

Article

Calling the Question: The Role of Ministries of Presence and Polity Principles in the Struggle for LGBTQIA+ Inclusion, Ordination, and Marriage in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Its Predecessor Denominations

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Abstract: This article reflects upon how LGBTQIA+ Christians and their allies within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessor denominations ‘called the question’ on their right *to* and responsibility *for* membership, ordination, and marriage by simultaneously (1) practicing apologetic ‘ministries of presence’ and (2) grounding their ecclesio-juridical arguments in the church’s long-standing polity principles. It is commonly argued that advocates for full inclusion pushed the church to change historic norms, while ‘conservative’ voices called for the maintenance of time-honored principles. In an effort to problematize such reductionistic accounts, this article begins by sketching the historical trajectory of U.S. Presbyterian theology and polity, with special emphasis on the Adopting Act of 1729 and the tradition that proceeds from it. Building upon its survey of the debates that shaped the church’s history between the early eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, the text then shows how LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies acted within the traditional discursive patterns of their faith community when they advocated for the repeal of the exclusive policies that arose in the second half of the twentieth century. Inspired by the work of advocates and allies alike, when the PC(USA) and its predecessor denominations articulated an inclusive stance toward openly LGBTQIA+ members in 1978/1979, removed barriers to their ordination in 2011, permitted same-sex marriages within Presbyterian communities in 2015, and opened the church to receiving new theological insights from queer people via the adapted version of the ‘Apology Overture’ in 2016, the church’s collective discernment drew on historic Presbyterian principles of theology and governance to respond (often imperfectly) to contemporary challenges. The church’s multi-generational self-critique thus created a space in which queer Christians could ‘re-de-normalize’ their experiences of life and faith in ways that may open doors for post-apologetic reconstructive theological engagement in the years to come.

Keywords: LGBTQIA+ history; queer religious history; Presbyterianism; PC(USA); freedom of conscience

1. “Is Anyone Else out There Gay?”

David Bailey Sindt (1940–1986) was ordained as a minister of word and sacrament in the United Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1965. By taking up the mantle of pastoral ministry, he participated in a family tradition that stretched back three generations and even included an uncle. After completing a Master of Divinity at McCormick Theological Seminary, Sindt pastored congregations in St. Paul, MN, and Chicago, IL. With less than five years of ministry under his belt, he decided to continue his graduate studies and earned a Master of Social Work from the University of Michigan in 1971. While in graduate school, he worked at the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, where he would remain gainfully employed alongside his ecclesial commitments for some time. During that same year, Sindt began to openly identify as a gay man.

By 1972, Lincoln Park Presbyterian Church had “issued a call to him to become a part-time associate pastor with a special ministry to the gay community” (Holmen 2013, p. 252). In a decision that he would later unsuccessfully appeal in ecclesial court, the Ministerial Relations Committee (MRC) of the Presbytery of Chicago (into which he had attempted to transfer his membership) blocked what “was believed to be the first call ever issued to an openly gay man by a Presbyterian congregation” (LPPC/MLCN 1999, p. 1). Unyielding in the face of those who thought the pulpit was an unfitting place for gay people, in the summer of 1974, the embattled pastor set out for the national judicatory of his church. Sitting among thousands of commissioners, guests, and onlookers, Sindt steadied himself as he climbed atop his chair. He held up a poster he had prepared in his hotel room and carried into the assembly hall earlier that day. The sign posed a provocative question: “is anyone else out there gay” (PHS 2022c)?

Before his fateful stand, Sindt and others, including two openly gay seminarians (Bill Silver and Chris Glaser), had organized the Presbyterian Gay Caucus (PGC), which changed its name to Presbyterians for Gay and Lesbian Concerns (PLGC) in 1977. In a letter that called for the creation of a PGC prior to the 1974 UPCUSA General Assembly, Sindt wrote, “I suggest that we focus our initial efforts nationally on a ‘ministry of presence’” (PHS 2022c). He also called his friends and colleagues to “work for change within the denomination, not attack it from either within or without” (in Holmen 2013, p. 353).

Sindt’s belief that the practice of a *ministry of presence* was a necessary first step toward the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ Christians in the church was shared by most leading advocates and allies in the movement’s early years. For example, his colleague, Chris Glaser, and the noted historian of medieval sexuality, John Boswell (1947–1994)¹, often expressed a similar conviction about the power of LGBTQIA+ witness to effect change through building relationships with their co-religionists. After speaking at events hosted by Presbyterian organizations, they concluded, “phobias, irrational fears, are not overcome by reason so much as experience. I believe the church and society’s phobia regarding homosexuality and homosexual persons will be overcome by experiencing us” (Glaser 1988, p. 1).

When the PGC was denied standing at the 1975 General Assembly of the UPCUSA, Sindt was interviewed by the New York Times on behalf of the caucus’ more than 120 members. He said, “it’s our purpose to remind the church that homosexuals exist and must not be shunned” (Dugan 1975). A PLGC pamphlet from the early 1980s included photos of Sindt and other openly gay Presbyterians in a banner across the top of the page. The first sentence of the document read, with emphasis included, “SOMEONE YOU KNOW AND LOVE is Presbyterian and a Lesbian/homosexual person” (PHS 2022g). For Sindt, Glaser, and other early advocates for inclusion, the practice of a ministry of presence was a prophetic act that took place within the church’s governmental structures and drew upon its historic polity principles. Their boundary-defying ministries confronted the myth of queer Christian non-existence and called the church to an expansive realization of divine grace.

To perform a ministry of presence was to offer an *apology*, in the classical sense of the term, by being *publicly* and *unapologetically* queer and Christian at the same time. Sindt’s audacious stand put a face on LGBTQIA+ people in America’s Presbyterian churches. His silent protest made two things uncomfortably clear; (1) the words *gay* and *Presbyterian* are not oxymoronic, and (2) the church’s theology and polity must account for the presence of queer people within its bounds. A solitary gay Christian’s protest became a watershed in the history of American Protestantism and a rallying cry for queer believers who sought to live and die in the church that was their spiritual home.² The theological, ecclesiological, and praxiological journey on which the church embarked in the years surrounding Sindt’s stand reshaped one of America’s historic mainline Protestant traditions in ways that have yet to be fully understood.

2. Aims, Limits, and Labels

This article reflects upon how various individuals and groups within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessor denominations drew upon historic apologetic

discursive patterns and polity principles when ‘calling the question’ on LGBTQIA+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage within their faith community. Based on an analysis of U.S. Presbyterian history and polity, the following pages support a two-fold thesis as to the primary means by which queer Presbyterians and their allies called the church to change its exclusionary policies. LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their supporters called the question on their right to and responsibility for inclusion, ordination, and marriage by simultaneously (1) practicing apologetic ‘ministries of presence’ through collective action, which confronted the myth of queer-Christian nonexistence via distinctly Presbyterian patterns of intra-ecclesial engagement, and (2) grounding their arguments in the church’s long-standing polity principles. Consequently, when the PC(USA) and its predecessor denominations articulated an inclusive stance toward openly LGBTQIA+ members in 1978/1979, removed barriers to their ordination in 2011, permitted same-sex marriages within Presbyterian communities in 2015, and opened the church to receiving new theological insights from queer people via the adapted version of the ‘Apology Overture’ in 2016, the church’s collective discernment drew on historic Presbyterian principles of theology and governance to respond (often imperfectly) to contemporary challenges. The church’s multi-generational self-critique thus created a space in which queer Christians could ‘re-de-normalize’ their experiences of life and faithfulness in ways that may open doors for post-apologetic reconstructive theological engagement in the years to come.

