



Presbyterianism

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Presbyterianism, which sees itself as part of the "One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church," came into being during the European Reformation movement of the sixteenth century and is regarded as a major branch of Protestant Christianity. There are approximately 75,000,000 Presbyterians world-wide, divided into numerous denominations, mainly in Scotland and other areas of the United Kingdom, North America, Mexico and other countries in Latin America, Kenya, South Korea, New Zealand, Australia, and Vanuatu.

Attitudes toward homosexuality within Presbyterianism vary greatly from denomination to denomination, though there has recently been movement toward acceptance and inclusion by the largest and most influential church bodies of Presbyterianism.

The name Presbyterian derives from a method of church government. Most Presbyterian denominations are governed by "presbyteries," or representative assemblies of elders selected by congregations, and by synods, which are regional governing bodies to which the presbyteries belong. In general, governing authority in Presbyterian churches resides in elected lay leaders (or presbyters), who work with the congregation's ordained minister, whom they choose according to guidelines issued by a denominational General Assembly.

The presbyterian form of government fosters a democratic spirit. Presbyterian belief is that God is the head of the Church. Hence, there is no equivalent in Presbyterianism to an authoritarian leader such as a Pope or Archbishop.

Much of the governance of Presbyterian denominations is centered in the presbyteries and synods, though in most denominations a General Assembly consisting of elected elders and ministers makes denominational policy. The position of Moderator of a General Assembly is honorific, and conveys little policy-making authority. The Moderator is considered the "first among equals" and performs largely ceremonial duties. Another elected officer in many denominations is that of "stated clerk," who serves as the presbytery's or assembly's executive secretary and parliamentarian.

While congregations, governed by councils called "sessions," enjoy some autonomy, Presbyterianism should not be confused with congregationalism, for the presbyteries and synods and assemblies establish a form of government that extends beyond the individual congregations.



Rev. Jane Spahr has been an important proponent for glbtq inclusion in the Presbyterian Church (USA).
Youtube video still: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofeWSZ9kH6A>

The theology of Presbyterianism emphasizes the sovereignty of God, the authority of Scriptures as interpreted by reason, and the necessity of Grace through faith in Christ for salvation. The most influential thinkers in the development of Presbyterian theology are the sixteenth-century reformer John Calvin and his student, the Scotsman John Knox. Hence, most Presbyterian denominations may be described as Calvinist.

Presbyterianism is a "confessional religion," where individual confessions of faith are deemed very important, as opposed to the Roman Catholic tradition, where doctrine is determined by a hierarchical structure. Yet theology in Presbyterianism is not simply a matter of individual interpretation. While individuals are encouraged to study Scripture and even to challenge institutional interpretations, ultimately Presbyterian theology is a community understanding that is then expressed in confessions.

Different denominations within Presbyterianism have adopted different "Confessions of Faith." The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms of 1647, however, has been the most important confessional document historically, and most denominations adopt the Westminster Confession and add other statements of faith to it that may distinguish one denomination from another. For example, the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s Book of Confessions supplements the Westminster Confession with other documents, such as the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, the Reformed Confessions, and some twentieth-century documents.

Presbyterian denominations generally recognize only two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper (or Holy Communion).

While most Presbyterian denominations permit some variance in theological interpretation, the order of worship and key doctrinal beliefs are usually enforced through required adherence to a Book of Order and Discipline. Moreover, Presbyterians have historically been both litigious and schismatic; disputes over matters of theology and discipline have regularly led to complex litigation and to splits and the proliferation of denominations.

Church of Scotland

The Church of Scotland, sometimes referred to as "The Kirk," is the "mother church" of Presbyterianism. It traces its origins to John Knox, who, after studying under Calvin in Geneva, returned to Scotland and agitated for the reformation of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, which was accomplished by legislation of the Scottish Parliament in 1560.

Although the Church of Scotland became the national church of Scotland in 1690 and is sometimes still referred to as the "established church" of Scotland, it no longer is a state church. Its hegemony even in Scotland has been lessened by numerous schisms and splits over the years. Most of the other Scottish Presbyterian churches, such as the United Free Church of Scotland, the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Associated Presbyterian Church, and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland, came into being as a result of congregations leaving the Church of Scotland over some doctrinal or policy dispute.

