

Gender, Sexuality Orientation and Faith

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In July 2020, the Assembly Council allocated funds to animate the church's decisions about sexuality and the findings of the Rainbow Communion. The Life and Mission Agency hired Carragh Erhardt as the Program Coordinator, Sexuality & Inclusion. The Program Coordinator will integrate and animate various policies, statements, decisions and initiatives of the church related to sexuality and gender identity. Program work will emphasize incorporating implications of the church's body of work related to sexuality and gender into the liturgical, educational, programmatic and policy formation that the church does nationally and locally according to the denomination's decisions and statements.

The Program Coordinator, Sexuality & Inclusion is available for conversations, presentations and workshops with church leaders, sessions, presbyteries, camps, colleges and committees of the church.

The program work builds on a foundation of Presbyterian reports and statements such as:

- The 1994 report on Human Sexuality by the Committee on Church Doctrine
- The work of the Special Committee re Sexual Orientation, culminating with its final report in 2003
- The work of the Committee on Church Doctrine and the Life and Mission Agency since 2015 related to overtures regarding sexuality
- The findings and recommendations of the Special Committee re Listening (Rainbow Communion)
- The Moderator's Letter of Repentance which was issued in 2018 in response to harm done (and that continues to be done) to LGBTQI people and others as a result of homophobia and hypocrisy in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

In these reports, statements and decisions, two themes are prevalent and thus the work of the 2020-2021 program year primarily fits into the following categories:

1. Repentance of homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism and hypocrisy
2. Pastoral care and equipping ministries to welcome LGBTQI people

Repentance of homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism and hypocrisy

In 1994, the Committee on Church Doctrine's report regarding human sexuality recognized that "the Christian Church has frequently shunned homosexuals and failed to minister to them and with them. The church as a whole must repent of its homophobia and hypocrisy." (A&P 1994, p. 267) The Committee on Church Doctrine and the Life and Mission Agency presented a joint report to the 2017 General Assembly which reminded the denomination of the need for the church to repent of homophobia and hypocrisy since no formal act of repentance had taken place following the 1994 report. The Committee on Church Doctrine and Life and Mission Agency also recommended that a special committee be created to listen to the experiences of LGBTQI people in the church and recommend ways forward (A&P 2017, p. 476-78). The General Assembly created the Special Committee re: LGBTQI Listening (known also as the Rainbow Communion) and a motion was passed that the Moderator would write a letter of repentance addressed to LGBTQI people before the 2018 General Assembly.

The letter of repentance written by the Rev. Peter Bush, Moderator of the 2017 General Assembly, was published on February 12, 2018 as an interim response to homophobia and hypocrisy in The Presbyterian Church in Canada while the work of the Rainbow Communion was ongoing. The letter names some of the ways that LGBTQI people have been harmed in

The Presbyterian Church in Canada through the action and inaction of its leaders and members.

The Moderator's Letter of Repentance from 2018 is neither the beginning nor the end of this journey; repentance and reconciliation cannot be achieved with one letter alone. Rather, righting the relationships between the church and LGBTQI people requires continued attention from all bodies within The Presbyterian Church in Canada to listen for where harm continues to occur wittingly or unwittingly and to seek to go a new way in our attitudes and actions.

In 2019, the General Assembly adopted the following recommendation of the Rainbow Communion:

That congregations, sessions, presbyteries, synods and other bodies of the church be urged to give public expression to the Moderator's Letter of Repentance and to seek ways to live out that repentance for harm done and that continues to be done, to LGBTQI people and others as a result of homophobia, hypocrisy, transphobia and heterosexism in The Presbyterian Church in Canada including developing discussion spaces with leadership drawn from a diversity of people. (A&P 2019, p. 486, 19)

A study and liturgy companion to the Letter of Repentance has been produced to assist leaders in the church to help the members of their ministries to read, understand and act upon the letter. The Letter of Repentance and companion resource may be downloaded at presbyterian.ca/sexuality. The Life and Mission Agency will continue to develop resources that support the church in recognizing and reforming aspects of our ministries that discriminate against LGBTQI people.

The church has acknowledged that many LGBTQI people, their friends and family members have been reluctant to share their stories with the church because they feel ashamed or are afraid of being cut off from their church families. In their listening process, the Rainbow Communion heard from individuals who expressed that the Letter of Repentance was an encouragement to tell their stories and a source of hope that the church was taking steps toward building an honest, just and welcoming relationship with LGBTQI people. As the church continues along this journey, we must continue to listen and respond to the concerns of LGBTQI people when they call the church's attention to ongoing sources of pain and harm.

Pastoral care and equipping ministries to welcome LGBTQI people

As various committees of the church have written reports about sexual orientation and gender identity, they have expressed concern for the care and well-being of LGBTQI people. In 2019, the Rainbow Communion echoed this concern: "as people have found the courage to tell their stories, it has become clear that the need for rebuilding broken communities and relationships and to respond pastorally to those who have been harmed cannot wait another year. It is evident that steps need to be taken now to create more welcoming and respectful spaces within congregations and other parts of the church so that all are able to tell their stories without fear and everyone can begin to walk in a more honest and pastoral way with one another." (A&P 2019, p. 486)

Previous reports recognized that there is a place for LGBTQI people in Presbyterian congregations and ministries and have offered guidance for the church to better meet the needs and recognize the gifts of LGBTQI people. Past guidance includes:

- The church must listen to and share the very real pain of LGBTQI people and their families. (A&P 1994, p. 267)