It is commonly argued that advocates for inclusion pushed the church to change long-standing norms, while ‘conservative’ voices called for the maintenance of historic principles. This reductionistic perspective mangles the historical evidence and belays attempts to listen for the tone and tenor of debates within specific faith traditions. In contrast to prevailing narratives, this article situates the struggle for inclusion within the broader trajectory of mainline American Presbyterian theology and polity. In so doing, it complexifies a discourse that tends to associate motivations for pro-LGBTQIA+ advocacy with *supposedly* extra-ecclesial impulses, like concerns for social justice and human rights, while uncritically granting conservative claims about the consistency of their arguments with past church rulings.

Guided by its two-fold thesis, this article seeks to disentangle the interrelated web of ecclesiastical theology, polity, and discursive mechanisms upon which advocates for full inclusion drew when making their arguments. The project thus aims to fill the gap in historical research regarding the discursive practices and historical principles employed by LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies in the struggle for greater inclusion. It also provides a brief narrative account of the intra-ecclesial movement that led to the denomination’s current policy position. Other publications have noted LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies’ persistent use of ‘ministries of presence’ within their church’s judicatories. Of particular importance in this regard is R.W. Holmen’s popular monograph, *Queer Clergy: A History of Gay and Lesbian Ministry in American Protestantism* (2013). While Holmen’s work focuses primarily on the struggle for LGBTQIA+ *ordination* in various mainline U.S. Protestant traditions, his references to the polity principles employed by advocates for inclusion significantly influenced the initial conceptualization of this article. Nevertheless, his account may be complemented by this project’s intentionally narrow focus on developments in the PC(USA) and by its reference to events that postdated the publication of his work.

Roché Francois Vermaak’s doctoral dissertation, *A Historical Study of the Polity of the Gay and Lesbian Ordination and/or Same-Gender Marriage Debates in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its Predecessor Churches*, was completed under the auspices of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria (South Africa) in 2009. In his dissertation and subsequent articles, Vermaak argued that U.S. Presbyterians have used “polity rather than theology to solve . . . theological issues” (Vermaak 2010a, p. 1). Like this project, his venerable work also asserted that the church’s historic polity principles guided the inclusion, ordination, and “same-gender blessing and marriage debate since the 1980s” within the PC(USA) (Vermaak 2010b, p. 1).

Nevertheless, while this article follows a similar discursive path and grapples with many of the same ecclesial adjudications as Vermaak's work, there are some essential differences between the respective approaches of the two projects. Vermaak's dissertation critiqued the tendency of decision-making bodies within the PC(USA) to solve disputes via polity processes rather than drawing on their church's wealth of theological and biblical reflection. In light of the exclusionary policies that were then still enshrined in the church's constitution and the decisions of the General Assembly's Permanent Judicial Commission (GA-PJC), which he so diligently examines, Vermaak called the church to reflect anew upon its theological heritage. Ultimately, he expressed hope that the PC(USA) would widen its official understanding of God's embrace and recognize God's call upon the lives of LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians (Vermaak 2009, p. 6).

In contrast to Vermaak's approach, this author views polity mechanisms as practical outgrowths of ecclesiastical theology, which comes to life through intra-ecclesial dialogue. Additionally, the primary emphasis in this account is not on the church's policy per se. Rather, it focuses on *how* LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians used historic principles to advocate for their vision of a more inclusive church and thus confounded their interlocutors by engaging constructively with the church's unique governing principles. Perhaps even more significantly, both Holmen and Vermaak wrote before the PC(USA) changed its exclusionary policies on same-sex marriage. This text benefits from the ability to look back on the discursive patterns employed by advocates for LGBTQIA+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage after the church has already repealed its exclusionary policies and opened the door for ongoing theological reflection by apologizing for past harms done. The (presumed) wisdom that comes from additional years of hindsight avails an opportunity to suggest that apologies are often among the first steps to receiving new truths and working toward reconciliation. It is, in fact, the skillful and sustained use of the church's historic polity principles, not the negation of them, that has led to the present situation in which the church is now free to move beyond queer Christian apologetics to the in-depth biblical and theological reflection which Vermaak once envisioned as a mechanism for change.

In an effort to trace the development of the aforementioned polity principles and discursive patterns, section three begins by looking back into the church's history to a time long before Sindt hoisted his provocative poster. It introduces formative decisions made at early gatherings of American Presbyterians in the eighteenth century. The section then traces the development of key principles of Presbyterian polity and governance, as exemplified by the Adopting Act of 1729, Itinerancy & Education Acts of 1737 and the accompanying Apology of the Presbytery of New Brunswick, 1758 Plan of Union, 1788/1789 codification of the Adopting Act in the post-revolution church constitution, the 1797 Radical Principles of Church Governance, 1801 Plan of Union, Portland Deliverance of 1892, Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910, report of the Special Commission of 1925, the Confession of 1967 and other important documents. After exploring the developments that contributed to the formation of these foundational texts, the fourth and fifth sections show how the largest group of Presbyterians in the United States reversed exclusionary policies and affirmed their LGBTQIA+ coreligionists as members, leaders, and married couples. Section six offers concluding remarks and points toward pathways for future engagement.

Due to the challenges associated with summarizing centuries of development within the paltry space of a single article, several limits have been placed on the scope of inquiry. First, though social and ecclesial change often starts at the grassroots level, this project charts broad developments in the denomination's institutional stance toward LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Consequently, it relies heavily on the records of the national judicatory (General Assembly-GA) of the PC(USA) and its predecessor denominations to the exclusion of significant reference to other sources in congregational life and the church's derivative organs; Namely, the General Assembly's Permanent Judicial Commission (GA-PJC), which heard important cases related to sexual orientation, gender identity, ordination standards, and the blessing of same-sex unions or marriages. Second, the author has curtailed references to extra-ecclesial stimuli like secular protest movements, U.S. Supreme Court decisions,

and psycho-social debates about sexuality and gender. These conversations took place not only outside but also within the church, and had a formative impact on ecclesiastical deliberations. Nevertheless, the inter-penetrative relationship between church and society is not the subject of this article. Thus, while certain aspects of the debate over LGBTQIA+ inclusion may constitute test cases for Open-Systems Theory (Koch and Curry 2000), this project considers the particular developments within the U.S. Presbyterian tradition in their own right. Finally, though the account presents a broad range of ecclesial documentation, it focuses primarily on the discursive techniques and polity principles employed by individuals and groups that advocated for the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in the PC(USA) and its predecessor denominations. Though the author does not feign objectivity as to the right application of church law when doing so would make the argument unintelligible, efforts have been made to present a multifaceted account of events by including limited references to documentary evidence from non-Affirming sources.