The Church of Scotland has historically been the dominant church in the country, sometimes commanding a large percentage of the population as adherents, but in the mid-twentieth and twenty-first centuries, its membership dramatically shrank, due not only to the split into other denominations and independent churches, but also to the increasing secularism of the nation.

In 2013, the Church of Scotland claims some 400,000 members (out of a population of more than 5,000,000 Scots) and 800 ministers supported by more than 1500 professional and administrative staff. Most of its parishes are in Scotland, but there are also Church of Scotland congregations in England and abroad.

The Church of Scotland is not the largest Presbyterian denomination, but because of its historical role as "the kirk," it has an influence beyond its size. Hence, its slow evolution toward an increased acceptance of homosexuals within the Church is significant.

Increasing tolerance toward homosexuality in the Church of Scotland has largely kept pace with changes in social attitudes generally, and has some parallel to the increased role of women in the Church. Although all ministries and offices in the Church of Scotland have been open to women and men on an equal basis since 1968, only in 2004 was a woman chosen the Moderator of the General Assembly. There are currently approximately 200 female ministers in the Church of Scotland.

Although the Church of Scotland has traditionally taught that homosexual acts are sinful, and has labored to practice a "hate the sin, but love the sinner" attitude toward homosexuals, the Church has in its various reports on sexuality since 1994 admitted that there is a division within its membership, with a substantial number of members believing that homosexual acts are not sinful.

The division came to a head in 2009 in regards to the controversy over the installation of an ordained minister who announced that he planned to live with his same-sex partner should he be appointed to his post. In a landmark decision, on May 23, 2009, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland voted 306 to 267 to ratify the appointment of the Reverend Scott Rennie, the Church's first openly practicing gay minister.

However, after taking this groundbreaking vote, and after Rennie was installed as minister at Queen's Cross, Aberdeen, and facing threats of schism, the General Assembly agreed to a moratorium on the appointment of other practicing homosexuals. The General Assembly appointed a theological commission to study the question.

On May 20, 2013, the General Assembly crafted a compromise that pleased no one, though it allowed both the "traditionalists" and the "revisionists" to claim victory.

On the one hand, it allowed the Church to maintain its historic doctrine in relation to human sexuality, but in line with the Kirk's traditional position of allowing congregations to call their own ministers, to permit an individual Kirk Session to call a minister in a civil partnership if it chooses to do so. The new policy permits the ordination of openly gay or lesbian ministers in civil partnerships, but it allows individual sessions to "opt in" or "opt out" of the policy of ordaining openly gay ministers who are not celibate and to refuse to appoint a non-celibate gay or lesbian minister.

The report that led to the compromise, entitled "A Challenge to Unity: Same-sex Relationships as an Issue in Theology and Human Sexuality," attempted to thread a needle, representing the viewpoints of both "traditionalists" and "revisionists." While it made no recommendations for action, it did strongly condemn homophobia. Indeed, while it acknowledged the division within the Church as to whether homosexual acts are sinful, it unambiguously declared homophobia a sin.

In 2005, the Church of Scotland took an official position opposed to civil partnerships. In 2013, it is on record in opposition to the same-sex marriage bill that the government of Scotland has introduced. Given its inability to stop civil partnerships in 2005, it is highly unlikely that the Church of Scotland will be able to forestall the same-sex marriage bill, which is likely to be passed into law in 2014. But it is also unlikely that the Church of Scotland will itself perform same-sex marriages in the near future.

Presbyterian Church (USA)

In the United States, the largest Presbyterian denomination is the Presbyterian Church (USA), which has approximately 2,000,000 members and over 10,000 congregations. It is considered one of the "mainline Protestant" denominations that helped define American Christianity until the 1960s, and assumed leadership roles in many areas of American life, especially on social justice issues. However, since the 1960s, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and other mainline Protestant denominations, such as the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church of the United States, and the United Church of Christ, have lost membership and influence.

The decline in membership in the Presbyterian Church (USA) has been steady since 1983, when the Church counted more than 3,000,000 members.

