something is drastically wrong. How do we support and provide assistance to transgender people who often find themselves ostracized by family, even by their own religious communities? How do we welcome them into our church?

The debate as to whether or not congregations should be able to make the broad decision to deny marriage to a particular group who can legally be married (that is, same-gender couples) also carried over into the 40th General Council. The Council declined to make a decision that would challenge the polity of the church in which congregations are responsible through their elders or Church Council, in consultation with their ministry personnel, to decide which ceremonies will and will not be observed. But General Council also declared that

⁶ See the definition in the Introduction to this document, p. 4.

in matters respecting doctrine, worship, membership and governance, The United Church of Canada is opposed to discrimination against any person on the basis of age, ancestry, colour, disability, ethnic origin, gender identity, language, marital status, place of origin, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic status or any other basis by which a person is devalued.⁷

The same statement calls for development of “educational resources that will assist courts and congregations to identify how they discriminate” and plans “to make room for all those who would be part of the body of Christ within The United Church of Canada.”

As the church continues to learn from the life experiences of its members, as the Spirit continues to move through our traditions, as history and reason influence our future, our understanding of the holy scriptures and their meaning for our lives will continue to grow and evolve.

We will continue to hear from some of our partners about oppression and homophobia in their denominations and cultures. Further sharing and dialogue will affect our discussions and actions as we work together on this issue.

Stories: Hope for the Future

Our final stories show us how far we have come and how far we have to go.

First, in 2006, the Executive of the General Council, acting on a motion from the General Council, apologized to the women who had been disjoined and to those who had been forced to leave their ordination rights behind when they married.

“We grieve over our limited and culturally conditioned vision of the women’s call to serve You. We are sorry for the policies and practices which denied their ministry and gifts. We repent of the injustices that left many women unemployed, in poverty, and shut out from the courts. We recant the sexism that continues to creep quietly and steadily into our views and practices towards women generally and women in ministry.”⁸

Second, in the not too distant past, homosexual ministers were non-existent, and discussing homosexuality positively in public and in schools would not have happened. And yet, in a rural congregation being served by a self-declared gay minister, two events indicate how well the congregation has welcomed and accepted him.

1. A youth member belongs to the high school gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender support group. When the teacher leading the group makes a comment about how most churches do not accept gay and lesbian ministers, the youth member speaks up about her minister. The teacher is surprised and the minister is invited to come to the school and speak.
2. Another youth member tells his father, “I don’t know if I like girls or boys.” The father replies, “Makes no difference to me, as long as you’re happy. Maybe you should talk to our minister.”

7 The United Church of Canada, 40th General Council 2009, Arctic Commission #6, “The United Church of Canada Commitment to Inclusion.”

8 Douglas, 10.

Last, there is a story that indicates a positive moment in accepting transgender people as equal—in one congregation.

The story of Del and Mary, transgender individuals, and of Emmanuel Howard Park United Church in Toronto, is told in Cheri DiNovo's book, *Que(e)rying Evangelism*.⁹ It tells how the congregation opened its doors to risk real welcome. It shares the pain and the struggle for all involved. Del and Mary came to be a joyous and welcoming presence to the congregation. Out of fear and misunderstanding from all parties, a diverse family was formed to share God's word in the world around it.

This experience must, and will be, repeated in other places over the years. There is hope.

Scripture

Galatians 3:27–29

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Questions

1. Have you experienced or do you know of an instance when someone who at first was not accepted by a congregation or community later became accepted? How did the change happen?
2. How is leadership shared in your community or organization? In what ways does your leadership represent the diversity of the membership and in what ways does it fail to do so?
3. In relation to sexuality and justice, what do you see as challenges for your community or organization in the short term? And, in the long term?

Last Reflection

Luke 10:29–37

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Questions

1. If you were the person dying on the roadside, what type of person do you think would mostly likely *not* stop to help you?
2. What if the Samaritan was gay or lesbian?
3. What if the victim was gay or lesbian? Would you stop to help a gay or lesbian person? Why or why not?