Proper use of labels and terminology is essential to good academic practice and foundational to mutual edification across contexts. Though the author's commentary uses gender-inclusive language, androcentric and heteronormative terms have been left unchanged in historic texts so as not to obscure the worldviews out of which they emerged. Additionally, the project makes use of the acronym 'LGBTQIA+' (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and + to create space for other expressions of sexual/gender diversity) or the term 'queer' as interchangeable catch-all referents for two reasons. First, as of this writing, they are widely used/reclaimed terms by the cohort in the United States. The contested term 'queer' has been employed historically to address LGBTQIA+ people in a derogatory manner. In line with others in the field of queer studies, the author has 'reclaimed' the term here as a resource for epistemic clarity in historical and theological research. No defamatory intent is implied by this terminological choice. Second, while the increasingly popular acronym 'SOGIESC' (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity Expression and Sex Characteristics) appropriately emphasizes that sexuality and gender identity are traits common to all human beings rather than markers of a specific group, the goal here is not to discuss universal characteristics. Instead, the intention is to engage with religious change as it has been generated by and for a subset of the broader human population which has been shaped into a class by sociocultural pressures.

While questions regarding gender identity played a role in intra-ecclesial discussions for many in the LGBTQIA+ community as early as the 1970s, Presbyterian policy debates were primarily focused on sexual orientation and behavior until as late as 2014. The 2006 report of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church provides commentary that is typical of official church statements in previous decades. In a footnote to its official account of various deliberations, the report states, "the task force did not discuss the issues raised by bisexual and transgendered [*sic*] persons, but we did receive a number of communications from groups that include and represent such persons in which the pain of their situation was expressed" (PC(USA) 2006, p. 12).³ Consequently, though trans and gender non-conforming Presbyterians had a profound impact on the church's development, its higher judicatories have only recently given serious consideration to their needs and concerns. Despite this oversight, in the following sections, the author regularly (though not exclusively) uses the terms 'LGBTQIA+' and 'queer' rather than the phrase 'gay and lesbian' to emphasize the presence of bisexual, trans, and gender non-conforming Christians throughout the church's story.

Though Sindt and other advocates for full inclusion took bold stands, they were hardly the first to call questions before a gathering of Presbyterians. LGBTQIA+ inclusion arose as an 'issue' to be debated by the church in the second half of the twentieth century, but queer people did not present their questions in a theological or praxiological vacuum. The struggle over the full inclusion of people who are marginalized due to their sexual orientation and gender identity was deeply rooted in Presbyterian discursive patterns and practices. The church's Form of Government (constitution) mandates that all meetings of its councils "shall be conducted in accordance with the most recent edition of *Robert's Rules of*

Order Newly Revised except when it is in contradiction to this constitution” (PC(USA) 2019, G-3.0105). According to the rules of order, a commissioner may ‘call the question’, or more accurately, ‘move the previous question’ on a matter being discussed by an assembly. The assembly then votes on whether or not to end debate on the motion under consideration. Presbyterians have long taken courageous stands amid gatherings of their coreligionists. Upon doing so, they were often ruled ‘out of order’⁴ for calling a question that had not previously been raised. Yet, they kept calling, and the church usually found a way to answer by widening its understanding of divine embrace.

3. Calling the Question: Patterns of Intra-Ecclesial Discourse in American Presbyterianism

3.1. “Do You Sincerely Receive and Adopt the Essential Tenets of the Reformed Faith?”

While Sindt’s protest at the 1974 General Assembly of the UPCUSA called a relatively new question before his faith community, the spiritual and theological groundswell from which he and others drew ran deep into the church’s institutional memory. His apologetic ministry of presence also had an impact far beyond the official limits of his denomination. Since their arrival in the Americas, Presbyterians have asked bold questions of one another. Depending on how those questions were answered, these passionate people of faith have either blessed the ties that bind the faithful together in unity or castigated opponents who would dare to scandalize decency and order.

The United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (UPCUSA), by which Sindt was ordained, was formed after the 1958 union of the two largest ‘Northern’ churches, then known as the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PCUSA) and the United Presbyterian Church in North America (UPCNA), which was itself a union church of two other Northern Covenant/Suceder traditions (ARPC and APC). In the second half of the twentieth century, the UPCUSA again reunited with the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), which had been created by Southern Presbyterians in 1861 due to intra-ecclesial conflicts over slavery and the U.S. Civil War. When these various strands of the tradition came together at the 1983 Atlanta Assembly, they formed the current denominational communion known today as the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., which is abbreviated here as PC(USA), to prevent confusion between the currently active ecclesial body and the pre-1958 church of the same name, which is abbreviated here as PCUSA.⁵ Despite the institutional complexity of American Protestantism, advocates for inclusion drew upon historical trajectories common to most expressions of the U.S. Presbyterian tradition.

Denominational mechanisms have evolved over the centuries, but Presbyterians have been a force in American history, economics, and political life since before the U.S. revolution. After fleeing English repression of religious non-conformists in Ulster and being tried in the magisterial court of New York for preaching without a license in an Anglican colony, Francis Makemie (1658–1708) formally established the first American Presbyterian congregation in Snow Hill, Maryland, in 1684.⁶ Twenty-two years later, in 1706, Makemie met with seven other ministers and was elected Moderator of the emerging church’s first regional judicatory (presbytery), which eventually became known as the (General) Presbytery of Philadelphia. By then, Presbyterians were arriving in the North American colonies in droves. Though the stated aim of the first presbytery was to strengthen missional engagement, considering Makemie’s experiences in Ulster and New York, it is perhaps unsurprising that a primary mean to that end was the development of common standards for the certification of ministerial candidates. Presbyterian pioneers needed a regional gathering of qualified ministers to legitimize the fledgling church by ensuring fidelity in its ordered ministries. Thus, from its earliest years, the Presbytery of Philadelphia devoted considerable energy to codifying ordination standards and credentialing ministers of word and sacrament (Smylie 1996, p. 29).

By 1716/17, the Presbytery of Philadelphia had spread out across the mid-Atlantic region of America’s British colonies (Balmer and Fitzmier 1994, pp. 23–26). Four presbyteries arose under what soon became the (General) *Synod* of Philadelphia. This organizational

realignment was prompted by concerns over the lack of a unified Form of Church Government, the need to establish a common order of worship, and the desire to foster effective pastoral accompaniment with emerging congregations. In line with broader settlement patterns, geographically bound presbyteries tended to reflect the dominant ethnicities of the Europeans who settled in their regions. The Presbyteries of Philadelphia and New Castle were essentially controlled by Scots-Irish immigrants (Church of Scotland-COS), while an Anglo-Welsh (English Puritan) cohort made up the majority in the Presbytery of New Brunswick (Balmer and Fitzmier 1994, pp. 25–28). The Presbytery of New York included a comparatively broad representation of both groups. In subsequent decades, more presbyteries would emerge within the Synod's bounds.