- “The church is called to be a welcoming, nurturing, loving and supportive community, a true church family, where all are welcomed, nurtured, loved and supported.” (A&P 1994, p. 267)
- The church should take steps to ensure that full pastoral care is extended to all people, regardless of sexual orientation and that all congregations and courts of the church anticipate the pastoral needs of LGBTQI people among their fellowship. (A&P 2003, p. 545)
- “All members of our Church regardless of sexual orientation must be regarded as [siblings] in Christ in need of forgiveness, understanding and compassion. No one among us should be held to be unworthy of our fellowship.” (A&P 2000, p. 487)
- Ministers and church leaders need to make it clear that they are prepared to listen and help their LGBTQI parishioners especially when they have been marginalized within the Church. Negative social behaviour and anger towards LGBTQI people should not be tolerated within a congregation. (A&P 2000, p. 487)
- “Presbyterians need to learn and understand more about sexual orientation in order to live with this diversity in our congregations.” (A&P 2003, p. 540)
- Sessions should provide support groups if needed and/or requested for those who are struggling with questions related to sexuality. For example, to support parents whose children are gay, lesbian or transgender and to support individuals facing discrimination because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Presbyteries should also provide similar pastoral care of their ministers. (A&P 2003, p. 540)
- Where counselling of any kind is sought by an LGBTQI person, the greatest of care must be taken to ensure that it is provided by a properly qualified person and that it is appropriate to the specific case. (A&P 2003, p. 544)
- Studies have not revealed any scriptural, scientific or pastoral basis or justification for programs to change a person’s sexual orientation and therefore acknowledge that any form of conversion or reparative therapy is not a helpful or appropriate pastoral response to those who identify as LGBTQI. (A&P 2019, p 486)
- “Leaders in the church need to equip all the saints by encouraging, respecting and affirming the variety of gifts with which they have been blessed.” (A&P 2003, p. 541)
- “All people are made in the image of God and there is a place for all people in Christ’s church. Acceptance means suspending judgement and affirming someone’s personhood as a beloved child of God. It does not mean having to understand everything about the people you encounter.” (A&P 2017, p. 375)
- In a process of confession, the church needs to study and recommend methods of pastoral care that are specific for LGBTQI people, as advised by members of the LGBTQI community themselves. (A&P 2017, p. 477)

The Life and Mission Agency will continue to develop and gather resources to equip congregations, sessions, presbyteries, synods and other bodies of the church in becoming more welcoming and inclusive of LGBTQI people, including resources regarding appropriate pastoral care. Resources are available at presbyterian.ca/sexuality.

Rainbow Pathways, an online course for ministry leaders to learn how to recognize barriers to LGBTQI people in local ministry contexts and how to take steps towards welcome and inclusion was offered twice this year. Emphasis in the course was focused on building upon participants’ pastoral care skills with context about common experiences of LGBTQI people in faith communities. Participants shared feedback that they found the course informative and practical and that it helped them build confidence in their ability 1) to provide appropriate pastoral care to LGBTQI2+ people and 2) to have and facilitate respectful conversation about sexual orientation and gender identity.

Clarity in policies

One aspect of church life for congregations to consider is how clear their policies are related to the participation of LGBTQI people in their ministry. Often, harm occurs when it is unclear what LGBTQI people can expect from a congregation. Having clear policies that are known within the congregation and that are readily available to the public can benefit LGBTQI people but also other people who may be affected by church policies. Conflict can occur when congregants hold expectations that do not match the behaviour of their minister or session or vice versa. Significant work will be done this year to provide guidance and resources that support congregations as they engage in processes of reviewing and clarifying policies.

Gender, Sexuality orientation and Faith Advisory Committee

An advisory committee has been created to support this new program work. Members include Ms. Janet Brewer (Toronto, Ontario), Mr. Rick Byun (Toronto, Ontario), Ms. Whitney Hanna (Victoria, British Columbia), Ms. Hera Lee-Moore (Etobicoke, Ontario) and the Rev. Anita Van Nest (Niagara Falls, Ontario).

FEEDBACK RE REMIT B AND REMIT C PROPOSING CHANGES TO CHURCH LAW AND DOCTRINE PERTAINING TO MARRIAGE AND ORDINATION

INTRODUCTION

As part of the prayerful discernment and discussion about sexuality in 2019, the General Assembly adopted the following recommendation of the Special Committee Regarding Implications of Option B (Inclusion) on June 6, 2019:

That as a matter of urgency, the Life and Mission Agency provide a means for those affected by this decision to express their concerns, views and pain in a safe environment and that the concerns be reported back to the 2020 General Assembly before the report on remits is received and its recommendations considered (A&P 2019, p. 51).

The context for this directive was the decision of the 2019 General Assembly to approve changes to church law and doctrine and by that action, to begin the three-step process called the Barrier Act by which The Presbyterian Church in Canada changes its law and doctrine:

1. One General Assembly agrees to make a change in church law or doctrine. As outlined in the Barrier Act (Book of Forms 293–293.4), however, the responses of the presbyteries to the proposed change must be considered by a subsequent General Assembly before it is permitted to make the change a permanent part of the church's law or doctrine.
2. The proposed change is sent (or remitted) to the presbyteries, where each presbytery votes either to approve or to disapprove the proposed change.
3. A report tabulating the decisions of the presbyteries to approve or to disapprove the remit is presented to the next General Assembly. Provided a majority of presbyteries voted to approve the proposed change and this majority of presbyteries together constitute a majority of all ministers, members of the Order of Diaconal Ministers and elders on the constituent rolls of all presbyteries, the General Assembly that receives the "report on remits" is free to adopt the change into the church's law or doctrine.

In this present case, the changes to church law and doctrine approved by the 2019 General Assembly and sent to the presbyteries for consideration were as follows:

Remit B, 2019 re Definition of Marriage

That The Presbyterian Church in Canada holds two parallel definitions of marriage and recognizes that faithful, Holy Spirit filled, Christ centred, God honouring people can understand marriage as a covenant relationship between a man and a woman or as a covenant relationship between two adult persons. That congregations, sessions, ruling and teaching elders be granted liberty of conscience and action on marriage.

Remit C, 2019 re Ordination of LGBTQI persons (married or single)

That congregations and presbyteries may call and ordain as ministers and elect and ordain as ruling elders LGBTQI persons (married or single) with the provision that liberty of conscience and action regarding participation in ordinations, inductions and installations be granted to ministers and ruling elders.