Appendix A

The United Church of Canada Timeline

- 1925 Church union: Methodist, Congregational, and most Presbyterian churches (together with Local Union Churches) come together to form The United Church of Canada.
- 1929 Women are declared persons in Canadian law.
- 1932 *The Meaning and Responsibility of Christian Marriage*
- 1936 Lydia Gruchy is ordained.
- 1946 *Christian Marriage and Christian Home*
- 1960 *Toward a Christian Understanding of Sex, Love, Marriage*
- 1962 *Marriage Breakdown, Divorce, Remarriage: A Christian Understanding*
Gainful Employment of Married Women
- 1966 The United Church Renewal Fellowship is formed.
- 1974 Church Alive is formed.
- 1975 *The Permanence of Christian Marriage*
- 1977 27th General Council—the responsibility for marriage is with the local congregation and the minister.
- 1980 *In God's Image... Male and Female: A Study on Human Sexuality*
- 1982 Affirm is formed.
- 1984 *Gift, Dilemma and Promise*
Friends of Affirm is formed.
Sexual Orientation and Eligibility for the Order of Ministry, report of the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education

- 1988** Community of Concern is formed.
Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientations, Lifestyles and Ministry, report by the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education and the Division of Mission in Canada
Membership, Ministry and Human Sexuality
- 1991** National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations is formed.
- 1992** Affirm begins the Affirming Congregation program.
Tim Stevenson is ordained.
Authority and Interpretation of Scripture
- 1994** Affirm and Friends of Affirm merge to form Affirm United.
- 1995** *Together in Faith*
- 1996** United Church Renewal Fellowship merges with the National Alliance of Covenanting Churches.
- 1999** *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Persons in Ministry*, report of the Division of Ministry Personnel and Education and the Division of Mission in Canada
- 2000** 37th General Council supports civil recognition of same-sex partnerships.
- 2003** 38th General Council supports same-sex marriages.
Of Love and Justice
No minister is required to officiate at a same-sex marriage against his or her own conscience.
- 2005** Canada becomes the fourth country to recognize same-gender marriages.
Marriage—A United Church of Canada Understanding
- 2009** 40th General Council affirms the full participation and ministry of transgender persons.
- 2012** The General Council Executive acknowledges the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation, and affirms that gender identity is not a barrier to membership and ministry in The United Church of Canada.

Appendix B

Canadian Social and Political Timeline

- 1841** The Canadian Criminal Code imposes the death penalty on men who have sexual relations with men. Buggery remained punishable by death until 1869.
- 1892** A broader law targeting all homosexual male sexual activity (“gross indecency”) was passed in 1892, as part of a larger update to the criminal law. Changes to the criminal code in 1948 and 1961 were used to brand gay men as “criminal sexual psychopaths” and “dangerous sexual offenders,” and provided for indeterminate prison sentences.
- 1948** The Kinsey report uses a six-point scale to measure sexual behaviour. 0 is strictly heterosexual and 6 is strictly homosexual. His report suggests that 10 percent of the population is strictly homosexual and that a small portion is strictly heterosexual.
- 1950** The Canadian government begins screening employees in order to remove all homosexuals.
Jim Egan is the first Canadian activist calling for changes in anti-homosexual laws.
- 1953** The Canadian Criminal Code is amended to prohibit acts of “gross indecency” between women. The Canadian government adopts an amendment to the Canadian Immigration Act, which prohibits foreign homosexuals from entering Canada. The Canadian Parliament doesn’t remove this prohibition until 1977.
- 1964** The Association for Social Knowledge, the first Canadian gay organization, is founded in Vancouver.
- 1967** George Klippert, a homosexual in Pine Point, Northwest Territories, is labelled a dangerous sexual offender and sentenced to life in prison, a sentence confirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada. He is released in 1971.
- 1969** The Canadian Parliament approves an Omnibus Bill amending the Criminal Code and effectively decriminalizing certain sexual practices (gross indecency, sodomy) committed between consenting adults (21 years of age) in privacy and not restricted to homosexual people. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau affirms that the state has no business in the bedrooms of the nation.
The Stonewall Riots occur in New York City.
- 1971** The first Canadian gay protest march takes place in Ottawa.
- 1973** The American Psychiatric Association decides that homosexuality is not a mental illness. As a result, homosexuality is withdrawn from the Diagnostic Statistical Manual.

