

Why Amendment 08-B is Good for the PCUSA

“We’re tired of talking about this issue.”

Women’s ordination took over 40 years to accomplish. The arguments against ordaining women: it’s contrary to Scripture, it’s unnatural, and it will split the church.

G-6.0106b was an attempt to force a solution on the Church before consensus has been reached; it failed. The Church must learn to live with disagreement and uncertainty. As Christ’s people, we must remain in relationship with each other even when we think differently, relying upon our fundamental unity in Christ.

“The issue” will not go away, because it concerns the lives of real people, both LGBT and straight, who are members of the PCUSA. Yet even after 30 years of controversy and more than 10 years with G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order*, there has been precious little actual dialogue leading to understanding. The amendment vote combined with the GA’s encouragement of listening and discernment is an opportunity for Presbyterians to build relationships even in the midst of continuing disagreement.

And if you’re really tired of the issue, the best way to get it over with is to vote ‘yes’ so that the PCUSA can move on; until this change is made, our responsibility to LGBT persons, those who love them, and the Gospel, will be to keep demanding justice like the persistent widow.

“The current G-6.0106b is faithful to Scripture .”

Biblical scholars disagree about whether homosexual practice is sinful; no matter which scholars make sense to you, it must be acknowledged that people of good faith, who love the Scripture and submit to its authority, read the Bible for guidance in this matter and reach different conclusions.

Whatever interpretation one follows, to accuse fellow church members of ignoring the Bible when they have appealed to its authority is itself a practice the confessions call sin: “The sins forbidden in the Ninth Commandment are... misconstruing intentions, words, and actions...” (Westminster Larger Catechism, 7.255). The peace, unity, and purity of the church does not require us all to agree on every point, but it does require “a charitable esteem of our neighbors, loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name...” (7.254).

08-B also calls all officers to honor Scripture not by making it an end in itself, but by honoring its witness to Jesus Christ. 08-B emphasizes the Christian’s highest calling, which is to submit in all things to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

“The Church must speak with clarity to the moral issues of the day.”

The Church is not clear on the issue of homosexuality; it cannot speak with clarity that it does not possess. Pretending there is agreement where none exists is dishonest and will not provide our youth and others with the guidance they need.

An underlying assumption of many who support G-6.0106b is that it is possible to be “healed” of homosexuality. The American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Psychological Association all agree that there is no scientific evidence that homosexual orientation can be changed, and that attempts to do so can be harmful. For the Church to promote therapies intended to “change,” “convert,” or “transform” persons, when the medical community warns against this, is irresponsible and could open the Church to malpractice liability. In fact, there has been at least one “change minister” found guilty of involuntary manslaughter subsequent to the suicide of a counselee (State of California v. the Rev. T.C. Moreland, June, 1994).

G-6.0106b’s supporters are wrong about the possibility of “transformation” in the vast majority of cases. The attitude enshrined in the current wording contributes to causing great suffering on the part of those who try to change and fail, and indeed all those who bear the stigma of “sin” for a situation they did not cause and cannot change.

A clear word is of no value if it is not a true word. (The medieval church could excommunicate Galileo for insisting that the earth revolves around the sun, but that did not make his position less true.)

“The Church must have standards of morality!”

Yes! But the standards must be applied to all equally, emphasizing the quality of relationship rather than the gender of the partners; to do otherwise is to elevate form over substance.

If the Church teaches that long-term committed lesbian and gay relationships are on a par with a series of one-night stands, it gives no support or encouragement for responsible, healthy exercise of sexuality. As long as the Church condemns all sexually intimate same-sex relationships, it has no standing to participate with the LGBT community in promoting a responsible sexual ethic, integrating sexuality and spirituality.

G-6.0106b actually provides disincentives to important values: by purporting to punish only “self-acknowledged practice,” it rewards duplicity rather than honesty; and by discouraging committed same-sex relationships, it encourages promiscuity rather than faithfulness.

