

**A historical study of the polity of the gay and lesbian  
ordination and/or installation, and same-gender marriage  
debates in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its  
predecessor churches**

**by**

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## SUMMARY

Since the 1970s, the Presbyterian Church in the United States has dealt with its most divisive issue ever: same-gender relationships. Two polity debates have occurred simultaneously: 1) The ordination and/or installation of partnered gay and lesbian Christians as church officers, i.e. deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament; 2) The permissibility of ministers to perform and officers to participate in same-gender blessings and marriages, both liturgical and civil.

This period is characterised by an absence of theological discussion and formulation of biblical and/or theological statements. Rather, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and its predecessor churches, the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and Presbyterian Church in the U.S., all used polity to guide them. This is in line with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, which decided in 1927 to solve controversial theological issues, not through theological discussion, but through polity.

Since 1978, various polity processes have guided and shaped the two debates to form the current policies: 1) Presbyteries send overtures to General Assemblies, which, in turn issue “definitive guidance” statements and Authoritative Interpretations; 2) General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commissions (GAPJC) issue Authoritative Interpretations in both remedial and disciplinary cases, after complaints have moved through the ecclesiastical courts at Presbytery and/or synod level; 3) The 173 Presbyteries vote on amendments, approved by General Assemblies, to amend the *Book of Order*. The most notable amendment was the addition of G-6.0106b in 1997.

This writer argues that G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order*, requiring “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness,” is a form of subscription, and, therefore, contrary to the entire history of the Presbyterian Church, which has rejected all forms of subscriptionism since 1706. Subscription to five standards briefly existed from 1910-1925, and was rejected by the 1926 and 1927 General Assemblies of the PCUSA. One ordination standard is now elevated above all other standards and, since 1997, there have been three attempts to rid the *Book of Order* of this requirement.

W-4.9001 and G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order* reflect the changes made in the Westminster Confession of Faith in the 1950s, allowing for the divorce and remarriage of officers; namely marriage is between a man and a woman. Yet, it is used to exclude partnered gay and lesbian Christians from ordination and/or installation, and from participating in same-gender liturgical marriages.

The debates have created camps of conservatives, centrists, and liberals, which consistently threaten the peace, unity, and purity of the church. Thousands of evangelicals and conservatives, opposed to partnered gay and lesbian officers, have left the denomination for the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Additionally, Special Organisations, which are not accountable to the denomination, have added to the tension and created intolerance of others’ views.

## KEY WORDS

*Adopting Act of 1729*; Authoritative Interpretation; *Book of Order*; Constitution; “definitive guidance;” G-6.0106b and G-6.0108 in the *Book of Order*; gay and lesbian; General Assembly; ordination and/or installation; Permanent Judicial Commission; 2005 *Peace, Unity and Purity* Report; Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); same-gender unions, blessings, ceremonies, and marriages; sexual orientation; *Special Commission of 1925*; *The Book of Confessions*.



## ABREVIATIONS

### Old Testament

Gn	Ex	Lv	Nm	Dt	Jos	Jdg	Rt	1 Sm	2 Sm	1 Ki
2 Ki	1 Chr	2 Chr	Ezr	Neh	Es	Job	Ps	Pr	Ec	Can
Is	Jr	Lm	Ezk	Dn	Hs	Jl	Am	Ob	Jnh	Mi
Nah	Hab	Zph	Hg	Zch	MI					

### New Testament

Mt	Mk	Lk	Jn	Ac	Rm	1 Cor	2 Cor	Gl	Eph	Phlp
Col	1 Th	2 Th	1 Tm	2 Tm	Tt	Phlm	Heb	Ja	1 Pt	2 Pt
1 Jn	2 Jn	3 Jn	Jude	Rv						

### Bible Translations

NEB - New English Bible  
RSV - Revised Standard Version

### Denominations

DRC - Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa  
EPC - Evangelical Presbyterian Church  
NWAC - New Wineskin Association of Churches  
PCA - Presbyterian Church in America  
PCUS - Presbyterian Church in the U.S.  
PCUSA - Presbyterian Church in the United States of America  
PC(USA) - Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
RCA - Reformed Church in America  
UPCUSA - United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.  
UPCNA - United Presbyterian Church in North America