- 1977** Quebec's National Assembly amends the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms to include sexual orientation as an illegal motive for discrimination. Quebec becomes the first jurisdiction in North America and only the second in the world, after Denmark, to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation.
- 1981** 286 men are arrested in raids on four Toronto bathhouses, and charged with being in a common bawdy house. Most are eventually acquitted.
- 1982** The Canadian House of Commons attaches a charter of rights to the Canadian Constitution, but refuses to prohibit sexual orientation as a motive for discrimination.
The first Canadian AIDS patient is diagnosed. (The first diagnosis anywhere was in 1981 in the United States, although researchers now trace HIV as far back as the 1930s.)
- 1986** Little Sister's Bookstore in Vancouver is accused by Canada Customs of importing pornography. At trial, the court finds that officers target shipments to the bookstore and that the same publications, when destined for other non-gay booksellers, are delivered without delay. The trial and appeals go on until 2000, and the Supreme Court of Canada ruling places the onus to prove obscenity on Canada Customs.
- 1996** The Canadian Charter of Human Rights is amended to include prohibition of discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The Quebec government amends the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms to eliminate discrimination against same-sex couples with respect to group insurance plans, pensions, and all other fringe benefit plans.
- 1997** The Canadian Criminal Code is amended to include the sexual orientation of people as a possible motive for hate crimes.
- 1999** Quebec's National Assembly amends various legislative provisions, which grants equal rights to common-law homosexual spouses. The Act eliminates discrimination in 28 Quebec laws.
- 2000** The Canadian House of Commons modernizes the statutes of Canada in relation to benefits and obligations, which grant equal rights and equal responsibilities to de facto homosexual spouses. This omnibus act eliminates discrimination in 64 federal laws.

- 2002** The American Academy of Pediatrics states in the February 2002 edition of its journal that children raised in a homoparental environment develop just as well as those raised in a heteroparental environment. It also concludes that children would benefit from having both parents officially recognized, encouraging legislators to take the necessary action. The American Psychiatric Association takes the same position.
Quebec's National Assembly adopts Bill 84, giving same-sex couples access to an institution equivalent to marriage and recognizing their right to be parents.
- 2003** Several Superior and Appeal Court rulings in British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec state that defining marriage as the union between a man and a woman contravenes the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.
The Canadian government asks the Supreme Court for advice on same-sex marriage.
- 2004** The fact that the Canadian government does not appeal rulings made by Appeal Courts in British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec results in same-sex marriages taking place in these provinces.
The Supreme Court delivers a unanimous response to the federal government stating that it can and should legalize same-sex marriages. It also says that neither Ottawa nor the provinces can force religious authorities to celebrate homosexual marriages against their will if this contravenes their beliefs or their traditions.
- 2005** The House of Commons adopts Bill C-38 on June 28, 2005, recognizing civil marriage between people of the same sex. The Senate adopts Bill C-38 in July. The new law comes into effect on July 20, making Canada the fourth country to recognize same-sex marriages.
- 2006** A motion tabled by Canada's newly elected Conservative government to reopen the same-sex marriage debate is defeated in the House of Commons by a vote of 175-123.
South Africa's parliament passes a bill giving same-sex couples the legal right to marry or to have a civil union, making it the first African country to approve same-sex marriage.
- 2008** Argentina grants gay couples the right to collect the pensions of their deceased partners, provided they can show they lived with their partner for at least five years.

Source: predominantly Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), Comité des gaies et lesbiennes, www.csq.qc.net/sites/1676/documents/english/rappel_historique_ang.pdf. Retrieved March 7, 2009. Also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sodomy_law. Retrieved June 9, 2009.

Appendix C

Using the Material for Bible Study

Depending on the length of your Bible study or how often you meet, you could consider various possibilities and adapt them to your needs.

Option A

Begin by looking at *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (www.united-church.ca/files/history/overview/ais.pdf). Ask participants in your group if they agree with this United Church of Canada's approach to scripture. Why or why not?

If your denomination has a written statement on the topic, get a copy your the statement and compare it with the United Church's. What do the two agree on? Where are the major differences? Why are there these differences?

Option B

Discuss all the scripture readings provided in *Moving toward Full Inclusion: Sexual Orientation in The United Church of Canada* and use the questions presented in the document or create your own questions for discussion.

Option C

Begin by discussing the scriptures cited in this document that relate to gender or sexism or other issues (such as those that might be related to power, morality, and culture) aside from orientation issues. As participants build trust among each other and feel safe, then look at and discuss the readings dealing with sexual orientation.