Presbyterians were among the earliest Reformed immigrants to America. They founded congregations as early as the 1630s, and in 1706 formed the Presbytery of Philadelphia, the first in the New World. The Synod of Philadelphia was organized in 1716. In 1798, the Synod formed the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, the body to which the current Presbyterian Church (USA) traces its origins.

One of the many schisms to divide the Presbyterian Church (USA) occurred in 1861, when the southern Presbyterians split from the PCUSA over the issue of slavery. Over the years Presbyterian denominations in the United States have split and reunited and split and formed other alliances.

Many of the conflicts within Presbyterianism in the twentieth century involved biblical interpretation and social issues. In the 1920s, those who believed in the literal interpretation of the Bible as the fundamental source of authority clashed with those who held a more modern and nuanced view of Biblical interpretation. In the 1950s and 1960s, conflicts over racism and gender divided Presbyterianism, especially disagreements over the PCUSA's involvement in the African-American civil rights movement and over the ordination of women.

Since the 1970s, the question of homosexuality has been a major issue of contention within the

Presbyterian Church (USA).

In 1978, the Church issued a study document entitled "The Church and Homosexuality" that contained a policy statement and recommendations that were adopted by the General Assembly. This document declared that "homosexuality is not God's wish for humanity." It asserted that "In many cases, homosexuality is more a sign of the brokenness of God's world than of willful rebellion. In other cases homosexuality is freely chosen or learned in environments where normal development is thwarted. Even where homosexual orientation has not been consciously sought or chosen, it is neither a gift from God nor a condition like race; it is a result of our living in a fallen world."

Although the document said that "Persons who manifest homosexual behavior must be treated with the profound respect and pastoral tenderness due all people of God" and asserted that "There can be no place within the Christian faith for the response to homosexual persons of mingled contempt, hatred, and fear that is called homophobia," it firmly rejected "the ordination [as deacons, elders, or pastors] of persons who do not repent of homosexual practice."

One reaction to the study document was the formation of the More Light Presbyterian (MLP) movement, which also had its germination in other groups in the mid-1970s such as "Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns." Although the earlier groups had repeatedly been spurned by General Assemblies, with their reports routinely refused, the 1978 study document so infuriated social justice activists and gay-friendly congregations that they became more aggressive and therefore less able to be ignored.

Congregations appalled by the exclusion of an entire class of people from church leadership began adopting resolutions proclaiming their intention to be inclusive in all aspects of ministry and to seek "God's light" on issues of sexuality. These congregations became known as More Light Churches and made a particular effort to welcome gay and lesbian members.

The first congregation to proclaim itself a "More Light Church" was the West-Park Presbyterian Church in New York City in 1978. The pastor of West-Park, Rev. Robert Davidson, announced that "In harmony with the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church, West-Park Church affirms the civil rights of all persons. Further, in keeping with our General Assembly's guidelines, this community of faith welcomes as members homosexual persons who both seek and have found Christ's love."

Then he added, in open defiance of the General Assembly, "This local congregation will not select one particular element from a person's total humanity as a basis for denying full participation and service in the body of Christ. Nor will this community of faith condemn or judge our brothers and sisters who declare their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and promise discipleship to Him."

By 1998, there were almost 100 congregations in 26 states that were designated as More Light Churches. (Now, there are more than 200 More Light Churches.) Linked together in a network, the movement has produced a number of activists who have worked within the Presbyterian Church (USA) to change the denominational policies that excluded gay men and lesbians from full participation in church life and that stigmatized homosexuality. Many of these congregations defied the policies that barred active homosexuals from leadership positions.

In 1992, another activist group within the PCUSA, "That All May Freely Serve," was formed to advocate for an inclusive and welcoming denomination and for the ordination of qualified gbtq candidates for ministry. It was formed in reaction to an ecclesiastical court decision that set aside the pastoral call to the Downtown United Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York of Rev. Jane Spahr, an ordained minister who had recently come out as a lesbian. After she had been hired by the Rochester church, 14 congregations in the presbytery protested her hiring. In an ugly trial in which she was compared to a bank robber and a child molester, the highest court in the Presbyterian Church eventually ruled that Downtown Presbyterian had erred in hiring Spahr.