An important “family value” is that children be valued and loved; parents of lesbians and gays also want such acceptance for their children, but failure to accept homosexuality works against this.

“Young people need guidance.”

Youth should be taught to be honest, true to themselves, and respectful of themselves and others. Gay and lesbian youth must not learn to hate themselves (struggles over sexual identity factor heavily in teen suicides); and non-gay youth must not learn

prejudice against those with minority sexual orientation. All youth must be encouraged to think for themselves, to take responsibility for their own lives, and to have empathy for others.

It makes as much sense to “guide” youth away from homosexuality as it would to guide them away from left-handedness.

“If we vote for this amendment, there will be membership loss and/or schism.”

Jesus called all sorts of unexpected people to be his disciples and do the work of the Kingdom; he welcomed all to the table. If the Church is to be faithful to Jesus Christ, it must follow his example; and if the Church is not faithful to him, it forfeits its reason for being and its right to survival. The true Church of Jesus Christ cannot die; but we will cease to be the Church if we do not live out the love and compassion of Jesus Christ.

True evangelism recognizes that the good news is for all people, and reaches out to all. A time-honored evangelism approach is to “win the right to be heard” by befriending persons, caring for them, listening to them, and becoming part of their lives. The Church cannot hope to evangelize within the LGBT community if it does not listen to and respect their stories, and more and more non-gay persons are disgusted with discrimination and prejudice even when it doesn’t affect them personally.

The church will split if we focus on law rather than grace and legislate ourselves to the point where we cannot deal with one another; excluding people does not foster unity.

“08-B is divisive.”

The paragraph being replaced by 08-B has infected the PCUSA with a spirit of narrowness, exclusion, judgment, and condemnation, an elevation of the letter of the law above the spirit of the law of love which is Jesus’ standard for the people of God.

It has not been constructive for the PCUSA. Because it is either unenforceable or hypocritical, it has fostered contempt for the law. It excludes some Presbyterians from responding to God’s call to use their gifts in leadership in Christ’s Church, and violates the conscience of many others. 08-B will correct these deficiencies.

“G-6.0106b is the right way because it moves from Bible, to theology, to confessions. Theology does matter.”

G-6.0106b assumes one interpretation of the Bible not shared by many, one theological approach, and a literal reading of the confessions in their references to sin.

It is a crucial principle of biblical interpretation that “while a particular text may name a subject with which we are also concerned in the present, the assumption should not be immediately made that the contemporary subject is the same as that addressed in the biblical text or that the circumstances and conditions of the biblical writer and

modern interpreter are similar.” (*Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture*) Many biblical scholars have pointed out that the Bible does not comment upon same-sex orientation and faithful monogamous practice, the situation that we are discussing today.

Theology matters because what and how we think about God influences our relationships with God and with other human beings. Theologies which cause harm to persons are suspect.

“G-6.0106b supports traditional Church teaching.”

Church teaching is dynamic - we no longer justify slavery by quoting Scripture, to name only one of many examples of changed understanding of God’s will. The *Book of Confessions* charts the Presbyterian direction, not the Presbyterian position, for we are “always being reformed.”

“Our ecumenical partners expect us to disapprove the amendment, and can’t understand why we are even having this discussion.”

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is by no means unique in dealing with homosexuality; it is a major issue in most U.S. denominations and many across the world. This is true not because there are now more gay and lesbian persons, but because they are becoming more visible in our society. Ignoring what is going on in the world would render our Church irrelevant; we are called to be responsive, not reactive, and to lead in the quest for justice rather than reluctantly to bring up the rear.

If the PCUSA waited for every ecumenical partner, we would still not be ordaining women. We do not break relations with sister churches that disagree on some of our theological positions.

“G-6.0106b honors marriage and celibacy.”

