

A way forward? Changing the conversation on homosexuality: Changing the conversation on homosexuality

by [William Stacy Johnson](#) in the [April 3, 2007](#) issue

Unable to reach consensus regarding the ordination of gays, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), like many other denominations, found itself embroiled for years in a series of winner-take-all battles with no end in sight. In 2001 a wearied General Assembly appointed the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church to help to break the stalemate. The task force consisted of 20 Presbyterians from across the theological spectrum; members of the group strongly disagreed about church policy regarding gays. Many of us still disagree, but we are all committed to finding a way forward. (In what follows I speak only for myself and not for my fellow task force members.)

When the task force first began to meet, many progressives wanted us to provide a new teaching on the subject of gay sexuality. Many traditionalists wanted us to confirm in no uncertain terms the church's prior teaching. We did neither. For better or worse, we were not given a mandate by the General Assembly to tell the church what to do; rather, we were empowered to try to model a way of approaching disputes that the church could endorse. While this may seem a modest goal, we did manage to become the first official Presbyterian group in 30 years of wrangling over the gay issue to file a unanimous report. That alone merits attention.

How did we move toward this unanimity? A decisive step was taken at the first meeting. We could have simply dived head first into controversial matters to see where the debate would lead us. I confess that this strategy appealed to me. In hindsight I can see that that would have been a serious mistake.

At the urging of a wiser member, we opted instead to take a step back and do something deceptively simple. We decided to concentrate not so much on the things that divided us but on the things that made us Christian in the first place. We spent much of our time worshiping, reading scripture, praying, and engaging together in Christian fellowship. We affirmed a common desire to bear witness to the love of the triune God who claims each one of us, notwithstanding our disagreements. This helped provide a grace-filled context within which to reapproach the matters over which we differed.

When we finally did take up the question of same-sex relationships, we began not with our own individual biases but by studying together a diverse collection of theological perspectives. This gave us a common literature and a language within which to discuss what was at stake. We went through a process of identifying strengths and weaknesses in every position, including our own, and looked for bridges between one position and another.

Having injected this measure of objectivity into our study, we also tried to relate personally to each position, though no one was forced to identify publicly with one position or the other. Some of us shared stories about our experiences with gay and lesbian people. It was important to the tenor of our conversations that one of our task force members was an openly gay man in a committed relationship.

In studying the church's official position of welcoming gays as individuals but refusing to sanction a gay relationship for an ordained church leader, we took notice of two major criticisms leveled against it. Not everyone on the task force accepted these criticisms, but all of us wrestled with them.

First, the current policy trades on a sharp distinction between sexual orientation and practice, a dichotomy of accepting gay identity but of condemning gay love. At the time this policy was formulated in 1978 it was a combination of tradition and innovation. It was traditional in that it interpreted scripture as saying no to all homoerotic sexual practices. It was innovative in that it accepted the new scientific category of sexual orientation. The 1978 policy, which has been reconfirmed several times since then, struck a compromise between those who utterly rejected all forms of gay sexuality and those who wanted to show some measure of toleration.

This combination of tradition and innovation presents a dilemma. If the church truly accepts a person's sexual identity (as the current policy does), then what sense does

it make to condemn the love that flows from that orientation, especially if the lovers are committed to one another and long to be bound together in a covenantal union blessed by the church?

Some defenders of the current policy would respond by offering a counterexample: having an orientation toward pedophilia would not entitle a person to engage in the molestation of children. This is true, and emphatically so. But the analogy is a false one. In the case of pedophilia, the church rejects both the practice (exploitation of children) and the orientation that leads to it. We consider pedophiles to be suffering from an illness, but that is not so in the case of homosexuals. (In 1974 the American Psychiatric Association removed homoerotic desire from its list of psychological disorders.) What are we to make of an ethical teaching that can make no meaningful moral distinction between relationships grounded in exploitation and those based in covenantal commitment?

This discussion led us to consider a second criticism, which is that the current policy of toleration falls short of the *koinonia* to which Christians aspire. To be sure, in contexts of violence and hatred, pursuing the virtue of peaceful toleration is a bold and significant moral achievement. Yet the very notion of toleration suggests that there is still some hidden hostility or even enmity which one is somehow keeping in check. Moreover, if the genocidal history of the past century has taught us anything, it is that mere toleration of the other can be revoked, for toleration is something less than true acceptance.

In short, a policy that is welcoming but nonaffirming of gays feels like a policy that is not welcoming at all. We tell gays that they are respected in their identities but not affirmed in them; that they are welcomed as Christian brothers and sisters but not as church leaders; that they are accepted as individuals but not as committed couples. We tell them that they are in a position no different from heterosexual persons who find themselves without a marriage partner, while ignoring the fact that the heterosexual person can still nurture hope of finding a union that the church will gladly bless.

Task force members differed on how to assess these criticisms, but all agreed that the habit of fighting over sexuality policy year after year was counterproductive. No pastor would choose to pursue such a divisive strategy in a congregation. It was clear to us that we needed to find a way to live together despite our differences.

As an alternative to the scenario of ongoing strife, the task force recommended that the church: 1) remain united; 2) remain in dialogue; 3) retrieve and reemphasize trusted theological traditions; 4) recover alternative methods of resolving disputes, 5) reaffirm the classic Presbyterian principles of churchwide ordination standards linked with case-by-case local application, and 6) refrain, for the time being, from taking potentially church-splitting action on contested matters. To sum it up, we urged that our differences need not be church-dividing.

Many detractors zeroed in on our fifth recommendation, worrying that case-by-case discernment could permit the ordination of people who are openly gay. Their objection in effect turns opposition to ordaining gay people into the sole litmus test for ecclesial allegiance. The question we face is clear: Do we want to find a way to respect one another's consciences, or do we want to continue to wage ecclesiastical war?