Subsequently, the indefatigable Rev. Spahr became a traveling evangelist crusading of behalf of justice within the Church.

However, despite the activism of the More Light movement and the "That All May Freely Serve" group, in 1996 the PCUSA General Assembly adopted an ordination standard that reaffirmed its discriminatory policy and effectively excluded sexually active homosexuals from all leadership positions in the Church: "Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and / or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament."

In response to the action of the 1996 General Assembly, in 1997, the Covenant Network, a broad-based group of clergy and other leaders, was formed. Its goal is to make the Presbyterian Church more inclusive and welcoming. Initially, they hoped to reverse the 1996 General Assembly action with a 1998 amendment that would give greater leeway to sessions and presbyters in the process of ordaining leaders. The General Assembly approved the amendment, but it was overwhelmingly voted down when it was sent to the presbyteries for ratification. The Covenant Network, however, continued its advocacy for a more inclusive Church and gradually developed into a leading voice of change within the denomination.

Attempts to revise the ban on sexually active clergy occupied activists within the Church for many years, with amendments routinely rejected and new studies ordered. In the new century, however, a pattern developed in which the General Assembly adopted progressive policies that were then rejected by the presbyteries, reflecting a disconnection between the leaders who were elected to attend the Assembly and the more conservative grass roots in the pews. For example, in 2000, the General Assembly voted to remove the "fidelity and chastity" clause in the ordination requirements, but it was rejected by the presbyteries. The same thing would happen repeatedly until 2011, when a majority of the presbyteries finally ratified an amendment to permit the ordination of practicing homosexuals.

A breakthrough came in 2006 with "A Season of Discernment: The Final Report of the Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church." This report acknowledged what had been obvious for many years, that the Church was deeply divided over key issues, both theological and pastoral, including whether homosexual acts were sinful.

Nevertheless, the task force reached agreement on some important points such as the following: 1) It is a grave error to deny baptism or church membership to gay and lesbian persons or to withhold pastoral care to them and their families; 2) Those who aspire to ordination must lead faithful lives. Those who demonstrate licentious behavior should not be ordained; 3) Sexual behavior is integral to Christian

discipleship, leadership, and community life. It is not a purely personal matter; and 4) Sexual orientation is, in itself, no barrier to ordination.

Rather than proposing a wholesale change in the ordination standards, however, the report recommended that candidates for ordination be allowed to express "scruples" or questions of conscience about certain requirements of ordination and that members of ordaining and installing bodies be permitted to decide "what departures can be tolerated and which are so serious that essential matters of faith and practice are compromised." In other words, the report proposed allowing practicing homosexuals to indicate that they have "scruples" about the requirement that they be celibate and that the ordaining and installing bodies be given discretion to decide whether they can be ordained or installed despite their unwillingness to commit to celibacy.

In 2006, the General Assembly adopted the recommendations of the Task Force. It voted overwhelmingly to affirm the "fidelity and chastity" section of the Book of Order and then by a considerably closer margin voted to allow the section to be waived in individual circumstances.

Although this change in policy appeared to open the doors to the ordination of practicing gay and lesbian aspiring leaders, in actuality that proved not to be the case. Conservatives within the denomination resisted the reform at every stage, exploiting the elaborate judicial system of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to frustrate the intended reform.

Lisa Larges, for example, had hoped that the change in policy might quickly facilitate her long quest for ordination. She had first been recommended for ordination in 1991 by her local presbytery in Minneapolis, but her ordination was quickly challenged by other congregations and an ecclesiastical court rejected her as unsuitable. In 2006, she began the process all over again, this time in San Francisco.

Again, Larges was approved by the local presbytery and, despite the new policy, she was yet again challenged. In 2010, after a court trial, a Synod of the Pacific Permanent Judicial Commission affirmed by a vote of 5-4 the San Francisco presbytery's approval of her for ordination with a departure or "scruple." But then that ruling was challenged and overturned. Her ordination was not affirmed until 2012, and by that time the policy itself had been changed and personal circumstances caused Larges to no longer be able to accept the "call" to ministry.