A Partner Reflection: Homosexuality and Biblical Studies

by Diego León Acevedo Peña¹

The great advances in biblical studies in recent decades are due, in large measure, to the fruitful dialogue with other disciplines and the active incorporation principally of methods and instruments of social sciences and linguistics.

The road taken to date permits us to look with new awareness at the relationship between sacred scripture and sexual minorities, especially homosexuals:

1. The incorrect interpretation of texts such as those of Sodom and Gomorrah, which today are made clearer thanks to intratextual and contextual analysis.
2. The small level of relevance with which the topic is treated in both the Old and New Testaments.
3. Understanding of the social context allows us to obtain a profile of the intended readers of the texts and to recognize historic differences in the exercise of homogenital relations.²

In this regard, it is important to recognize that such relations have taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures.³ As such, the homogenital relations among the peoples surrounding Israel were tied to idolatry, and among the Hebrew people such relations constituted an obstacle in the effort to maintain an acceptable birth rate. At the same time, the understanding of conception as a process begun by the seed of life that was possessed only by the male made the waste of semen into something abominable.

Likewise, in ancient Greek and Roman cultures, these relations were socially mediated through unjust structures that led to degeneration into paedophilia, ephebophilia, and sexual slavery. Condemnation of these acts is thus not surprising. But a new concept of homoerotic relations gave rise to the use of the word "homosexual" during the second half of the 19th century. This term would replace words and concepts like "sodomy" or "inversion," both of which expressed social condemnation of all non-hetero-normative sexuality; the terms signalled the "abnormality" and "dysfunctionality" of those so described. This "abnormality" was considered valid not just in religious discourse but also in scientific discourse through to the second half of the 20th century.

The word "homosexual" as we understand it today denotes a condition of sexual orientation exclusively or predominantly toward people of the same sex. Such orientation is exercised between persons who are equal before the law and who conduct themselves in a free and voluntary manner.

1 The author is a member of Confraternidad, an ecumenical Christian group for sexual minority people in Medellín, Colombia. He is also a student at PROMESA, an ecumenical theology school in Medellín and Bogotá. This excerpt is from a presentation, *Homosexual Identity and Christian Spirituality*, that he gave at the Ecumenical Encounter of Pastoral Agents: Identities, Spirituality and Pastoral Accompaniment in the Context of Conflict, May 25–26, 2006, organized by the Ecumenical Network of Colombia and the Council of Latin American Churches (CLAI). Texts published by the Ecumenical Network of Colombia: *Memorias: Encuentros agentes de pastoral*. Translation by Jim Hodgson.

2 With the expression "homogenital relations," Acevedo refers to sexual-genital relations between persons of the same sex.

3 Catechism of the Catholic Church 2357.

Appendix D

Using the Material for a Social and Political Dialogue

The resource that you have been reading is predominantly a religious one but the story it tells takes place within the Canadian social and political environment. Each sphere—religious, social, political—influences the others. When representatives of global partners came to The United Church of Canada’s partnership consultation in June 2008, they asked that we consider how this report might be used to help discussions in non-religious settings and outside Canada as well. The challenge is this: just as the United Church is different from other denominations, so each nation has its own political and social context.

Upon looking at Canadian history with regard to sexual orientation and gender identity, we offer some questions for possible discussion in other contexts. The factors that helped bring about greater participation by sexual minority persons in social, political, and religious life in Canada cannot be a prescription for other contexts, but some of what has been learned through our experience may be useful elsewhere. Feel free to use these comments and questions in any way that encourages dialogue in your own situation.