The directive of the 2019 General Assembly to the Life and Mission Agency was intended to furnish the next General Assembly with feedback about how people in the church felt about the proposed changes, quite apart from the input the presbyteries would have in voting on the remits. People across the church would be provided with ways to express their concerns, views and pain about the proposed changes and a report detailing this feedback would be presented to the next General Assembly before it received and considered the “report on remits”.

LISTENING PROCESS

To carry out the task assigned by the General Assembly, the Life and Mission Agency developed a listening process. The first step was the creation of an online tool through which people could submit material electronically. This feature was available between June 12, 2019 and February 15, 2020. By June 18, 2019, announcements were made about additional ways people could participate in the listening process. Information about all these pathways, deadlines and contact information was publicized repeatedly and widely throughout the denomination through a variety of channels. Initiatives were taken early in the process to schedule listening events with some specially identified bodies in the denomination to ensure that it was easy for them to participate. In-person listening continued until February 7, 2020. Individuals, groups, congregations and presbyteries made submissions online, by email, mail, telephone, online submissions and in-person visits. All the material received was read and considered in the preparation of this report.

In-person Listening

In addition to receiving written submissions, in-person listening opportunities were created. In-person listening with groups and individuals followed a consistent pattern. The listening sessions were bracketed by prayer and opened with the following prayer:

Loving and Compassionate God, at your word all things were made and the beauty of creation was called from chaos. Through your word, you formed us in your image and gave us life. By your Word, you called us to love and to serve you and to live in peace with you and all that you have made. Giver of all gifts, open our hearts and minds by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and give us wisdom in our thinking, clarity in our speech, understanding in our listening and grace in all our actions. Send your Spirit to rest on

us and stay with us as we meet so that everything we do or say may be for the reconciling of the world, for the upbuilding of the church and for the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Listening sessions began with a brief review of the process, agenda, timing and what would happen with the material and report. Participants received documents including those that outlined some of the church's statements on sexuality, the Barrier Act, the Moderator's Letter of Repentance (2018) and some principles or covenantal boundaries to help frame a space in which listening could be done in a sufficiently safe environment. It was always explained that the submitted and recorded material would be kept confidential and that some material might be quoted anonymously in the report to General Assembly to help illuminate themes or points. Participants at listening events were told that there was an advisory committee associated with the writing of this report.

Participants in this exercise shared their comments about how the remits affected them while listeners paid careful attention to the speakers. Listeners noted not only what people said but also the emotions and the affect that appeared to underlie what people said. Listeners indicated that they would speak during the listening sessions only under the following circumstances:

- to ask clarification about something the speaker said
- to clarify matters of fact about such things as church polity, terminology, the church's theological statements, historical events and the decisions of General Assemblies
- to remind people of the boundaries of a safe environment
- to call attention to time limits

Speakers occasionally gave the listeners documents, letters and manuscripts in lieu of or in addition to speaking. Sometimes listeners got impressions about how people felt based on non-verbal cues they witnessed. For example, it was not uncommon for people to shake their heads or make other gestures to register how they felt about what they or others were saying.

Some in-person listening was done privately between one speaker and one listener. Participants in one-on-one meetings were given the same background documents, procedural explanations and commitments that participants in group meetings received. Leading with Care protocols were followed and care was taken to ensure people's privacy and comfort.

Generally, listeners were welcomed warmly. The Life and Mission Agency Committee is grateful for the hospitality that congregations, courts and groups extended.

Safe Environment

The General Assembly stated that listening was to be done in a safe environment. Great care was taken to ensure that as safe a process and environment as possible was provided for those who wished to express their thoughts and feelings.

Using resources based on scripture and material used at previous General Assemblies to facilitate respectful listening and speaking people covenanted to create a time and place where speakers could be heard with the reasonable assurance that they would not be criticized or exposed to discrimination, harassment, recrimination and belittlement by other speakers or the listeners. The attempt to create and maintain a spirit of goodwill fostered an environment that allowed for empathetic and graceful expression of views. Sharing views within groups was sometimes difficult; nevertheless, sitting together and listening with care to each other was holy work and a participation in God's vision of the Peaceable Kingdom and a foretaste of the

unity to be found in the Communion of the Saints. The gatherings were usually respectful and there were moments of remarkable grace and compassion.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality was an important aspect of creating a safe environment in this case. Thus, assurance was given repeatedly by a variety of means that the material the Life and Mission Agency received and heard would be held in confidence by the Agency. Additionally, people were informed that what was received would be used anonymously to create a report for the General Assembly and some quotes from written or oral material would be used in the final report. Names, addresses and identifying information were redacted from any printed and stored material.

Advisory Committee

The Life and Mission Agency Committee approved the terms of reference and membership of an advisory committee to give advice, suggestions, guidance and support in the creation of this report. The members of the advisory committee had access to every piece of material that was submitted and transcribed. All documents had been redacted so that names, contact information and other identifying factors were not revealed to the members of the advisory committee to maintain confidentiality, preserve the privacy of people who submitted material and to maintain the integrity of the process that had been framed. The members of the advisory committee were: the Rev. Soo Jin Chung (Presbytery of Eastern Han Ca), the Rev. John Henderson (Presbytery of Huron-Perth), the Rev. Allyson MacLeod (Presbytery of Oak Ridges), the Rev. Dr. Heather Malnick (Presbytery of Barrie) and the Rev. Dr. Susan Shaffer (Presbytery of Paris). Staff support was provided by Ms. Grace McCreary (Program Assistant, Life and Mission Agency) and the Rev. Ian Ross-McDonald (General Secretary, Life and Mission Agency).

Pastoral Listening – Not a Plebiscite

The General Assembly directed the Life and Mission Agency to provide a means for those affected by the 2019 General Assembly's decision to approve and remit to presbyteries under the Barrier Act Remit B and Remit C to express their concerns, views and pain and to report those concerns to the General Assembly. The task is pastoral listening – inviting people in the church to express themselves in a safe environment – and then telling the next General Assembly what was learned about people's minds and hearts regarding these matters.