In the 1720s church leaders debated whether they should follow the 'old world' tradition and adopt/subscribe to the *Westminster Confession & Catechisms of 1647* as what Presbyterians would later define as a 'subordinate standard' to the Bible. Presbyterians had long joined their Reformed siblings of other stripes in affirming that scripture is the supreme measure of Christian orthodoxy. Nevertheless, there was a growing sense that the church needed to formally adopt a confession to clarify its worship and witness amid the vicissitudes of colonial life. In 1721 representatives from the New Castle Presbytery (Scots-Irish) requested that the Synod mandate subscription to the 'Westminster Standards', while representatives of the Presbytery of New Brunswick (Anglo-Welsh) "warned against strict creedal formulas" (Vermaak 2009, p. 24). The mostly Scots-Irish proponents of the Westminster (New Castle), who had begun requiring confessional subscription as early as 1724, asserted that the document was a reliable interpretation of what scripture had to say amid their century's theological and social challenges. The predominately Anglo-Welsh opponents (New Brunswick) may have agreed with the theological system outlined in the confession, but they feared that mandated subscription to a particular confessional, doxological, and governmental formula would lead to a repression of the religious freedoms in search of which they had fled to the colonies. Vowing to protect Christian liberty, the Anglo-Welsh cohort argued that the best "way to prevent error from harming the church was to examine [individual] candidates thoroughly" (Hart and Muether). At a 1727 synod meeting, the Scots-Irish wing again called for 'mandated subscription', but the gathering failed to resolve their differences with the anti-subscriptionists and the church's stance toward the Westminster remained unclear.

Delegates to the 1729 Synod came together in the hope of ending the fledgling church's first major controversy. The normative/ecclesio-legal consequence of their lengthy debate about confessional standards is known as the *Adopting Act of 1729*. Though it has been argued that the *Irish Pacific Act of 1720* constitutes a prototype (see Loetscher 1929, pp. 340–42), the Adopting Act, in its present form, was primarily compiled by Johnathan Dickinson (1688–1747). The Act was a compromise. Though the "subscriptionists had a two-to-one advantage in the Synod, a compromise was reached due to the moderates within both parties" (Vermaak 2009, p. 24). With its action, the synod charted a *via media* between extreme positions and would "set a pattern for American Presbyterians in theological disputes" (Holmen 2013, p. 345). Presbyterians from across the theological spectrum would use the Adopting Act to undergird their arguments on various issues for centuries to come. Smiley summarizes the Act's contents as follows, "in the act, the Synod, [which was then the highest judicatory], disclaimed any attempt to legislate the conscience and declared Christ and the Bible as the source and rule of Christian faith and life. It then described the Westminster Confession and the catechism[s] 'as being in all essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine'" (Smylie 1996, p. 45).

While U.S. Presbyterians would build upon the precedent established by the Adopting Act to develop an innovative doctrine of the freedom of conscience in the centuries to come, the 1729 synod confirmed the 'new' church's continuity with Reformed thought across the Atlantic when it drew inspiration from the Westminster Confession itself. The Westminster's twentieth chapter is dedicated to "Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience."

To guard against both the iconoclastic tendencies of the radical Reformers and legalistic adherence to high liturgical or ecclesio-political traditions, the Westminster divines (i.e., theologians) asserted, “God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or obey such commandments out of conscience [i.e., against conscience], is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also” (BPC 1938a, p. 31). As advocates for LGBTQIA+ inclusion would remind the church at the turn of the twenty-first century amid debates over various ecclesiastical adjudications, the Westminster and the Adopting Act enshrined a complex understanding of the human conscience in the church’s theology of governance. It made clear for future generations that, in subscribing to the Westminster Confession, U.S. Presbyterians agreed to *act* in accordance with the principles of their emerging church’s discipline, but they were also committing to the exercise of a conscience that is free from human control and bound only to God’s word.

Since the church had yet to adopt other confessions when the Act was affirmed, ministers were required to subscribe to ‘all essential and necessary articles’ of the Westminster. However, the Act did not specify which articles were considered ‘essential and necessary’. The 1729 Synod thus created a discursive space in which Presbyterians could be trusted to hold one another accountable to the theological system they collectively affirmed. At the same time, the refusal either to codify specific essential articles of belief, or to mandate ‘blind’ and absolute obedience to the very letter of a document that had been drafted amid religious turmoil on the other side of an ocean almost a century earlier, *implied* that there were, indeed, some articles of the Westminster that could be called “non-essential parts of the confession” (Vermaak 2009, p. 25). The Act thus created space for flexibility, pragmatism, and trust in the church’s collective discernment when leaders met to examine candidates for ordination or adjudicate intra-ecclesial disputes.

Despite the Act’s ambiguity, it confirmed for future generations of Presbyterians that “some beliefs and practices were indispensable, but that; differences always have existed and have been allowed” (in Vermaak 2009, p. 26). From 1729 onward, a *general* commitment to limited diversity of belief within the confines of the Reformed theological tradition was accompanied by a *particular* allowance. The Act permitted individual candidates for ordination to declare ‘scruples’ with elements of the confession that they believed God (through their conscience) forbade them to accept. The Act states, “as such a minister or candidate for the ministry shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the presbytery or Synod, who shall notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds and to ministerial communion if the Synod or presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship or government” (PCA 1729, p. 8). Inspired by the Act, which remains in effect in the PC(USA) since the reunion between the main Northern and Southern branches of U.S. Presbyterianism in 1983, candidates for ministry have been asked the following question during their ordination services; “Do you sincerely receive and adopt *the essential tenets of the Reformed faith* as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?” (Emphasis added, PC(USA) 2019, W-4.0404c).

The Adopting Act’s endorsement of a candidate’s right to ‘scruple’ on non-essential articles of faith enshrined what has become a defining feature of U.S. Presbyterianism. The concept of ‘scrupling’, and the broader commitment to religious liberty to which it bears witness, draws on two parallel traditions that the church has tried to hold in tension throughout its history. Both traditions seek to balance order and ardor, dogma and devotion, biblical authority, and openness to the Spirit’s movement in the world. The first of the two principles is *confessional affirmation*. The Adopting Act did not spell out what the church

considered ‘essential and necessary’ articles of belief, but it made clear for successive generations that U.S. Presbyterians are ‘confessional Christians’ and that their church is a “confessional church” (Loetscher 1929, p. 346). Though Jesus Christ, as revealed in the New and Old Testaments, is its only ultimate authority in matters of life and faith, the church believes its confessions are reliable witnesses to the word of God in various times and places. In the years that followed the Synod meeting of 1729, mainline U.S. Presbyterians came to affirm other historic creeds and confessions alongside the Westminster. Today the PC(USA)’s twelve confessions make up the *Book of Confessions*, the first volume of its constitution.⁷ Volume II is called the *Book of Order*, which contains the rules of order, worship, and discipline. Elements of both volumes will be discussed in detail below.

The second tradition codified by the Adopting Act is that of *freedom of conscience* or, more accurately, *the binding of the conscience to the word of God*. The use of the Adopting Act as a polity mechanism by subsequent generations of Presbyterians has led some scholars to conclude that the tradition that flows out of the Act contributes to the development of *atheological* problem-solving in intra-ecclesial disputes that has hindered productive reflection on the church’s mission (Vermaak 2009). This conclusion is based on contemporary debates over the Adopting Act tradition within modern Presbyterian governmental structures, but it obscures the theological convictions that made a pragmatic compromise like the Act possible in the first place.