1. Canada was a colony shaped politically and religiously by its European rulers. First Nations (Indigenous) people here were understood as needing to be “civilized” by becoming Christian citizens. First Nations had their own understandings of sexuality and gender roles, including the concept of Two-Spirit persons.¹
 - Was your country controlled by a foreign power or by a religion that wasn’t indigenous to your country?
 - How does your place in society or history affect your cultural or religious understanding of sexuality, gender, and same-gender relations?
2. What understanding is there in your country about intimate sexual relations between people of the same sex? Is it the same for men and for women? What are the current laws on this kind of relationship?
3. Today, Western culture—media, music, materials, ideas, values—has a strong influence on other cultures of the world. Has it influenced your nation’s understanding of sexuality? Some people believe that homosexuality is a Western concern and that homosexuals do not exist in their cultures. Do you agree?
4. In Canada, those opposed to same-sex marriage said it would harm “traditional family values” and the nuclear family—father, mother, children. In your context, what family structure might be considered the “norm” (nuclear, extended, blended, other)? What are the closely-held values regarding families?
5. The American Academy of Pediatrics states that children raised within an environment where one or both parents are homosexual develop equally well as those raised in a heterosexual environment. It also says that children would benefit from having both parents legally recognized as parents. What do you think?
6. Canadian sexual minorities (gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, etc.) became active to protect their human rights to have places to live, to work, and to receive services from public institutions. Do sexual minorities in your community have these rights? Should they? Why?
7. In 1981, a new disease was diagnosed among gay men. This “gay cancer” was later identified as Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). This disease affects many people of all sexual orientations, but its early label as a gay disease has stuck. How is AIDS described in your country? What is its impact on women, people in need of blood transfusions, and other groups? Does homophobia (fear of homosexuals) contribute to the spread or treatment (or lack thereof) of the disease?

1 “Two-Spirit” is a term many First Nations are adopting to identify those in their communities who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

Appendix E

Some Perspectives from the Canadian and Global Christian Family

From Canada

Jim Loney, a Canadian member of the Christian Peacemaker Teams and the Catholic Worker movement, who was kidnapped in Iraq in 2005 and held for four months, was recognized with a special award on May 7, 2008, by the United Theological College in Montreal. In his convocation address, Loney spoke of being gay in these terms:¹

I belong to a people who have long been forced to live in a shadow land of shame, self-loathing, existential degradation, moral opprobrium. A people who have been silenced, scorned, mocked, taunted, invisibilized, psychoanalyzed, incarcerated, lashed, bashed, beaten, burned, hanged. A people who sometimes have no other option but to believe what is said of us, that we are “intrinsically disordered,” a “serious depravity,” a “threat to the foundation of the family and the stability of society,” and therefore pretend to be what we are not and languish in suffocating closets, or destroy ourselves with parties, drugs and razor blades...

We know what it is like to live in fear and trembling of what we might be. We know what it is like to be excluded, marginalized, despised, cast out. We know the body and soul terror of staking our lives on our desires, proclaiming this is who I am and this is who I love. Perhaps worst of all, we know what it is like to hate who we are.

But Loney added that the experience of exclusion gives sexual-minority people a privileged way of seeing.

We can see, from the place of exclusion what real inclusion is; from the place of shame what dignity is; from the place of oppression what liberation is...the image and likeness of God body-breathing and heart-beating in our sacred desire to love and be loved, woman and woman, man and man, together giving birth to yet more love.

From Colombia

PROMESA—the Open Theological Studies Ministerial Program—functions in Colombia as a campus of the Latin American Biblical University (UBL) in San José, Costa Rica, also a partner of the United Church. With regard to sexual orientation, PROMESA states the following:

In the past three years [through 2006], PROMESA has lived through a process of awareness-building that has moved us to broaden our horizons with respect with gender. Various factors have moved us to take new paths in this area.

On the one hand, we hear the call of women that men must undertake their own reflection on masculinity. Some work in the Latin American theological community (CETELA) and the

1 James Loney, “When a People in Darkness See a Great Light,” Convocation Address, United Theological College, May 7, 2008. Text retrieved March 8, 2009, from www.utc.ca/fichiers/People%20in%20Darkness.pdf. Used with permission.

presence of PROMESA in the Intensive Bible Course in 2004 have helped affirm this need. To this we would add the work that has been done in Medellín by the gender group with the Ecumenical Collective of Bible Scholars (CEDEBI) that has insisted on the need to go deeper in the reflection on gender, beyond feminist perspective and including the questions of masculinity and environment.

On the other hand, we have become closer to people and minority groups whose life orientations are different from that of the heterosexual; this has led us to broaden the horizons of gender, opening a new vein in biblical-theological reflection that has to do with the matter of homosexuality.