Both the Scripture (Matthew 19:10-12, 1 Corinthians 7:7-9) and the Reformed tradition recognize that celibacy is a special gift, not given to all persons. Those who choose celibacy must do so freely; when it is a religious vocation, the church which requires it endeavors to provide persons who make that commitment with the intentional support of the community.

The Presbyterian Church has asked lesbian and gay persons to forfeit not only sexual intimacy, but emotional and spiritual intimacy as well.

Heterosexual persons without a vocation of celibacy are called to abstinence in those times in their lives when they are unwilling or unable to commit to a permanent relationship; but the Church calls lesbian and gay persons to celibacy even when they have found another with whom to share their lives in faithful commitment. This is very different from calling all persons to the same standard.

“G-6.0106b not aimed against gays, but against all unrepentant sinful behavior, including that of heterosexuals.”

The history of the enforcement of G-6.0106b shows that it is indeed aimed against gays. Its wording is so broad that if it were not enforced selectively against “the other person’s” sins it would disqualify everyone.

Openly gay and lesbian Presbyterians do not believe that their committed sexual relationships are sinful, and many other Presbyterians agree with them. There are numerous other practices called sin by the confessions that many Presbyterians also do not agree are sinful. G-6.0106b encourages hyper-judgmentalism, hypocrisy, and an obsession with sexuality over other aspects of a faithful life.

The *Book of Confessions* (C-5.039, 7.260) recognizes that some sins are more serious than others, and that no person is free from sin; yet as written (if not as enforced), G-6.0106b fails to make any distinction between sins that are grievous and those that might be considered minor.

“G-6.0106b distinguishes between orientation and practice.”

This is in reality a false distinction. Persons who identify themselves as lesbian or gay, or who are suspected, are discriminated against without regard to, or even knowledge of, their “practices.”

It is dualistic to divide sexuality into orientation on the one hand and behavior, activity, or practice on the other. God created whole persons, and the expression of every individual’s sexuality should flow with integrity, in accordance with his or her identity.

“G-6.0106b is pastoral.”

The Church is not called to be a shelter pretending to shield persons from the moral storm raging in the world, but a safe place in which persons can be supported in dealing with the important life issues confronting them. It is not pastoral to make it difficult for persons to talk honestly about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

“G-6.0106b holds leaders to high standards.”

It holds leaders to unrealistic standards, many of which are no longer widely accepted as appropriate, encouraging the notion that the Church’s statements and standards cannot be taken seriously.

“G-6.0106b acknowledges limits to inclusivity.”

The *Book of Order* declares that the only limit to inclusivity is faith in Jesus Christ: “The congregation shall welcome all persons who respond in trust and obedience to

God's grace in Jesus Christ and desire to become part of the membership and ministry of his church. No persons shall be denied membership because of race, ethnic origin, worldly condition, or any other reason not related to profession of faith. Each member must seek the grace of openness in extending the fellowship of Christ to all persons. (G-9.0104) Failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the gospel." G-5.0103

"G-6.0106b shows compassion for gays and lesbians."

Real compassion requires empathy - the capacity to "walk a mile in others' shoes," to listen to and respect their stories. While there may be some who describe an experience of "healing" from homosexuality, this has not been the case for many more persons who are lesbian and gay. It is not compassionate to insist that persons do what is for them impossible, and to punish them when they do not. It is not compassionate towards parents to uphold the stigma which oppresses both their children and them.

"We love gay people but..."; or, "Love the sinner, hate the sin..."

Love is not manipulative or punitive. Love looks at persons, not at categories, and encourages persons in integrity and wholeness. Persons cannot, and should not be expected to, separate the expression of their sexuality from their sexual identity. To expect lesbian or gay persons to act in violation of who they are is not love - it is abuse. We are all called to live ethically, expressing our sexuality with faithfulness, love, and mutuality, in accordance with the integrity of our bodies, minds, and spirits.

"G-6.0106b doesn't exclude anyone from membership. But ordination is a calling, not a right."