The Adopting Act tradition has played a significant role in shaping religious debates around ‘freedom of conscience’, not only in the United States but throughout the entire world via Presbyterian’s formative participation in the ecumenical movement and geopolitical advocacy for human rights and free expression. Indeed, church leaders have frequently drawn upon the Act amid discussions of interreligious cooperation and intra-denominational pluralism. Nevertheless, since 1729, the tradition has rested solidly upon a Reformed theological foundation. When Presbyterians affirm ‘freedom of conscience’, they mean that their conscience is bound (i.e., unfree/dependent) upon the word of God. It is because Presbyterians are *unfree* to contradict their conscience, which is dependent upon God’s word for guidance, that they believe no human being or institution can claim to regulate their faith, or the convictions of others. The enduring relevance of the Act derives from the staunchly Reformed *theological* affirmation of an asymmetrical relationship between a sovereign God, whose will is absolutely free, and human beings who are bound by sin, and can only be freed through divine grace. It is because of humanity’s inability to judge rightly or understand completely unless guided by grace that Presbyterians believe all people must be protected from asymmetrical control over their beliefs by another person or institution. If consciences that are bound to God’s word are not protected from human interference or imposition, artificial barriers may be established between believers that scandalize the church’s peace, unity, and purity.

Like most compromises, the Adopting Act left many intra-ecclesial tensions unresolved. The Act’s relevance to matters of doctrine, polity, and practice in the church would need to be clarified repeatedly in the centuries that followed its ratification. The creative tension affirmed by the church’s dual commitment to its confessional identity and what is commonly called ‘freedom of conscience’ would characterize intra-Presbyterian scruples for centuries to come. Indeed, “the ethnic character of the two [early Presbyterian] groups, [Scots-Irish and Anglo-Welsh], might have disappeared, but . . . their different tendencies remained” (Vermaak 2009, p. 22). In the following sections, it will be shown that when LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies called their questions at church gatherings or declared their ‘scruples’ with exclusionary policies, they located themselves within the tradition of the Adopting Act. Like their forebears, they affirmed that diversity of belief on non-essentials did not necessarily threaten the church’s mission. Yet, when they decided to stand within the church’s polity, they did more than identify their arguments with a seemingly obscure synodal promulgation from 1729; LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and allies laid claim to their inheritance as members of a tradition that has long taken for granted the cantankerous nature of Christian communion.

3.2. Which Side Are You On?

The Adopting Act of 1729 made it possible for colonial-era American Presbyterians to move beyond theological differences and coalesce around a shared sense of mission, but its scope of application has remained hotly contested throughout the church's history. Amid what is commonly called the First Great Awakening (1730s to late 1740s), a pan-protestant divide emerged between advocates for revival and traditionalists who spurned 'enthusiastic' spirituality. Advocates for the awakening remembered that, in his farewell address to the Dutch pilgrims aboard the *Speedwell* in July 1620, the Congregationalist pastor John Robinson (1576–1625) had proclaimed, "for I am very confident the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of his Holy Word" ([Ashton 1851](#)). In line with Robinson's use of the biblical 'light' theme and with an eye toward the intra-Presbyterian conflicts discussed below, the Reformed theologian and pastor Johnathan Edwards (1703–1758) penned *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* in 1737 ([Edwards 1972](#), pp. 144–211). In the text, Edwards described individual experiences of divine grace as the shedding of 'new light' on sin that revealed the way to forgiveness and revival. Drawing on these and other allusions, revivalists were labeled as 'New Lights', while traditionalists were called 'Old Lights'.

Among Presbyterians, the Old/New Light debate employed a modified vocabulary and centered largely around the judicial functions of ecclesial bodies that had been roughly enumerated in the Adopting Act. In Presbyterian circles of the eighteenth century, New Lights were called 'New Siders', and Old Lights were described as 'Old Siders'. New Siders emphasized the authority of presbyteries to decide over questions related to the scope of the Adopting Act, especially as it pertained to the ordination of ministers and the maintenance of sound doctrine. In contrast, Old Siders lauded the superior jurisdiction of the Synod over questions of ordination, worship, and theology. Both 'sides' functioned as polar opposites between confessional legalism and openness to the Spirit's witness, in relation to which moderate Presbyterians have often located themselves.

One year after the Adopting Act was passed, at the 1730 meeting of the Synod of Philadelphia, a dispute emerged as to whether its provisions were "sufficiently obligatory upon intrants" (in [Baird 1856](#), p. 6). The text of the Act had been compiled during a morning session of the 1729 meeting, but the actual adoption of the Westminster Confession took place later in the day. During the afternoon session, nineteen delegates declared scruples with some aspects of the confession. Among the 'scruplers' were Jonathan Dickinson (who composed the Adopting Act), William (1673–1746), and Gilbert (1703–1764) Tennent. However, by the end of the discussion, eighteen of the nineteen disputants had assented to what the Synod deemed 'essential and necessary articles of faith' and had made exceptions regarding only two 'chapters' of the confession.⁸

Two of the scruples declared amid the discussion pertained to the twentieth and twenty-third chapters of the Westminster. Chapter twenty of the version of the confession to which the Synod had access addressed those who "may be proceeded against by the censures of the Church, and by the power of the civil magistrate" ([Baird 1856](#), p. 5). In its unedited form, the twenty-third chapter of the Westminster stated, "the civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the word and sacraments, or the power of the keys" ([Baird 1856](#), p. 5). Yet, in words that might have caused Makemie anxiety a generation earlier, the confession asserted that the magistrate "hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church . . ." ([Baird 1856](#), p. 5). While it did not repeal the Adopting Act in principle, the 1730 Synod leaned heavily toward the confessional 'subscription' (Old Side) end of the ecclesio-political spectrum. It obliged members "to receive and adopt the Confession and Catechisms at their admission, in the same manner, and as fully as the members of the Synod did, that were then present" ([Baird 1856](#), p. 5).

In 1734, following persistent discord regarding ordination standards and confessional subscription, the Synod declared that it would "make a particular inquiry during time of their meeting every year, whether such Ministers as have been received as members since

the foregoing meeting of the Synod, have adopted or have been required by the respective Presbyteries, to adopt the Westminster Confession . . . ” (Minutes 1730, p. 98 in [Baird 1856](#), p. 6). Thus, the Synod claimed a *general* authority to overrule the presbytery’s decision to grant a preaching license based upon its own review of ordinands. The higher judicatory also maintained the right to overrule the granting of a license to a minister who did not meet their standards.

In light of ongoing strife over unconstrained revivalist preaching, at its 1737 meeting, the Synod of Philadelphia, which was then primarily controlled by Old Siders, passed several measures that sought to constrain diversity within the church’s bounds. The Synod’s various measures can be collectively referred to as the *Itinerancy & Education Acts of 1737*. The 1737 acts limited itinerant preaching, a common practice among New Siders and other revivalists. Old Siders, still dominated by the Scots-Irish cohort, often aligned with the liturgical theology of the Church of Scotland and were deeply concerned by the ‘disorderly’ nature of revivalist worship. Like conservative Presbyterians in subsequent generations, Old Siders recognized that the preservation of their influence depended not only on policing standards during the examinations of ministerial candidates. The church also needed to carefully monitor the *installation* of ministers in particular preaching posts. Old Siders believed spiritual enthusiasms were an affront to the sacred humility, decency, and order expected of Christians when approaching the divine. Thus, they admonished congregations to conform their worship to the principles laid down in the *Directory for Public Worship*, which had been produced as a liturgical complement to the Westminster Confession in 1644.⁹ The Synod also required ministerial candidates to possess a formally recognized academic diploma from an American college (e.g., New College/Harvard, or Yale) or a European university, or to be otherwise ‘certified ready’ to receive a call through an examination by the Synod.