We recognize that this last issue is not only new but also difficult to approach. Churches and theological institutions alike have been carried along by moralism and prejudice. In spite of the difficulty and risks implied, we have taken on the theme knowing that we discern behind this movement the strength of the Spirit that calls us to assume a pastoral attitude that is more coherent with the liberating grace of the gospel. This is a path in which we have no certitudes, put where we wish to walk guided by the logic of love and the Spirit for the sake of human shared living and a Christianity that is truly inclusive.²

From South Africa

Near the end of 2006, South Africa became the first country in Africa and the fifth in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. On September 7, 2006, the General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, Edwin Makue, joined the public debate by sending the following open letter to the Chairs of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committees on Home Affairs and Justice and Constitutional Development:

The South African Council of Churches

affirms the equal dignity and worth of each individual. As South Africans, we are proud that our society is founded on a Constitution that respects the fundamental human rights of all people and promises everyone equal protection before the law. We feel called by our faith and our convictions to articulate a religious motivation for marriage equality as a contribution to the public discussion of the reform of the Marriage Act, as required by the Constitutional Court.

The moral imperative for a review of the Marriage Act, 1961

We recognise the need for a comprehensive review and transformation of all apartheid-era legislation, including the Marriage Act, in the light of our democratic Constitution if we are to live together as a united society amidst our differences and diversity. We recall with shame the role that legislation such as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and the Immorality Act played in the social engineering of racial domination. We are equally saddened that marriages conducted according to Muslim, Hindu and customary African rites have not enjoyed equal legal status with Christian marriages. As a part of this long overdue review, we must also consider how our society recognises and protects committed same-sex partnerships.

² Translation of document given March 31, 2006, to Jim Hodgson, Caribbean/Central America and Colombia Regional Program Coordinator, JGER Unit. Used with permission.

Christians hold diverse views on marriage and homosexuality

We do not presume to speak on behalf of all Christians. There is not a single “Christian” perspective on marriage. We are alarmed by the widespread misapprehension that those who oppose equal marriage rights speak on behalf of a monolithic “Christian Church”. Different denominations have different understandings of and policies governing marriage and divorce, and these have evolved over time. The Roman Catholic view, for example, is predicated on the belief that marriage is a sacrament that cannot be undone. Divorce in this tradition is therefore wholly unacceptable and never recognised. The Protestant and Reformed traditions hold marriage in equally high esteem, but in some situations reluctantly permit divorce as the lesser of two evils. Some churches see men and women as equally responsible for household decisions, while others uphold a tradition in which the male is the head of the household and women are encouraged to play a supportive, and ultimately subservient, role. In both cases, the churches concerned would see their positions as grounded in scriptural principles.

Currently, most churches uphold the union of one man and one woman as the only valid model for Christian marriage. At the same time, there is a growing number of dissenting voices in all denominations—people who see equal validation of homosexual and heterosexual unions as consistent with their understanding of the inclusiveness expressed through the unconditional love referred to as God’s grace.

Christians hold equally diverse views on homosexuality. Today, most churches accept the overwhelming evidence that sexual orientation (as distinct from sexual behaviour) is a component of identity over which individuals exercise little or no conscious choice. Typically, they oppose discrimination against homosexuals. However, this acceptance is sometimes conditional on celibacy. Some Christians have difficulty reconciling such conditionality with an understanding of sexuality as a gift from God that has the potential to strengthen and enrich intimate human relationships.

Scripture speaks afresh to each generation

Just as there is not one view on marriage, there is also no single authoritative interpretation of scripture. We view the Bible as God’s living word. As such, it is capable of speaking afresh to humanity at different times and in different places and circumstances. The handful of passages most commonly read as condemnations of homosexuality were informed by the dominant understanding of human nature at the time they were written. They must be read and interpreted in their historical and cultural context. They should not be simplistically applied to contemporary society any more than ancient ways of explaining the natural world, also evident in scripture, should be used to dismiss the conclusions of centuries of scientific inquiry.

More importantly, our interpretations of these texts must be “checked” against the central messages that emerge clearly and powerfully from the Gospel: Christ’s admonition to love God and to love one’s neighbours, as well as his particular compassion for the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed.

Church and State have different responsibilities

The Church must continue to wrestle with scripture to discern God’s will with regard to the moral and theological questions associated with same-sex relationships, particularly as they affect questions of ordination and religious marriage. But the fact that most Christian denominations are not currently prepared to bless same-sex unions should not necessarily be a rationale for inaction by government. Government’s responsibility, in a secular democracy, is not to interpret the Bible but the Constitution. It has a duty to test legislation against Constitutional principles and to protect the rights of all citizens equally. At the same time, the

state must defend religious freedom by ensuring that churches retain control over decisions regarding religious rites and sacraments, including the religious aspects of marriage.