## TERMINOLOGY and ABBREVIATIONS

ACBO	- Assembly Committee on Bills and Overtures of the PC(USA)
ACBOO	- Assembly Committee on the Book of Order of the PC(USA)
ACC	- Advisory Committee on the Constitution of the PC(USA)
ACCM	- Assembly Committee on Candidacy and Ministry of the PC(USA)
ACCOM	- Assembly Committee on Church Orders and Ministry of the PC(USA)
ACDW	- Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship of the PC(USA)
ACOHS	- Assembly Committee on Ordination and Human Sexuality of the PC(USA)
ACOS	- Assembly Committee on Ordination Standards of the PC(USA)
ACPPUC	- Assembly Committee on Peace, Purity, and Unity of the Church of the PC(USA)
ACSWP	- Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy of the PC(USA)
AI	- Authoritative Interpretation
ARC	- Administrative Review Commission
CCM	- Confessing Church Movement
Church officers	- Deacons, elders, ministers of the Word and Sacrament
CN	- Covenant Network of Presbyterians
COM	- Committee on Ministry of a presbytery
COMP	- Committee on Ministry Preparation of a presbytery (now CPM)
COVC	- Church Orders and Vocation Committee of the PC(USA)
CPC	- Committee on Pluralism and Conflict of the PC(USA)
CPM	- Committee on Preparation for Ministry of a presbytery
EAC	- Ecclesiastical Affairs Committee of the PC(USA)
GA	- General Assembly of the PC(USA)
GAC	- General Assembly Council of the PC(USA)
GAMC	- General Assembly Mission Council of the PC(USA)
GAPJC	- Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly
GLBT	- Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons
Minutes	- Minutes of the General Assembly, Part 1: Journal
MLP	- More Light Presbyterians
NWA	- New Wineskins Association
OGA	- The Office of the General Assembly of the PC(USA)
Overture	- A proposed amendment to the Constitution by a presbytery
PFR	- Presbyterians for Renewal
PJC	- Permanent Judicial Commission
PLC	- Presbyterian Lay Committee
PLGC	- Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns
PPJC	- Presbytery Permanent Judicial Commission of the PC(USA)
PPR	- Presbyterian Panel Report
RCHS	- Representative Committee on Human Sexuality of the PC(USA)
SARC	- Special Administrative Review Committee
SOSP	- The Shower of Stoles Project
SPJC	- Synod Permanent Judicial Commission of the PC(USA)
TAMFS	- That All May Freely Serve
TTF	- Theological Task Force
TWMU	- Theology and Worship Ministry Unit of the PC(USA)

## A Chronology of American Presbyterianism

- 1640 The first Presbyterian congregation in the USA is organised.
- 1708 The first American presbytery is formed. Also known as the Presbytery or the General presbytery.
- 1716 The first American Synod is organised in Philadelphia.
- 1729 The *Adopting Act of 1729* distinguishes between essential and nonessential components of the Westminster Standards.
- 1736 The subscriptionist – anti-revivalist coalition rescinds the *Adopting Act of 1729* and imposes strict subscription on all members of the Synod.
- 1738 The New Lights establish the New Brunswick Presbytery.
- 1741 Schism between New Side and Old Side Presbyterians over the legitimacy of the Great Awakening.
- 1745 The New York Presbytery withdraws from the Synod of Philadelphia, and with revival party, forms the Synod of New York.
- 1758 The Synod of New York (New Side) and Synod of Philadelphia (Old Side) reunite under *Plan of Union*.
- 1789 The first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA), with four synods, is held in Philadelphia.
- 1801 The *Plan of Union* is adopted, uniting Presbyterians and Congregationalists.
- 1837 Old School and New School factions divide at the PCUSA General Assembly; the 1801 *Plan of Union* is declared unconstitutional.
- 1857 Southern New School Presbyterians form the United Synod of the South or United Synod of the PCUSA.
- 1858 The Associate Reformed Church and the Associate Church unite to form the United Presbyterian Church in North America (UPCNA).
- 1861 The Old School’s Southern section splits off to form the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (PCCSA).
- 1864 The PCCSA merges with the United Synod of the South to form the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS).
- 1869 The Old and New School General Assemblies reunite in Pittsburgh.
- 1892 In response to the Briggs trial, the General Assembly adopts language defending the “inerrancy” of Scripture.
- 1903 The PCUSA amends the Westminster Confession of Faith.
- 1906 The majority of Cumberland Presbyterian churches reunite with the PCUSA, ending a division of nearly 100 years.
- 1910 The PCUSA General Assembly adopts the “five points” of fundamentalism.
- 1924 The Auburn Affirmation is published.
- 1925 The PCUSA General Assembly appoints the Special Commission of 15 or Swearingen Commission, due to the fundamentalist-modernist controversy.
- 1927 The final report of the Special Commission of 1925 is approved and the “five points” are revoked. Two key principles from the *Adopting Act of 1729* are affirmed: the right of the ordaining body to determine the fitness of a candidate is paramount, and neither the General Assembly nor the ordaining body can erect essential and necessary articles which are paraphrases of the Confessions or Scripture.
- 1929 The PCUSA General Assembly reorganises Princeton Seminary, ending the control of the fundamentalists. Machen begins rival Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia.

- 1936 Machen and others form the Presbyterian Church in America, which becomes the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1939
- 1958 The United Presbyterian Church in North America (UPCNA) and the PCUSA merge to form the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA).
- 1967 The UPCUSA supplements the Westminster Confession with a *Book of Confessions*, including the newly-drafted Confession of 1967.
- 1972 Conservatives withdraw from the PCUS to form the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).
- 1981 Congregations from the UPCUSA and the PCUS form the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC).
- 1983 The UPCUSA and the PCUS reunite to form the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PC(USA)) and heal the split from 1861.



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## DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis, *A historical study of the polity of the gay and lesbian ordination and/or installation, and same-gender marriage debates in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessor churches*, which I hereby submit for the degree Philosophiae Doctor at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

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## DEDICATION

Dedicated to Kobie Vermaak, my wife and mother of our children, friend and theologian.