Occasionally, participants stated their belief that the listening process was or ought to be a plebiscite on Remit B and Remit C. When this misconception was heard, the listeners explained that this was not and could not be the case, for various reasons. First, the Life and Mission Agency was not directed to conduct a plebiscite and tally votes. Second, there is no place in the Barrier Act process for any actions other than the votes at two General Assemblies and in the presbyteries. Third, the church was not told that the listening process was a plebiscite. Fourth, the material received from participants resists and disqualifies its use as a plebiscite for a number of reasons, among them:

- people did not always state whether they approved or disapproved of Remit B and Remit C
- some expressed ambivalence
- sometimes it was not possible to determine whether people were in favour or against the adoption of the remits
- several groups submitted corporate responses without indicating the size or composition of the group

- on several occasions, speakers expressed a common opinion on behalf of a group without knowing or disclosing the fact that there was actually a diversity of opinion within the group
- some individuals submitted multiple responses
- people living in only a minority of presbyteries submitted material

SUBMISSIONS COLLECTED IN THE LISTENING PROCESS

We estimate that the views of approximately 3,000 people were gathered in the process of preparing this report. Feedback and submissions were received from youth groups, congregational members, elders, ministers, WMS/AMS groups, ad hoc gatherings of people with shared concerns, sessions, presbyteries and staff of the synods, camps and colleges. Although people living in only 18 of the 45 presbyteries chose to submit comments, these individuals were spread across every province and synod. People from a broad diversity of theological perspectives and cultural backgrounds participated in the process. Some of the responses came from the very young and from people 90 years of age. Some participants disclosed that they identify as LGBTQI or that they were family members and friends of LGBTQI people.

A large cache of information (roughly 550 pages) was received in the course of the listening process. It would not be appropriate, for pastoral and ethical reasons, nor would it be responsible or practical, to print all the material or report every sentiment or nuance expressed in the responses. Moreover, a significant portion of the submitted material was peripheral or not related to Remit B and Remit C.

FINDINGS OF THE LISTENING PROCESS

People across the church who accepted the invitation to tell how they were affected by the General Assembly decisions regarding the remits were given the space to express their comments. The online form was not structured as a survey with options to select, boxes to fill in and questions to answer: instead, there was a space simply labelled “Your Comments”. The same freedom was extended to participants in the in-person meetings and to those who submitted their feedback in writing. Therefore, it was not surprising that people commented on many matters beyond how they were affected by Remit B and Remit C.

Some of the material that people expressed was not related to the remits or to sexuality at all. A few examples include creationism (literal reading of Biblical accounts of creation that refutes the possible role of any evolutionary process), personal details and experiences about other things in the church. Some comments touched on material only tangentially related to the remits. Among the most frequently raised matters in this regard were the following: the actions taken by special interest groups in the church, seminary education, the Body, Mind and Soul document (study on sexuality, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2015), the length of time the discussion has taken, complaints about polity and process, lack of trust in the church’s leadership generally, perceived bias, worship and other events at General Assembly and the Moderator’s letter of repentance (2018).

Some comments, especially in regard to process, polity, the Bible and the church’s doctrinal statements about marriage and sexuality, revealed widespread misunderstanding, incorrect assumptions or unawareness. Listeners facilitating the in-person meetings were often asked to answer questions about polity, history and doctrine. The Barrier Act and liberty of conscience were among the more frequently questioned topics.

People often spoke about the length of their association with The Presbyterian Church in Canada and the nature of their involvement in the church. And it was common to hear people express love for the church and their congregation.

There were times when participants expressed opposing opinions and listened to one another graciously and with remarkable mutual respect. And there were times when people expressed respect and concern for those who held different positions than their own. There were other times when speakers voiced their opinions in ways and words that appeared to cause discomfort to other participants.

In the collected material, some participants conveyed their disrespect for people holding opposing views to their own. Some went on to say that not only were such persons wrong in their thinking but they should be treated with fear, distrust, anger or contempt. This disturbing shift from disagreeing with persons to rejecting them as valued persons was demonstrated by participants across the theological spectrum.

Some participants described instances of homophobia (fear of or prejudice against LGBTQI persons) and harm done that they or others experienced in the church. Some made accusations of homophobia and some material collected during the listening process was homophobic.

Some comments were unsettling and difficult for people to hear or read because the things said and the stories they told were painful and tragic. Some of the material that was submitted was sexually explicit. Some material seemed to reveal malice. And some material was indicative that people were in need of Christ's healing and peace for psychological pain and anguish.

Some people expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to convey how they felt and for a way to participate in the discussion. Others expressed doubt about the usefulness of the process. Some were skeptical that the material would even be read or heard. Some believed that there was no point participating in the listening process because they felt nobody cared what they thought.

All of the information that was heard or received was read and considered multiple times. And again, it would not be feasible to report everything that was heard. The scope of this report reflects a broad review of the expression of concerns, views and pain that were received from those affected by the approval by the 2019 General Assembly of Remit B and Remit C who opted to participate.

Basis for Views on Marriage and Sexuality

People often spoke about the constellation of factors that informed their views on marriage and sexuality in the church. The most frequently named basis for people's views are outlined below in no significant order.

Youth

Some people holding a range of views spoke about how young people could be affected positively and/or negatively by the adoption or defeat of the remits.

Personal Experience

People holding a diversity of opinions spoke about the various ways their life experience, sexuality, relationships, family and friends informed their views.

Mission and Stewardship

Sometimes people said they arrived at their views based on what they thought would keep or attract members to their congregation. Some said they had settled on a point of view based on what they felt would free the church to focus on other things. Some said that denominational and congregational finance had to be considered.

Science

Some people referred to the findings of the sciences, such as biology, psychology and sociology. It was not the case that everyone who invoked the importance and findings of the sciences held the same opinion about the remits or the church's stance on marriage and sexuality. Nor was it the case that people invoking science agreed upon the findings of the sciences.