It is true that ordination is not an absolute right; those called should have "the necessary gifts and abilities..., strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ..." (G-6.0106a). There are honest, open lesbian and gay Presbyterians, known by those who have called them, who are chosen by God through the voices of congregations to serve in ordained office. G-6.0106b seeks to deny the validity of those calls on the basis of one aspect of their lives, without regard for their capacity to serve effectively and faithfully. It denies vital and able leadership to the Church.

For churches with many LGBT members, the supposed inability to call them as elders and deacons leads to practical problems when it's time to nominate new leadership - the non-gay folks get tired of not being able to share the load! And it leaves the LGBT members with no access to participation in the governance of their own churches.

To deny ordination to persons as a group violates the *Book of Order's* provision that "an active member is entitled to all the rights and privileges of the church, including the right to ... vote and hold office," (G-5.0202) and therefore does exclude them from the full exercise of their membership.

The PCUSA has been consistent in deploring discrimination against gay and lesbian persons in society, and has called for civil rights for same-sex couples. We confuse people, both within the Church and outside it, and compromise our witness for justice with our “do as I say, not as I do” attitude. Our discrimination in ecclesiastical matters gives our call for civil rights no credibility, and opens the Church to charges of hypocrisy.

“The Church must promote holiness and purity.”

The ethic of holiness - purity based upon maintaining distinctions between clean and unclean - was replaced by Jesus with an ethic of compassion (see Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*; William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex*). Jesus’ ethic is based upon love, that which contributes to human well-being.

What kind of holiness and purity are we seeking by encouraging dishonesty? Is sex the only, or primary, litmus test for purity?

Purity involves self-examination, not someone else’s judgment. For Jesus, self-righteousness, pride, and failure to put love first were among the most serious violations keeping persons from being justified in God’s sight.

“G-6.0106b supports the traditional family.”

Jesus shocked his listeners by devaluing blood ties and redefining the family as “those who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8:21) Gay and lesbian Presbyterians are already a part of Jesus’ family by virtue of their baptism.

Traditional families face many challenges - divorce, pregnancy out of wedlock, economic pressures, etc. - but none of these challenges is caused by acceptance of lesbian or gay relationships. On the contrary, vilification of gay and lesbian persons disrupts many traditional families with gay and lesbian members, as they must decide whether to hide the truth of their lives from other members of the family or risk rejection.

Lesbian and gay persons, like all of us, have a variety of families: birth/biological, chosen/relational. Many lesbian and gay persons have children, who are not helped by the demonization of their parents.

G-6.0106b fractures families - the church family as well as individual families.

“08-B will violate the consciences of those who believe that homosexuality is sinful, and impose upon us leaders we cannot accept.”

A governing body believing that Scripture prohibits ordained service by gay and lesbian Presbyterians can exercise its discretion not to ordain or install them – while, in the same manner, governing bodies reading Scripture differently can follow their conscience as well.

We ordain people to the whole church, but we install people to particular ministries. As is true now, congregations will still elect their own officers, and presbyteries will still examine, ordain, and approve persons laboring in their bounds.

“08-B puts the church on record as approving of homosexual conduct.”

08-B makes no statement and takes no position on homosexuality; it does remove a premature word on the subject that has falsely claimed to represent a consensus. It invites sessions and presbyteries to consider candidates' sexuality along with all other aspects of their lives and faith in reaching faithful discernment of their suitability and call.

“How can Amendment 08-B be considered “middle ground”?”

Middle ground is a place where Presbyterians can stand together, even when we might disagree with each other's positions. Our Constitution does not anticipate that we will always agree with each other -- no church since the apostles' days has. But it gives us a “duty. . . to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other” (G-1.0305).

Peace for the Church while we have the current G-6.0106b requires that those who disagree must change their convictions, act against their convictions, declare departures, remain silent, or leave. Amendment 08-B would require none of these for people who disapprove of homosexuality: they remain free to hold, teach, and act on their convictions. They are only being asked to grant the same respect to others, and cease imposing their views upon all.