In 1738 and 1739, the Synod, which was already on a hair trigger, exploded in outrage when it received word that the Presbytery of New Brunswick had licensed a candidate named John Rowland to preach, though he neither possessed a diploma nor had he been formally examined by the Synod. Instead, Rowland was educated by New Sider William Tennent (1673–1746), father of Gilbert and William Jr., at the ‘Log College’ in Pennsylvania. Tennent had founded the college in 1727, but it was not a formally recognized academic institution. Thus, it could only offer ‘private education’ and could not grant the diploma required by the Itinerancy & Education Acts of 1737 for ordination. Indeed, it was largely due to the establishment and growth of the Log College that Old Siders sought to exclude ministers who did not possess a degree from a formally recognized institution.

In line with its acts of 1737, the Synod judged “the proceedings of the said Presbytery of New Brunswick to be very disorderly, and do admonish the said presbytery to avoid such divisive courses for the future; and do determine not to admit the said Mr. Rowland to be a preacher of the gospel within our bounds, nor encourage any of our people to accept him until he submit to such examinations as were appointed by this Synod for those that have had a private education” ([Ingram 1912](#), p. 329). To the shock of New Siders, the Synod further decreed, “no Person should be allowed to sit and vote in the Synod who acts or persists in any *Practice* contrary to any Rules contained in the Directory, or Orders made by the Synod, until he professes of his Sorrow for such sinful Disorder, to the Satisfaction of the Synod, or such inferior Judicatory, as the Synod shall appoint for that Purpose” (Emphasis added, [Tennent 1741](#), p. 14). In this statement, the Old Side dominated Synod conformed to a pattern that would emerge in intra-ecclesial disputes whenever a reigning majority felt threatened; it emphasized the distinction between freedom of conscience and freedom of *action*. The Old Side declared that whatever the Presbyterians in New Brunswick believed about revival, so long as they were in communion with the Synod, they could not contradict the judgements of the higher judicatory.

In response to the Synod’s decision to revoke Rowland’s preaching license, the embattled presbytery issued the document known as *An Apology of the Presbytery of New Brunswick* in 1739, which Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764) preserved in his *Remarks upon a*

Protestation Presented to the Synod of Philadelphia (Tennent 1741, pp. 12–31). The ‘apology’ of the Presbytery foreshadowed the apologetic acts carried out by believers like Sindt in future generations. The text lamented disunion in the “infant church” (Tennent 1741, p. 11). It also recognized the Synod’s duty to adopt and maintain allegiance to a confession of faith. However, the New Brunswick Presbyterians considered the larger body’s refusal to seat individuals who did not conform to the Old Side interpretation of the confession or the letter of the Directory for Worship “unreasonably severe” (Tennent 1741, p. 14). The New Brunswick cohort evoked the language of the Adopting Act when they rejected the notion that the Synod, through majority vote, could be “vested with a Power authoritatively to make new Laws or acts, from time to time, binding the smaller Number to obey them, who conscientiously scruple and oppose them” (Tennent 1741, p. 17). The New Brunswick cohort believed that, if left unchecked, the Synod’s quest for power would “open a door for continual Oppressions, Schisms, and Convulsions in the Christian Church” (Tennent 1741, p. 17). According to Tennent and his colleagues, the synod’s action also allowed “no Mercy for scrupulous Consciences and renders synodal communion as precarious as the variable Humours and Fancies of Men” (Tennent 1741, p. 14).

At the 1741 Synod meeting, the Old Side issued their own ‘protestation’, which called for the expulsion of the Presbytery of New Brunswick. In the document, they furiously asserted that the “revivalists had forfeited their membership in the Synod by declaring their powers over ordination” (in Vermaak 2009, p. 28). The Old Side then vented its outrage at the New Side preacher Alexander Craighead (1705–1766) for his refusal to appear before the Presbytery of Donegal and answer charges leveled against him by the influential Old Siders, Francis Alison (1705–1779). Alison charged that Craighead had preached from his pulpit without permission and thus violated the Itinerancy & Education Acts of 1737. After a lengthy debate, it was clear that New Siders were not going to allow the trial to proceed. Unfortunately for both sides, many of the moderates in their respective ranks had anticipated schism and failed to attend the meeting.

Amid the cacophony, the New Side supporters of the Presbytery of New Brunswick called the proverbial question before the gathering and decided to break ties with their interlocutors. They then withdrew and, after sub-dividing into the Presbyteries of New Brunswick and New Castle, were called the Conjunct Presbyteries. Meanwhile, the Old Siders solidified their hold on the Synod of Philadelphia. Most members of the Presbytery of New York leaned toward the New Side, but they feared schism and attempted to moderate between the partisans in their midst. Nevertheless, in 1745, New Siders from the Presbyteries of New Brunswick, New Castle, and New York formed the Synod of New York and opposed their Old Side counterparts who remained in the Synod of Philadelphia.

Arguments at the synodal level quickly spread to Presbyterian congregations and communities across colonial North America. Gilbert Tennent continued to fan the fires of discord when he lambasted Old Siders for focusing on formal education, decency, and order while ignoring concerns about the spiritual lives of ministers in his 1742 sermon, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*. John Hancock, Jr. (1702–1744), father of John Hancock III (1736–1793), who enthusiastically signed the U.S. Declaration of Independence, responded to Tennent with the equally provocative sermon, *The Danger of an Unqualified Ministry* (Hancock 1743). The subsequent publication and distribution of Hancock’s response to Tennent exemplifies the reactionary pamphleteering that would be employed by Presbyterian leaders in future church debates.

Despite the vehemence with which Old Siders argued their case, within a decade, it had become clear that the New Side, and revivalism in general, had won the hearts of many American Christians. After seven years of productive dialogue, the seventeen-year schism ended, and the 1758 *Plan of Union* was enacted. That year, the Synods of Philadelphia and New York formally reunited. At the reunion assembly, Francis Alison, who remained committed to his Old Side views, but lamented the schism, preached the opening sermon. His message to the gathered community reflected on Ephesians 4:4–7, which recognizes that Christians are of one body, one spirit, and rely on a shared hope. During the years

of schism, New Side graduates of the Log College had supported the foundation of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) in 1746, and thus could offer a formal education in accordance with their values. Perhaps that is why, in accordance with the acts of 1737, representatives of both sides to the 1758 reunion meeting recognized the importance of formal education for the church's ministers and passed resolutions to limit intrusions upon the pulpits of pastors by unlicensed itinerates. Old Siders also exhibited a willingness to compromise, and the newly reunited synods "ratified the Awakening as the work of the Holy Spirit" (in [Vermaak 2009](#), p. 28).