Doctrine

Both those in favor and those against adopting the remits referred to Living Faith, the ordination vows of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and the church's subordinate standards and doctrinal statements as important considerations in their discernment of the matter. People holding an array of opinions about marriage and the remits stated their belief that one or more of the tenets of Reformed Theology supported their particular views.

Justice

Justice was often referred to as an important principle; however, visions and definitions of justice were contested. At one end of the spectrum, it felt just to some that all people be welcomed fully and live out their callings and lives in the church equally and fully regardless of sexual orientation. Some referred to the human dignity of people made in God's image and to human rights as important factors in their decision making. At the other end of a broad spectrum, some were opposed to the concept of marriage for sexual minorities because of the holiness of God and the righteous justice and judgement of God on those who have heard but ignored God's will.

Culture

People across the theological spectrum spoke about the role of the church in culture and culture's influence on the church. Some felt that the remits were evidence of the church "conforming to the patterns of the world," embracing political correctness and secularism. Some were concerned that the church was turning to pleasing people over pleasing God or replacing the Bible with current-day culture. Some spoke about the influence of Satan in culture, in the church and/or in the church's discernment about sexuality. Some people said that they regarded the remits as signs of the church making positive steps to get with the times and modernize. Reference was also made to the importance of understanding the cultural context in which the Bible was written. Some participants expressed sentiments like: if Christians are not different from the

world, we cannot offer the world anything. Others said things like: it's time to show the world that Jesus loves everyone.

The Bible

By far the most frequently named and referred to basis and highest standard upon which people said they had formed their views was the Bible. Almost all participants mentioned the Bible or the teaching and healing ministry of Christ. Participants from across the theological spectrum indicated that they treasure the Bible and share an understanding of the centrality of scripture to their lives and faith. It was common for people to invoke and offer reflections on biblical passages in support of their position. Some people simply let scripture speak and submitted or read scripture passages that they felt explained their views, without adding many of their own words.

Some participants stated the view that the real question before the church was not homosexuality or same-sex marriage but different understandings of biblical interpretation and the authority of scripture. Concerns were expressed by people holding a variety of views about the use and abuse of the Bible. Some drew attention to the church's tradition of Biblical interpretation and pointed out that there are many passages the church does not abide by; the church does not read the Bible consistently. Cited in this regard were some of the Bible's teaching on matters such as economics and slavery. Other participants said that there should be very narrow limits to the interpretation of scripture, if it was even possible or necessary to interpret the Bible. Words like "infallible" and "inerrant" were used frequently to describe scripture.

Some pointed out that there was no place in scripture where same-sex marriage was mentioned or permitted and that God's word does not change, so the remits should not be adopted. Some said they might consider the proposals in the remits positively, however, they believe there isn't sufficient scriptural warrant to change the church's position. Some expressed the desire to love all people as Christ loved but without contradicting the word of God. Others said that the Bible's trajectory bent towards inclusion and that not to take a positive approach [to inclusion] seemed contrary to the basic gospel message of love.

People holding different perspectives spoke about the role of the Holy Spirit in the church's understanding of scripture and the direction the church should take. People from across the theological spectrum asked, "What would Jesus do?"

Concerns

People holding a variety of opinions expressed concerns about how, when and why Remit B and Remit C reached the floor of the Assembly. There was also concern from people holding various and conflicting perspectives about who conceived of, contributed to and wrote the remits. Some said that they found the wording of Remit B and Remit C confusing and/or their claims potentially misleading. Others felt that the remits were insufficient because they did not reference certain features, for example, the Holy Spirit or implications of the remits.

For some, the remits felt like they were based on the desire for a compromise that found a way to include a diversity of theological positions and allow the denomination to be "a big tent". Some said they approved of this basis as they felt that the remits would allow our church to move forward and work together to spread the gospel in a respectful and loving way. Some felt the remits addressed a concern that a path would be found that would mutually accommodate

parents, children, friends and colleagues to worship and work together. Some said that the remits offered hope. Others found peril, rather than hope, in what they believed to be the basis of the remits. Some felt that unity was chosen above safety or care for LGBTQI. Some people who saw peril in the remits as a compromise felt that the unity of the church was being preserved at the expense of truth and God's will.

People holding a variety of views felt that the remits were imperfect in some ways. For some, regardless of whether they were in favour of the church changing its practices and definitions of marriage, the flaws and shortcomings in the proposed legislation compelled them to feel that they must vote against the remits. Conversely, some felt that while the remits may not be perfect, they were a step ahead.

Some people expressed concern that the remits were biased towards one perspective or the other. Some holding this view felt that the church was more sympathetic towards LGBTQI people than to people holding the traditional view of marriage. Others who believed that the remits were biased felt that the reverse was true and that the remits gave preference to people who held the traditional view of marriage while leaving LGBTQI people unsafe and excluded.

The most frequently named themes of concern that were heard are outlined below in no significant order.

Parallel Definitions

Some of the participants expressed concern that it is impossible to have two definitions of marriage. And some felt that the definitions were "inconsistent", "muddled" or that the parallelism in the remits was an irreconcilable contradiction. Others felt that the strength of the proposed legislation was that the parallel definitions allowed people who wished to conduct same-sex weddings to do so and allowed LGBTQI persons who were called to ministry and who were married or might wish to consider marriage to carry out their calling to ministry. Some were concerned that the parallel definitions underscored that the church was not inclusive and/or was divided.

Unity and Accommodation

Some saw the remits as a way to preserve unity in the church. It was the prayer of some that the denomination could continue to stand together, as diverse people but as one body, working to create a church community where all people feel they belong. Some felt that the remits were more divisive than inclusive and would further split the denomination and some congregations. In this regard, Matthew 12 and the phrase "a house divided cannot stand" was invoked by some. Some attributed the division in the church and the impetus of people to support the remits, to the work of Satan. Some felt that the remits represented a middle path that requires compromise on all sides; they were concerned that some people might continue to fight for a pure version of their position.