Ethical principles for equal marriage

This is not to say that Christians (and other people of faith) have no role to play in building a national consensus on marriage. Our faith traditions provide us with moral insights on the role and significance of marriage that remain relevant to legislative reform.

We understand religious marriage as a covenant that two people make publicly with God, a commitment to mutual sharing, caring, faithfulness and support. Good marriages benefit the community by creating stable and durable families that nurture both the partners and their children. They facilitate human development and social and economic participation, increasing individuals' capacity to contribute to the common good. We value these characteristics of religious marriage, regardless of the procreative capacity of the two individuals involved; we believe that the national interest is also served by enshrining these values in public policy governing civil unions.

Furthermore, we see our theological understanding of the equal dignity of all human beings being given secular expression in the equality clause of the Constitution and the principle of equal protection of human rights in terms of laws of general application. In the case of the revision of the Marriage Act, the challenge will be to keep an appropriate balance between the constitutional principles of freedom of religious expression and voluntary association on the one hand, while promoting a healthy coexistence with the equality clauses on the other.

This calls for creative thought and an appreciation of the benefits of protecting difference and diversity. Our national history illustrates all too painfully the folly and injustice of creating multiple legal and administrative mechanisms to perform essentially the same functions for different categories of people. Separate institutions are rarely, if ever, equal. Their chances of achieving equal impact are further reduced if they are embedded in a society that remains afflicted by prejudice and discrimination. Consequently, we believe that the State should craft a single legal framework capable of recognising and protecting the legal rights of all partners who wish to declare their commitment to each other, irrespective of their gender or the faith or cultural tradition in which their partnership is recognised or validated.

Conclusion

In the light of these principles, we urge Parliament to act expeditiously to reconcile existing marriage legislation with the provisions of Section 9 of the Constitution within the timeframe designated by the Constitutional Court. We trust that, in so doing, Parliament will refrain from imposing any duty on faith communities that would inhibit them from celebrating and blessing partnerships in ways consistent with their respective beliefs. We stand ready to contribute constructively to this process by offering our own assessments of proposed legislation.³

3 Edwin Makue, "Open Letter on Marriage." Retrieved March 8, 2009, from www.sacc.org.za/news06/marriage.html. Used with permission.

From India

On July 2, 2009, the New Delhi High Court repealed the portion of a sex law that criminalized homosexual activity between consenting adults. The judge relied less on Western legal precedents than on Indian traditions of inclusion.

“This Court believes that Indian Constitution reflects this value deeply ingrained in Indian society,” wrote Justice S. Muralidha. “Those perceived by the majority as ‘deviants’ or ‘different’ are not on that score excluded or ostracized. Where society can display inclusiveness and understanding, such persons can be assured of a life of dignity and non-discrimination.”

Such court decisions do not emerge in a vacuum. For many years, groups representing sexual minorities and their allies have been organizing and encouraging deeper study of gender issues.

One group, Vikas Adhyayan Kendra (VAK), is a partner of The United Church of Canada. VAK is a secular voluntary organization established in 1981 to be a meeting place between academics and social activists. It understands “people as the subjects and makers of history,” and works through critical reflection to strengthen people’s struggles towards a just and more humane social order.

When VAK staff member Ajit Muricken came to Canada in June 2008 to participate in the United Church’s consultation with global partners, he talked about VAK’s strategy for bringing the concerns of sexual minorities into the mainstream: “The issue has to be on the agenda of all people’s organizations concerned with the development of a pluralistic and democratic society in which human rights are truly for all human beings,” he said. “Churches and other faith-based should make lesbian and gay rights a topic for clergy and laity, and integrate them in training.”

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From its founding in 1925 to today, The United Church of Canada has evolved in its understanding of sexuality and marriage. Article 20 of the church's Basis of Union affirmed the inviolability of marriage and the sanctity of the family. In 2003, the United Church called on the federal government to recognize same-sex marriage.

Through story, scripture, and reflection questions, this book presents how the United Church has journeyed toward full inclusion of sexual minorities. It describes how the church prayed, debated, fought, protested, pleaded, reflected, studied, heard, and moved within the context of faith.

A tool for dialogue, *Moving Toward Full Inclusion* invites you into conversation with this journey.



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