Another breakthrough occurred in 2008. The General Assembly by a 54% to 46% margin voted to replace the "fidelity and chastity" ordination clause with the following language: "Those who are called to ordained service in the church, by their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation, pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions. In so doing, they declare their fidelity to the standards of the Church. Each governing body charged with examination for ordination and/or installation . . . establishes the candidate's sincere efforts to adhere to these standards."

The General Assembly also reiterated the compromise adopted in 2006 allowing candidates for ordination to declare a "scruple" and giving discretion to ordaining and installing bodies.

The Assembly also began a process to revoke the Authoritative Interpretation of the Book of Order that homosexual behavior is sinful, an action that may prove particularly significant in the long run.

Again, a large majority of presbyteries rejected the proposal to remove the "fidelity and chastity" requirement.

However, in 2010, the amendment was again approved by the General Assembly and in 2011 finally adopted by a majority of presbyteries.

Amendment 10-A, as it was known, replaced the old ordination standard with the following language: "Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all the requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation. Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates."

Coming after more than 30 years of struggle, this victory to include gay and lesbians as full members of the church was sweet. It undoubtedly reflected changing attitudes toward homosexuals in society at large, but it was also the result of determined clergy and laity committed to the cause of justice within the Church who refused to give up or go away.

It may also have occurred because the opponents of the ordination of gay and lesbian couples simply left the denomination to join others. In any case, the battle for equal rights within the PCUSA was a long and arduous one that sharply divided the Church and has indeed led to schism, with a number of congregations leaving the denomination.

In the first year after the new ordination standards were officially approved, about a dozen sexually active gay or lesbian clergy members were ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The other battle within the Presbyterian Church (USA) is over same-sex marriage. For many years Presbyterian clergy have been permitted to bless same-sex couples in church buildings. However, in 1991, the General Assembly adopted a report stating emphatically that "it is not proper for ministers to conduct ceremonies represented as marriages between persons of the same sex."

While ministers are permitted to conduct blessings, they are urged to "instruct same-sex couples that the service to be conducted does not constitute a marriage ceremony and should not be held out as such." Moreover, "services where a same-gender union is blessed or performed should have a liturgical distinction from marriage services."

Marriage is defined in the PCUSA Book of Order as "a gift God has given to all humankind for the well being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians

marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith."

Judicial rulings have established that Presbyterian clergy are prohibited from performing same-sex marriages and that church facilities may not be used for same-sex marriages.

Despite such rulings, more than a dozen Presbyterian clergy have nevertheless performed same-sex marriages, and in so doing have kept the debate about same-sex marriage in the PCUSA at the forefront.

Rev. Jane Spahr has been the most visible challenger to the denomination's prohibition against officiating at same-sex marriages. She has gone through several church trials and many appeals for having performed same-sex marriages and commitment services.

In 2006, Spahr was charged with having presided over a same-sex marriage. In 2007, she was convicted in a regional court, but in 2008 the charges were dismissed when the denomination's highest court ruled that the ceremony was not actually a marriage since it was not recognized by either church or state.

However, soon after that ruling was made, during the "window" in 2008 in which same-sex marriages were recognized in California, Spahr wed more than 16 gay and lesbian couples before Proposition 8 banned same-sex marriage in the golden state.

In 2010, Spahr stood trial before a northern California church court. During the three-day hearing, Spahr's attorneys argued that her actions were justified by Presbyterian teachings on diversity and inclusion. The commission ruled 4-2 that she had "persisted in a pattern or practice of disobedience" and that she had broken her ordination vows. But most of the 2 ½ page ruling was devoted to praising her for her "prophetic ministry" and "faithful compassion." The commission assessed the most lenient sentence possible for the conviction, a public rebuke.

Despite the leniency of the sentence, Spahr appealed the conviction to the denomination's highest court, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Court, which in February 2012 upheld the conviction and sentence and also issued a warning that pastors should not represent the marriage of gay and lesbian couples as Presbyterian marriages. In response, Spahr announced that she would continue to marry same-sex couples.

Spahr's defiance was matched by that of the Presbytery of the Redwoods, which refused to carry out the sentence passed on her. In an action that may have been unprecedented in PCUSA history, the presbytery voted 74 to 18 to reject the Church's official denunciation and instead support Rev. Spahr.