Some felt that the remits were no compromise at all. Some who articulated this position felt that there was no accommodation for people holding the traditional definition of marriage, who were seen to have lost everything and been excluded from and by the denomination. On the other hand, some felt that people holding the traditional view had not had to compromise anything; from this perspective, the broad protections provided by liberty of conscience meant that those who did not believe in a change to the church's marriage traditions gave up nothing, while LGBTQI people were still "second class".

The listeners heard concern from and for ethnic-specific congregations. Some felt that the remits asked too much of some congregations and presbyteries with the result that inclusion could become another form of exclusion. Conversely, some pointed to liberty of conscience as a protection for ethnic-specific congregations. And again, some felt that the remits continued the church's long-standing practice of asking too much of LGBTQI people and nothing of others. Some also spoke of the broader unity of the universal church and expressed concern that, if the remits were adopted, local and international partners might not wish to associate or work with The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

It was common to hear people mention the toxicity of the debate in the church and fear for the unity of the church. The growing "tribalism" in the church, "theological drift", and the effects of years of debate on the church were common themes that people discussed in various ways. Some people said that the nature of the church's debate and how people dealt with those they disagreed with were a test and had as many implications for the church as the content of the remits.

Pastoral Concern and Inclusion

Pastoral concerns were expressed from and on behalf of people who had suffered and found the debate stressful in the course of the church's discernment. Participants holding a diversity of perspectives stated that they felt were being forced out of the denomination, excluded and/or sometimes unsafe because of the positions they held. Some participants spoke about the physical danger or psychological and spiritual trauma some LGBTQI people experienced in the church. Some voiced the concern that LGBTQI persons and individuals who support the remits may be in danger of divine judgement.

Some participants expressed bitter sentiments and made accusations against liberals or traditionalists or people who identify as LGBTQI. At the same time, others on all sides of the issue spoke of pastoral care and concern for people with opposing views and/or LGBTQI people.

Some said that their opposition to the remits did not mean that they wanted anyone excluded from the church. Nor did they consider it was homophobic to believe what they interpret the Bible says about some aspects of sexuality.

Sometimes participants' understandings of inclusion were qualified, expressed in sentiments similar to a desire that the church should be "compassionate but without compromise" or "compassion – yes; acceptance – no". Some participants stated their belief that sexual minorities should not be part of the church.

Sexuality

One area of expressed concern arises from a lack of information about The Presbyterian Church in Canada's current teachings about sex, sexuality and marriage.

It was very common to hear participants say that homosexuality is a sin. Some expressed surprise, doubt, denial and concern when they learned that the church said in 1994 that homosexual orientation was not a sin. Some spoke about their comfort with the statements in this regard in the 1994 Church Doctrine Report and expressed the desire that the church maintain this position. While some considered celibacy sufficient for LGBTQI people, as it was for others who were unmarried for a variety of

reasons, others said that homosexual orientation and/or sexual intercourse between people of the same sex was sinful and that LGBTQI people should never be in positions of church leadership. Other participants expressed concern that LGBTQI people were being asked to make unfair sacrifices and were treated differently than others. Some indicated that they didn't know what to think and were struggling with the complex matter of the church's discussions about homosexuality.

Liberty of Conscience

Liberty of conscience was mentioned often and generated many questions. Some people felt that liberty of conscience provided everyone ample protections. Some people holding a diversity of opinions about whether the church should change its definition of marriage felt that liberty of conscience might not offer sufficient protections. Some said that liberty of conscience was too narrow and could prevent people from preaching and practicing pastoral care as they felt called to do. Others felt that liberty of conscience was too broad and, among other things, enshrined the status quo. Concerns were expressed that presbyteries where a majority of members shared the same definition of marriage could prevent candidates who hold a different view from preparing for ministry or being considered for calls by interim moderators. Some were concerned that liberty of conscience would be taken away. Others questioned the exclusionary motives and deep division that the provisions for liberty of conscience might cause in the church.

Logistics

Concerns were raised about the practicalities of implementing the remits if they were adopted. Some were concerned about such things as the relationships between colleagues and the relationships between ministers and sessions where they disagreed about same-sex marriage. Some raised concerns about how students and candidates for vacancies would fare in presbyteries where the majority held views different from candidates under consideration. Others spoke about the practicalities of congregations and ministers finding suitable pastoral matches.

Legal Questions

Some said they had questions and/or concerns about the potential legal implications of the remits. Others, however, felt secure with the protections that are in place in the remits, the church's own polity and in law.

Vows

Some ministers and elders were concerned about whether they might have to break their ordination vows in some way if the remits were adopted. Likewise, some said they might have to break their vows if the remits were not adopted.

Denominational Structure and Departure

Some asked questions and expressed concerns about denominational governance and church structures. Some advocated for different models of presbyteries and synods to ease and accommodate the enactment of the remits and to reflect different perspectives in the church. Some participants asked for clarity on what would happen if congregations left the denomination. On this question, participants spoke both for or against the provision for "gracious dismissal": allowing congregations that opt to leave

the denomination to take their building and property, which are held by the Trustee Board of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and belong to the denomination as a whole.

Vocations

Some people were concerned about vocational issues. In some cases, people expressed concern that if the remits were not adopted, LGBTQI people who were called to ministry and who were married or might wish to consider marriage would be prevented from fulfilling their calling. Some raised concerns about the effect that adopting the remits might have on some people's livelihood, because congregations might divide or close and/or because ministers might feel that they need to leave a congregation.

Remit C (ordination of LGBTQI persons, married or single)

In regard to Remit C, some questioned whether ministers in same-sex marriages could lead effectively or be in a position where they would have to preach against how they themselves were living. There were concerns that allowing ministers to be in same-sex marriages would encourage congregational members to live in unrepented sin. Some said that this was not a matter of their concern.