Lest one assume that all was quiet at church gatherings following the 1758 reunion, disagreement over the proper application of the principles enshrined in the Adopting Act persisted between hard-liners on both sides. Intra-ecclesial discord was finally quieted upon the outbreak of the U.S. Revolutionary War. Following the cessation of hostilities, Presbyterian leaders, like their counterparts in the civil government, worked to shape a new constitution (Form of Government and Discipline) for their church. Their work was completed in 1788, and in 1789, the same year that the U.S. federal government began operating under its present constitution, commissioners gathered for the first meeting of the General Assembly (GA) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PC(USA)).

In the lead-up to the first General Assembly, the united Synods of Philadelphia and New York had been dissolved, and the church's structure was clarified as deriving power 'from the ground up.' Enshrining the wisdom gained from decades of intra-ecclesial debate, the new constitution firmly placed the authority over the examination of ordinands and installation of ministers under the mandate of presbyteries. It also created four new synods that would serve as regional judicatories or 'mid-councils' to which presbyteries could appeal. The newly formed GA would then function as the supreme judicatory. The aim of this institutional restructuring was to formalize the mechanisms by which presbyteries could settle disputes and carry out their responsibilities for mission and ministry in the United States. Thus, unlike Presbyterians in Scotland, the newly formed American church viewed "synods and General Assemblies merely as agencies for unifying the life of the church" ([Vermaak 2009](#), p. 30).

Since colonial Presbyterian leaders began their work together by organizing themselves into presbyteries, those bodies provided the wellspring for judicial authority in the church. Perhaps counterintuitively, the authority of higher judicatories like synods and the General Assembly derives from presbyteries in much the same way the U.S. federal government derives its powers from states. Debates over the church's national life would thenceforth be adjudicated by the GA, which consisted of 'commissioners' from each presbytery. The church's constitution, and subsequent amendments to it, would be 'passed' at assemblies and 'sent' to presbyteries for ratification through a process that would be clarified in subsequent decades. The assembly could act only upon the authorities enumerated to it in the constitution or, as would be clarified amid twentieth-century intra-ecclesial debates, in response to a request from presbyteries to 'clarify ambiguity' in the church's constitution by offering formal guidance (eventually known as an Authoritative Interpretation of the Constitution 'AI').

During the founding meeting of the GA in 1789, U.S. Presbyterians, passed an amended version of the Westminster Confession which altered its references to the civil magistrate. Their goal was to bring the confession into alignment with the "American theory of separation between church and state" ([Vermaak 2009](#), p. 30). In so doing, the church also codified and clarified the scope of the Adopting Act for a new generation of Presbyterians and anticipated further disputes and divisions around the relationship between ordination standards and freedom of conscience. The words of the 1788/1789 Form of Government/constitution echo down the centuries and have shaped Presbyterian responses to countless developments, including slavery and racism, gender equality, religious pluralism, and, most importantly for this project, LGBTQIA+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage. In a declaration that would become part of their new church's constitution,

U.S. Presbyterians jointly quoted Chapter XX, Article II of the Westminster Confession, and enumerated the political theological consequences of the Adopting Act tradition. They stated, “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship” (PC(USA) 2019, F-3.0101a). The nation’s new Presbyterian church went on to assert, “therefore, we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable: We do not even wish to see any religious constitution aided by the civil power, further than may be necessary for protection and security, and at the same time, be equal and common to all others” (PC(USA) 2019, F-3.0101b).

In 1791, the majority of states ratified the ‘Bill of Rights’, which included the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Six years later, in 1797, after a series of debates, U.S. Presbyterians also clarified their church’s Form of Government (constitution). That year, the church affirmed the *Radical Principles of Church Government*. By describing the principles as ‘Radical’, post-revolution Presbyterians meant that these were their church’s ‘basic’ or ‘fundamental’ structural mechanisms. The principles established an appeals process by which scruples could be settled progressively ‘from the ground up’ all the way from sessions¹⁰ to the General Assembly. The principles also made clear that to ensure the protection of free consciences, the church had been and would continue to be governed by majority rule rather than consensus or some other decision-making process. Implicit in the Radical Principles is a belief that the “collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church” (PC(USA) 2019, p. 13) is best discerned when individuals are empowered to believe and vote freely and in accordance with their own consciences (not on behalf of a set of partisan concerns, lobbying from constituents, or another governing body).¹¹

Thus, since the early days of independence, mainline Presbyterians have advocated for religious freedom in U.S. society and mutual forbearance among coreligionists who disagree on non-essentials. Conservative advocates of religious liberty have often used these polity principles to justify the marginalization of LGBTQIA+ people in the church and society. However, those who called for greater inclusivity consistently drew upon the same principles in their arguments for the acceptance of sexual and gender diversity within their faith community. The engagement of LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians with their church’s historic polity principles will be addressed in detail below. At this stage, it is sufficient to note that the 1788/89 constitution, the Radical Principles of 1797, and the other ecclesio-legal promulgations referenced in this section testify to the reception of the Adopting Act tradition within the faith community. By affirming these principles, Presbyterians expanded the scope of the Adopting Act tradition beyond the confines of intra-ecclesial debates over historic confessional standards into a political-theological framework for ministry in a rapidly changing context.

3.3. “Shall Woman Preach?” and with Whom Shall We Minister?

Like other American faith traditions, Presbyterianism experienced significant religio-cultural changes in the nineteenth century. New revival movements, expansion into the Western frontier, ecclesial division prompted by slavery and the U.S. Civil War, and the rise of industrialization had a profound impact on the church’s development. As the new country’s institutions came of age and faced emergent conflicts, Presbyterians continued to develop unique polity mechanisms and a theological worldview that would eventually create space for serious conversations about LGBTQIA+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage.

The movement commonly called the Second Great Awakening (1790s to 1840s) impacted Presbyterians in ways that are distinct from their counterparts in other protestant denominations. Major church debates remained focused on the application of now historic polity principles and the credentialing of ministers. Disputes over revival, Arminianism, and ordination led to the expulsion of the Cumberland Presbytery in 1802, which eventually prompted the formation of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (CPC) in 1810. In 1886,

the Cumberland Presbyterians became the first Reformed denomination to ordain a woman to the ministry of word and sacrament.

Like LGBTQIA+ Christians in subsequent generations, Louisa Mariah Layman Woosley (1862 to 1952), the first woman to be ordained in the CPC, faced significant opposition on her climb into the Presbyterian pulpit. It would take the Cumberland General Assembly two decades to endorse her as a minister after the presbytery initially recognized her call. Like Sindt, her ordination came after she practiced an apologetic ministry of presence by calling a question before the church through her pathbreaking book, “Shall Woman Preach? Or The Question Answered” (Woosley 1891).

