

Dear Members of the Presbyterian Church in Canada,

In response to more than a dozen overtures, the 141st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada called for the church “to engage in a year of prayerful conversation and discernment and Bible study on the topics of human sexuality, sexual orientation and other related matters.” The Assembly charged “the Committee on Church Doctrine and the Life and Mission Agency (Justice Ministries) [to] prepare a joint study guide on [these] topics ... to be posted on the church’s website by the end of October...” (*Acts and Proceedings, 141<sup>st</sup> General Assembly*, p. 43, 47). A joint team with representatives of both groups prepared the document, “Body, Mind and Soul: Thinking together about human sexuality and sexual orientation in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.”

At our meeting in early October, as the Committee on Church Doctrine (CCD) reviewed the study guide we found ourselves engaged in a very animated conversation. On that basis, we agreed that, although many of us had strong reservations about the study document, it did what it was intended to do: stimulate conversation. The study guide is not a doctrinal statement or policy but the CCD still made suggestions to the joint committee to help strengthen the guide.

Everyone on the CCD had difficulties with parts of the document all the while appreciating its presentation of a new perspective on questions of human sexuality. The church has studied human sexuality before, and significant papers in 1994 and 2003 summarised the findings of those studies. In our conversation about the new study document, members of the CCD recognized the value of those earlier documents. They provide important context which will enrich a review of the new study document.

There are still many areas to explore as a denomination. As the CCD takes up the task of that further reflection we hope to address some of the issues within the Study Guide that prompted serious discussion in our midst. Some of those matters for continuing discussion and reflection are,

- What does it mean to consider scripture authoritative for our understanding of Christ’s call for the church? How does our understanding of “scriptural authority” determine our response to issues of human sexuality?
- Do we have an adequate vocabulary for this conversation? Do we have a sufficiently nuanced and deep understanding of terms like “homophobia” or “transgender”? Do terms like “progressive” and “traditional” lock the church into a binary opposition that doesn’t reflect the true diversity in our denomination? Do these terms direct the conversation in one direction or another?
- How can we fairly represent different stories that involve human sexuality in such a broad and large conversation?
- How can the Reformed understanding of law as moral, ceremonial, and judicial play a role in how we interpret Scripture? How does our understanding of the “third use” of the Law as an ongoing guide for a faithful Christian life guide our reflections?
- What role should the decisions and reflections of other denominations play in our discussions?

- Recognizing that how we have these conversations is an important part of the Christian life how can resources like *I Beg to Differ: Navigating Difficult Conversations with Truth and Love* by Tim Muehlhoff and *Jesus Outside the Lines: A Way Forward for Those Who are Tired of Taking Sides* by Scott Saul aid us?
- How can we faithfully relate science, in all its facets and with all of its insights into the human condition, to our theological understanding of human sexuality?
- How does our pastoral responsibility for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Two-spirit persons impact our conversation and our theology?

These are only a sample of some of the questions the CCD has set out to grapple with. Surely there are more.

As you use the Study Guide the CCD prays for God’s Spirit to lead you into the fullness of God found in Jesus Christ. Let us know what further questions you think are important to consider\*. The Assembly asked “that congregations, sessions, presbyteries and synods be invited to share the result of their conversation with both the Committee on Church Doctrine and Life and Mission Agency (Justice Ministries) prior to March 31, 2016.” As some on the CCD observed, frustrations with this Study Document and the conversations it prompts are important and can help guide the national committees as we seek “the continual illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures.”

Yours in Christ,  
The Committee on Church Doctrine

\* Responses may be sent directly to the Convener of the Committee on Church Doctrine or forwarded to the committee through the General Assembly office.