Study

Some were concerned about whether adequate or even any study on scripture and other topics, such as theology or law, had been done in the church before the remits were proposed. Some referred to the number of reports and studies that had been created over the years during which the matter of sexuality had been studied in the church. Some asked for more study material on a variety of matters related to the topic of sexuality and marriage.

“Slippery Slope”

Among the participants who expressed opposition to the proposed changes to church law and doctrine, there were some who questioned whether the remits initiated a “slippery slope”. In this regard, they wondered whether the remits would open the door to the church permitting marriages among more than two people or marriages with children or with non-humans. Further, some expressed concern that adopting the remits could lead to sanctioning sexual practices, for example, bestiality.

Distraction, Finances, Membership and Fatigue

Some participants spoke about their belief that the remits were a distraction from the church's mission and other ministry priorities. Some expressed concern about the financial cost associated with adopting or not adopting the remits. People spoke about the effect they imagined the remits, if approved, would have on congregational membership. In regard to new members, some felt that if the church adopted the remits, people would be attracted to the church while others thought adopting the remits would repel current or potential members. Likewise, some felt that if the church did not adopt the remits people would be attracted to the church while others felt people would avoid joining Presbyterian congregations if the remits were not adopted.

It was not unusual to hear people say that they were tired of the church's discussions about marriage and sexuality. Some said they were tired of the topic and wanted it to go away. At the same time, other people commented that they had heard little or nothing about the topic. Some people said they would welcome more opportunities to learn about sexuality and the discussion the denomination has been having. Others said that scripture was clear and the matter was closed; from this perspective, no changes were warranted because God and God's truth did not change.

Church Standards

Concerns were expressed by people who said that the remits ignored or contradicted the Bible and/or the subordinate standards and law of the church. Likewise, others said they felt that the remits were permissible in light of the teachings of scripture, the Reformed Tradition and polity. This matter is discussed more fully below.

Views

The people who participated in the listening process held a broad diversity of views on whether Remit B and Remit C should be adopted. People had a constellation of differing and opposing reasons for arriving at their points of view. The array of perspectives in the church is complex and defies simple categorization.

Some participants who held opposing views agreed that the church had to be more welcoming and/or inclusive. However, the definition of welcome and inclusion varied. For some, the church would be welcoming when LGBTQI people were not held to different standards than others are and were able to fill the same leadership roles as other members of the church and the church permitted same-sex marriages. Others on a spectrum of understanding said that people who identified themselves as LGBTQI were welcome to attend worship but not necessarily occupy all and/or any positions of leadership. Still others said that people who identified themselves as LGBTQI were sinful and must repent and/or leave the church.

Some participants clearly stated their preference for adopting or for not adopting Remit B and Remit C. Some people who stated a strong preference – both those in favour and those opposed to the remits – expressed the belief that there would be no place for them in the church and they would leave the church if the General Assembly did not act according to their preference. There were some people who indicated that they were in favour of one remit but not both.

Some indicated that they would have preferred the remits to offer greater inclusions than they felt the current remits provide. Some said they preferred the church to look for very different models and options than were pursued in the creation of Remit B and Remit C.

Some indicated that they viewed the church's theological stand on sexuality and marriage as a central part of the Christian faith. Other expressed confusion about why sex, sexuality and marriage were such divisive issues in the church.

Some participants with a variety of views indicated that they regarded the actions and positions of those they disagreed with as hypocritical. Some described the people whose views they disagreed with as, among other things, heretics, apostate, homophobic or unchristian. Some invoked biblical images and terminology to express similar sentiments.

It was not the case that all the people against adopting the remits were satisfied with the church's current definition of marriage. Some indicated that they would vote against the remits

because they felt the remits were not inclusive enough and that the liberty of conscience clauses allowed for the continued discrimination of LGBTQI people. Also, some said they were in favour of the remits but not because they were believed the church should change its standards and practices in regard to marriage. Some felt that since the remits provided sufficient protection and accommodation, they were a good-enough solution to a vexing question.

Some people indicated they were ambivalent about Remit B and Remit C. Some people said that they did not know how they felt about the remits and had “more questions than answers”. In some cases, no view on the remits was stated and in others, it was not possible to determine a point of view. Some spoke with regret about their views on the remits; they said that they wished they could vote in favour of the remits but felt that they could not do so because this would go against scripture and the church’s standards and ordination vows. Some said they were not against same-sex marriage but that they were against such marriages being conducted in churches and/or by clergy. Some indicated only that they were praying for unity and peace.

Pain

Listeners paid attention to and recorded what they heard as well as the emotions and affect accompanying the speakers’ words. Often very painful things were expressed. Often the material was difficult to read and hear because of the palpable sense of pain that people conveyed. However, pain was by no means the only strong feeling expressed by people who participated in the listening process. To be true to what people expressed, the broad spectrum of feelings that participants expressed about the remits is referenced here.

Some people reported sleeplessness and significant emotional and physical strain on themselves and/or family members as a result of the discussion the church has been having about sexuality. People often spoke about the pain of seeing the church and congregations divided. Some people referred to the pain of being accused of being abominations, apostate, evil, heretics, homophobic and unchristian because of their views.

Some LGBTQI people spoke of the trauma of feeling inferior, evil and unloved and of having to lead secret lives. One person said, “It feels to me like fear and deception have defined my life and I consider the attitudes of church and society that led me to this nothing less than spiritual violence committed against the integrity of my person”. And they said that the church has denied them hope. Likewise, some who held the position that the church’s definition of marriage should not change spoke of the pain of being called hateful. Some expressed pain at feeling that the church had turned its back on God, the Reformed Faith, polity, the Bible and them. Some said they felt that people with their perspective were being “exterminated,” and that the remits were a departure from God and like “death”.