I admit that I wish the task force had been able to reach a more explicit consensus on the sexuality debates. Still, we did offer two specific findings that offer hope for a way forward. The first was to begin asking a different sort of question. Instead of concentrating all our attention on ordination of gay individuals (important as that issue is), we suggested that the church spend more time on the ethics of gay relationships. Specifically, the church should ask: Is there a welcome place for committed gay couples within the life of the church? Addressing this question will require the church to gently resist the voices claiming that to even ask the question is forbidden.

Our second finding was that the church should take account of the broad and complex range of viewpoints among us. The claim that there are just two views on the subject—a biblical and a nonbiblical view—is no longer tenable. I cannot treat the important issue of biblical interpretation here, or the full range of viewpoints the task force considered. However, I do want to briefly mention two viewpoints—I call them accommodation and consecration—that received considerable task force attention.

Advocates of the first position, accommodation, want to keep the church's nonaffirming standards in place but are willing to make a gracious exception for committed gay couples. Some proponents of accommodation are open to blessing gay unions but want such blessings to be done quietly and without fanfare. For what it's worth, the policy of the PCUSA at least since 1991 has permitted this practice: it

allows ministers to bless a gay union so long as the relationship is understood to be different from traditional marriage. My observation is that we have quite a number of silent accommodationists in the church—those who disapprove of gay sexuality in theory but are open to certain committed relationships in practice.

The problem with this sort of tacit accommodation is that it offers gay people only a grudging acceptance. Because of this, others are beginning to see accommodation as something less than fully welcoming. I recently received a letter from a pastor who for some time has recognized problems with the church's current teachings; however, he could not see his way clear to overturning those teachings without having something constructive to put in their place.

The second position, consecration, seeks to provide this constructive alternative. It pushes beyond grudging acceptance and offers full acceptance to gay couples whose relationships are exclusive, committed and intended to be lifelong. Many advocates of this view find inspiration in a 1989 essay by Rowan Williams titled "The Body's Grace," which asks the theological question: What is sexuality for? Williams pushes beyond the dichotomy between asking "Am I keeping the rules" and "Am I being sincere and not hurtful" to pose a deeper question: "What does my sexual relationship signify or demonstrate concerning the faithfulness and grace of God?" Persons who favor full consecration of committed gay relationships believe that heterosexual marriage provides a context for nurturing the virtues of companionship, commitment and community, and that gay couples are as capable of living out these virtues as are heterosexual couples.

Some have charged that the consecration position ignores scripture. But proponents of consecration take scripture very seriously by honoring the biblical teaching that sexual relations ought to be ordered within a covenantal context. Context is important in reading scripture as well.

To sort out the questions of context, the task force examined the three types of homoerotic sexuality identified by historians. The first is age-differentiated, as, for example, in the rites of passage in Melanesian culture or the practice of pederasty among ancient Greeks. The second type is status-defined, as characterized by sexual relationships in the Roman Empire—the privileged male citizen was expected to have his way with inferiors, such as slaves, prostitutes or conquered warriors, who occupied a stigmatized, passive role. Roman iconography portrays the nations Rome conquered as women being sexually subdued; and upon conquering a people, the

Romans often castrated the young boys and sold them as sexual slaves. The lively trade in sexual slaves is the context for the condemnation, in the same breath, in 1 Timothy 1:10 of “sodomites” and “slave traders.”

Interpreters of scripture need to remember that it was this Roman status-defined and sometimes age-differentiated conception of sexual roles that permeated the social world in which the apostle Paul wrote his letters. And neither of these first two types of hedonistic homoeroticism has any bearing on the third type of same-sex relationship, which is mutual and egalitarian in character.

Much of the biblical prooftexting that condemns committed gay couples ignores these distinctions and makes the mistake of assuming that there is one monolithic thing called homosexuality which is the same in all periods of history. History reveals many homosexualities, each of which must be judged in the light of appropriate theological and ethical norms.

The consecration position seeks to move beyond the impasse posed by the binary opposition of affirming and nonaffirming positions by crafting a third response—one that sees exclusively committed relationships as a God-given means of grace for gay people, just as it is for straight people; one that provides ethical guidance that is not merely welcoming and affirming, but welcoming, affirming and ordering.

Clearly, the accommodationists and the consecrationists come at things differently. But they also have one thing in common. Each is open to finding some way to include committed gay couples; accommodationists do it more covertly, consecrationists more overtly. Not everyone on the task force would agree with this, but my own prediction is that over time these two groups will forge a new political coalition in the churches, one that will enable us to move beyond our current policy of mere toleration.

Since the task force operated by consensus rather than by votes, and since we did not make everyone declare his or her final position on the subject, I cannot tell you who stood where on the spectrum of opinion regarding gay couples. Nor would that be appropriate. What I can tell you is that we unanimously declared our desire for a church that is gracious enough to include us all—gracious enough to include conservatives, liberals, accommodationists, consecrationists, and yes, our gay colleague and his partner.

We did not know it at the time, but in retrospect the task force stumbled upon a strategy that had already been suggested once by Stanley Hauerwas. Rather than debating the abstraction we call homosexuality, Hauerwas suggested that we spend our time living into concrete practices of the church—the practice of fidelity, the practice of refraining from promiscuity and adultery. He also suggested we spend more time in conversation with gay and lesbian people who are living in exclusively committed relationships.

For my own part, I've come to see that as a theologian of the church I must do more than provide analysis of issues; I must reach out to embrace the people behind the issues. That includes my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, as well as those good people who disagree with me.