In response to the presbytery's action, the Rev. Scott Clark, a member of the team of lawyers representing Spahr, said, "More and more people actually know lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folks, and they have to acknowledge our full dignity and our full value." Spahr said, "today, today, this presbytery said we're equal. . . . Love and justice became friends today."

At the 2012 General Assembly, the Presbyterian Church (USA) faced the question of same-sex marriage head on. After rejecting an attempt to restore the "fidelity and chastity" ordination standard, the Assembly considered an amendment that would have changed the definition of marriage from a civil contract between a man and a woman to a contract between two people. After three hours of debate, the amendment narrowly failed on a vote of 338 to 308.

The vote was closer than expected. Moreover, proponents of marriage equality in the Church took comfort in the fact that younger members of the Assembly expressed support for same-sex marriage more strongly than older members. The prospects are good that the Presbyterian Church (USA) will soon endorse marriage equality.

In addition, the General Assembly implored members of the Church to engage in prayerful deliberation upon the understanding of marriage between same-gender couples and directed the Office of Worship, Theology and Education to prepare a study guide to review established Church policy and practice on marriage.

Another important development was the approval of a new translation of the Heidelberg Catechism by more than two-thirds of the presbyteries. If approved again by the 2014 General Assembly, the new, more accurate translation will remove the phrase "homosexual perversion" from the Book of Confessions.

There is no doubt that the PCUSA is deeply divided on the question of homosexuality and profoundly weary of the continual discussion of the issue. At the same time, it is also clear that the battle for full and equal participation by glbtq members is nearly won. That victory may turn out to be at the cost of losing membership and congregations, but that may itself lead to a less contentious and more unified denomination.

But not all the congregations who are leaving the Presbyterian Church (USA) are doing so because the Church has become too gay-friendly. Progressive congregations are also exhausted by the continuous wrangling over the issue of homosexuality in the Church.

For example, the historic West Hollywood Presbyterian Church, which was the first PCUSA congregation to hire an openly gay minister, 27 years before the denomination permitted the ordination of sexually active gay and lesbian clergy, announced in 2012 that it was leaving the denomination because of what its pastor, the Rev. Daniel Smith, described as "the core-level homophobia in the Presbyterian Church." The congregation voted to affiliate with the United Church of Christ, where homosexuality has been less contentious on the denominational level.

Smith said, Presbyterians led the charge for civil rights in the 1960s, but have lagged far behind on gay rights. "We so deserve to be part of a denomination where we do not have to spend all our time and energy fighting for our rightful place at Christ's table," he said. "We're the first, but we won't be the last progressive church to leave."

Other Presbyterian Denominations in North America

If the Presbyterian Church (USA) may be described as deeply divided but on a trajectory toward the full acceptance of glbtq people within the denomination, most other North American Presbyterian denominations are much less welcoming.

The Presbyterian Church in America (about 375,000 members), the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (about 40,000 members), the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (about 30,000 members), and the Presbyterian Church in Canada (about 120,000 members) condemn homosexual acts as incompatible with Biblical values. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church also views homosexual orientation as sinful. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church (about 140,000 members) allows congregations a great deal of freedom with regard to social issues, but its position paper on the issue declares homosexuality a sin.

By far the most glbtq-supportive of any North American Presbyterian denomination is the United Church of Canada (about 3,000,000 members). Although the United Church of Canada is not purely Presbyterian, it may nevertheless be considered mostly Presbyterian since Presbyterians were the largest constituency in the merger of several denominations in 1925 that formed the Church. Moreover, the resultant Church adopted a Presbyterian church structure. It is organized into Presbyteries and Conferences and governed by a General Council, each having membership of both clergy and lay people. Conference presidents and moderators of the national church may be clergy or lay people.

Over the past four decades, the United Church of Canada's stance on homosexuality has evolved from condemnation to acceptance. From denouncing homosexuality sinful, it has moved to celebrating it as a gift of God. As the most influential Protestant denomination in the country, it has been instrumental in the increased acceptance of glbtq rights, including same-sex marriage, in Canada.

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