Some participants said that they were ashamed that they belonged to a church that would consider changing the definition of marriage. Some others said they felt shame for belonging to a church that held the denomination’s current definition of marriage. Some people indicated that if the remits were adopted, they would feel that there was no place for them in the denomination and they would leave or be forced to leave the denomination. And likewise, people said they would leave or be forced to leave the denomination if the remits were not adopted. Some participants said that LGBTQI people and those wanting a change to the current standards should leave and find another church. Likewise, others said that those who did not accept the remits could leave.

Some participants expressed pain and bitterness at the sense of betrayal they experienced in the adoption of the remits by the 2019 Assembly. This was matched by a feeling expressed by some that the pain of those who disliked the proposed changes and were given the option to exercise liberty of conscience pales in comparison to the history of pain inflicted on those who have experienced homophobia and had no options.

People speaking from along a broad spectrum of perspectives sometimes expressed their convictions with passion. During the in-person meetings, people holding a constellation of views were observed to raise their voices, make gestures and shed tears. People holding an array of views and opinions reported experiencing the following feelings: abandoned, afraid, aggrieved, anger, anguish, appalled, ashamed, astonished, betrayed, bitter, broken-hearted, concerned, despair, devastated, disappointed, disbelieving, discouraged, disenfranchised, disgusted, dismayed, distressed, elated, embarrassed, empathetic, endangered, excluded, exiled, fatigued, fear, furious, hated, heartbroken, heavy-hearted, hopeful, insulted, joyful, loss, mourning, pained, proud, pitying, sad, scared, self-hatred, shame, shattered, shock, sick, sorrow, soul-wrenched, spiritually drained, tension, terrified, thrilled, tired, torn, troubled, unsafe, vexed, violated, voiceless and worried.

CLOSING REMARKS

The listening process provided a way for people in the church to express their concerns, views, pain and other feelings pertaining to the proposed changes to church law and doctrine approved by the 2019 General Assembly. For some people, the listening sessions were received more as an opportunity to learn than speak. For some, the exercise was reportedly helpful and useful, while others expressed skepticism and some a sense of futility. The material collected was subjective, varied and often very personal; it resists easy and simplistic categorization. Rather, it reflects the thoughts and feelings of the people in the church who chose to make use of the pastoral listening process.

The feedback from participants in the listening process highlights needs that the church would do well to address at the appropriate levels. Perhaps the most pressing is the need for caring, wise and insightful pastoral care. The sheer volume and intensity of comments describing feelings of worry, dismay and hurt speak to people's need for tenderness, care and prayer. Pastoral care is an integral part of the church's ministry in every season but at this time, it requires special attention.

Another need evident from the collected information is for the church, through its ministers and committees, to provide fact-based education. Sometimes it was possible to see that strong feelings, concerns and views were based upon inaccurate assumptions. Comments, both oral and written, revealed widespread lack of knowledge about matters such as church polity and church history as well as the church's doctrinal understanding of such matters as marriage, sexuality and the scriptures. This reality undoubtedly has hampered the church's discussions on sexuality generally and on Remit B and Remit C specifically. Among other things, misunderstandings and inaccuracies have added to and caused some of the mistrust and pain that some people said they felt.

The thoughts and feelings expressed present a picture of The Presbyterian Church in Canada that is diverse. There are various different beliefs about God's intentions concerning human sexuality and marriage and about the people whom Christ calls into ministry. There are different understandings of scripture and the way it should guide Christian life. People are discerning different answers to central discipleship questions: What does the gospel mandate to love look like in this context? What is just? What is true? What would Jesus do? People also expressed differences in their level of conviction; some are strongly formed in their views, while others

indicated that they are less sure, still questioning. Differences were observed in the varying attitudes that people revealed towards those voicing different views from their own. Some participants described how they maintained feelings of Christian love, respect and prayerfulness for the people who disagreed with them; other participants indicated that they felt contempt, anger and embarrassment for the people whom they regarded as opponents.

The differences expressed in the listening process present a picture of The Presbyterian Church in Canada that is complicated. The appointed role of the presbyteries in voting either to approve or to disapprove the remits – the only two actions presbyteries can take in the Barrier Act procedures – could lead to the unfounded expectation that the church has only two distinct groups, each group united by a common heart and mind.

In fact, however, the information collected in the listening process does not support this expectation. Simply put, the church is not made up of two groups holding opposing views. The reality is very much more complex.

Some examples from the foregoing “Findings of the Listening Process” section might serve as illustration here. Participants voicing disapproval of the remits were not of one mind: some wanted the church’s stance on marriage and ordination to remain unchanged and others believed the remits do not go far enough in ensuring safe space for LGBTQI persons. Participants voicing approval of the remits as a way for the church to stay together and move forward in ministry were similarly different: some affirmed full inclusion of LGBTQI persons and others affirmed the church’s traditional view of marriage and ordination.

Similarly, the whole range of attitudes to people – from respect and love to contempt and hatred – was identified by participants of every theological perspective as they described how they related to people who disagreed with them. – Also, the different levels of conviction – from firm and certain to still questioning – was reported by participants of various theological perspectives.

Differences across the church do not comprise the entire picture presented by the information collected in the listening process. There are commonalities as well. In fact, one striking impression is just how much is shared by people affirming an entire constellation of viewpoints. The list contains shared principles and perspectives that are deeply important to people in The Presbyterian Church in Canada: love for and devotion to God, following Jesus, reliance on the Holy Spirit, honouring scripture, love for the church and concern for its welfare, love for their local congregation and concern for its welfare, commitment to mission and concern for the nature and fruitfulness of the church’s witness to the love of Christ.

The differences and shared values present a picture of The Presbyterian Church in Canada at this point in its history. This picture may serve to encourage the church to claim its strengths at the same time that it addresses its differences.

The feedback from across the church also underscores the importance of how people treat one another while they disagree. This is true even when starkly different opinions are held with strength and conviction. The vibrancy of the church’s faith and the quality of its witness depend on the ways its people interact with one another. The hope facing the church is that its life might be characterized by mature Christian discipleship, confidence in the healing power of prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit forming minds and hearts to participate in Christ’s ministry. May God’s abiding presence guide and sustain us all.