“Isn't this “local option” -- a departure from Presbyterian connectionalism?”

No. Presbyterian polity has always provided that the Constitution establishes standards, but that the responsibility for *application* of the standards is lodged with the governing body making the individual decision. The high standards established in the Constitution will still be applied to individual candidates by Sessions and Presbyteries as they look to Scripture and the Confessions for their understanding of the manner of life which demonstrates the gospel.

“Under 08-B, could a Permanent Judicial Commission order a Session or Presbytery to ordain or install a person whom the governing body believes to be unfit for office?”

No. Decisions of governing bodies may be appealed, but a PJC does not have the power to direct a governing body to take an action that is within that governing body's discretion. Congregations have the right to elect their own officers (G-6.0107), and presbyteries determine their own membership (G-11.0403). The most a PJC could do in a case in which a person has been denied ordination/installation is to direct the governing body to redo the process to correct a procedural error. No governing body can be required to approve any individual candidate.

Amendment 08-B does not change our current, long-standing Presbyterian polity regarding the authority and relationships of governing bodies; the ability of a higher governing body to review the actions of a lower governing body will be the same as it is now -- no more, no less.

“Will Amendment 08-B result in a proliferation of judicial cases, or in repeated attempts to change our ordination standards through Authoritative Interpretations by General Assemblies?”

08-B relies upon fundamental principles of our Reformed tradition by providing for freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture on a non-essential matter, and honoring the duty to show one another mutual forbearance -- a duty which is established in our Constitution and vital to the healthy functioning of the Church. There may be further cases and overtures, but only if some remain determined to force their interpretation upon others who, in good faith, disagree.

“But isn’t there a requirement to ordain women? What’s the difference?”

Since 1972, the *Book of Order* has required that “every congregation shall elect men and women from among its active members” (G-14.0221) and that “both women and men shall be eligible to hold church offices” (G-6.0105). Even so, we still provide for exceptions where women’s ordination is not well accepted. A candidate cannot be refused because she is a woman, but neither is she guaranteed ordination based on her gender.

The consensus about women’s ordination is now so vast that it obtained confessional status in the *Brief Statement of Faith* (the Holy Spirit “calls women and men to all ministries of the Church,” 10.4).

“Will an officer’s ordination be recognized in a place where s/he would not have been ordained in the first place?”

Once an individual has been ordained, he or she retains that status unless s/he sets it aside voluntarily or is divested of it according to the Rules of Discipline. But ordination is not a special status that exists in any meaningful way apart from service in a governing body of the church. (G-6.0102). A Minister must have the approval of the Presbytery to become a member or to labor within its bounds; an Elder or Deacon must be elected by the congregation in order to exercise such leadership on Session or the Board of Deacons.

It is certainly true now, and would be true under 08-B, that some presbyters do not approve of other ordained persons, and might prefer not to serve in the same governing body with them. Their individual feelings of discomfort, however, do not and would not override the discernment of the appropriate governing body.

“Would the adoption of 08-B mean that the PC(USA) no longer has any standards for sexual behavior?”

No. Expectations about faithful sexual behavior did not suddenly develop in the PC(USA) in 1997. Scripture and our Confessions are still our guiding authorities, examining bodies are still bound to apply the standard that a candidate’s “manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world,” and candidates for office must still take and abide by the ordination vows that are emphasized in 08-B.

No party to our current controversy is asking for license to ignore Scripture and the Confessions and the sexual standards found there. The reason for our conflict is that the Church is divided in its interpretation of what Scripture and the Confessions teach. To claim that ceasing to impose one interpretation on the whole Church would open the door to widespread abuse is to display a lack of trust in one another that belies the nature of our fellowship (“The organization rests upon the fellowship and is not designed to work without trust and love.” G-7.0103).