In the *Plan of Union of 1801*, Presbyterians and Congregationalists agreed to coordinate their church-planting efforts in the new country’s vast frontier. Building upon the Plan of Union of 1758, which had allowed New and Old Siders to maintain a diversity of views in good conscience, the two denominations promised to share the costs and commitments associated with sending ministers and founding new churches in America’s emerging Western towns. Congregationalist ministers also agreed that they would participate in Presbyterian polity structures when installed in Presbyterian pulpits outside of New England. Many Presbyterians celebrated the emergence of a pan-Reformed commitment to cooperative mission and ministry. Advocates for the 1801 plan recognized improved relationships with Congregationalists as a logical consequence of the Adopting Act tradition, but others feared the agreement was leading the church to compromise the essential tenants of the Reformed faith and governance.¹²

During the period of Western expansion and early pan-Reformed missional engagement, America’s theological academe came into its own. A series of heated scholarly debates led to more scruples and the advent of another old/new division within the church. This time, advocates for the ‘Old School’ argued against proponents of the ‘New School.’ The Old School was championed by the likes of Charles Hodge (1797–1878), Professor of Didactic Theology and Second Principal of Princeton Theological Seminary. Members of the Old School, also known as “Old Calvinists,” advocated for strict adherence to the Westminster Confession, usually rejected interdenominational mission initiatives, and often supported gradualist approaches to the emancipation of enslaved people or the colonization movement. Among New School proponents was the lawyer-turned-preacher Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875), who is commonly called the “Father of Old Revivalism” (Hankins 2004, p. 135). In addition to serving as the second president of Oberlin College and alongside his millenarian conception of revival, Finney was a passionate abolitionist and advocate for equal access to education regardless of race or gender.

The 1801 Plan of Union led to the formation of interpersonal contacts between Presbyterians, who gravitated toward the mid-Atlantic region, and congregationalist ministers who tended to settle farther north. In yet another debate over the ‘installation’ of ministers in pulpits, greater interaction with Congregationalists brought to the fore discussions of ‘New England Theology.’ In contrast to Old Schoolers like Hodge, New Schoolers were accused of espousing versions of the New England Theology, which relied upon earlier insights from Johnathan Edwards’s works.¹³ Edwards had been influenced by enlightenment rationalism, which led him to a nuanced perspective on the doctrines of original sin, total depravity, free will, and the perseverance of the saints. Old Schoolers thought some of his conclusions were beyond the doctrinal scope of the Westminster standards.¹⁴ Moreover, Old Schoolers believed that joint missional engagement and shared ministries with Congregationalists or common communion with the Cumberland Presbyterians would open the door to dangerous compromises on ‘essential and necessary’ articles of faith¹⁵.

In 1834 and 1835, Old Schoolers distributed a document called *The Act and Testimony*. Many self-professed Old Schoolers, including Charles Hodge, found the document problematic. The polemical text decried the formation of new presbyteries under the ‘elective affinity’ provision of the 1801 Plan, the presence of a new wave of revivalists and Arminians within the church, and countless other perceived ills. Like later generations of conservatives who came to mistrust the actions of the General Assembly, the declaration’s signatories

proclaimed, “in the solemn crisis, to which our Church has arrived, we are constrained to appeal to you in relation to the alarming errors which have hitherto been connived at, and now at length have been countenanced and sustained by the acts of the supreme judicatory of our Church” (PCA 1834). The Old Schoolers thus declared, “we do avow our fixed purpose to strive for the restoration of purity, peace, and scriptural order to our Church; and to endeavor to exclude from her communion those who disturb her peace, corrupt her testimony, and subvert her established forms” (PCA 1834).

When the New and Old schools met for a rhetorical battle at the 1836 General Assembly, questions were called, votes were tallied, and the Old School won the day on critical overtures. As a result, many New Schoolers were expelled and subsequently forbidden to participate in the 1837 assembly. The 1836 assembly’s victorious Old School majority also made their decision retroactive and “declared that the four [additional] synods, predominantly New School and formed under the Plan of Union, were illegal” and were thus expelled from the Presbyterian communion (in Vermaak 2009, p. 31). In subsequent years, the New and Old School churches would again split into four churches amid disagreements over the abolition of chattel slavery. Nevertheless, it is sufficient to recognize at this stage that from 1837 until the outbreak of the U.S. Civil war, the schismatic New and Old Schools operated separate churches. Both groups called their denominational body the PCUSA.¹⁶

3.4. “What Do You Do Here?”

Soon after the 1837 assembly, debates over mission, ordination, and theological distinctives would become interwoven with the broader U.S. struggle over the institution of chattel slavery. U.S. Presbyterians had condemned slavery and called their coreligionists to “work toward abolition” at their first General Assembly in 1789 (Smylie 1996, p. 87). Around the time of the New/Old School schism, several black Presbyterians rose to leadership roles in the church and abolitionist organizations. Princeton Theological Seminary’s first black graduate (class of 1828), Theodore Sedgwick Wright (1797–1847), was prominent among them.

Wright’s rhetorical prowess, organizational skills, and theological insight combined with the lived realities of American slavery to call a question before the church. Yet, while some of his fellow Presbyterians listened, many did not have ears to hear either his question or the GA’s admonition from nearly fifty years earlier. Instead, in the decades to come, it was a question posed to Wright that would typify many white Presbyterian responses to black advancement. In 1836, the same year the assembly expelled New School-dominated synods from its midst, Wright returned to his alma mater for a visit. While retiring in the chapel, he was accosted and physically assaulted by a white man. “After using a racist term, the man yelled to Wright, ‘What do you do here? What do you do here? Don’t let me see you here again’” (Bowens 2021).¹⁷

In 1847, Presbyterian abolitionists from both the New and Old Schools vented their outrage over the refusal of their respective denominations to exclude slave ‘owners’ from membership in the church (PHS 2022e). In the absence of clear ecclesio-legal prohibitions on slaveholding, many assembly commissioners believed they could not impose abolitionist beliefs upon those whose consciences permitted them to ‘own’ another human being. Together, abolitionists in both schools bolted their respective communities and formed the Free Presbyterian Church, which would later reunite with the New School branch of the Northern denomination in 1863 amid the U.S. Civil War. While the staunchest abolitionists in both schools and from across regions joined the Free Presbyterians, some New Schoolers threw in their lot with their Congregationalist colleagues, and others decided to sever denominational ties altogether in favor of congregational independence (Parker 1988). In 1858, Southern anti-abolition New Schoolers separated from their national body to form the United Synod of the South, which joined with Southern Old Schoolers in the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (see below) in 1864.

Following the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War in 1861, the Old School branch began a rancorous dispute over what came to be known as the *Gardiner Spring Resolutions of*

1861.¹⁸ The resolutions called Presbyterians to move beyond party sentiment and support the duly elected federal government under the leadership of President Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865). The resolutions were passed by a large majority, made up of representatives from the more populous Northern presbyteries. Decrying, perhaps ironically, what they saw as attempts to legislate their conscience, Southern Old Schoolers bolted and formed the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (PCCSA), which continued its separate existence as the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) following the war until reunion with the Northern church at the 1983 GA in Atlanta.

Though the war ended in 1865, sectional concerns hardly abated within the church or society. It was U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, though he was not formally a member of any Christian denomination, who in his Second Inaugural Address and other statements, lauded Christian siblinghood and called for a mending of the national bonds that had been so violently torn asunder. Presbyterian leaders in both the north and south took much longer to open themselves to a reunion with their coreligionists. As the Presbyterian historian and advocate for unity, Ernest Trice Thomson (1894–1985) lamented in a 1965 speech to the Presbyterian Historical Society, “the Old and New School Assemblies [in the North] did not possess the spirit of the martyred President. Their post-war resolutions widened rather than narrowed the sectional cleavage which the war and previous declarations had steadily deepened” (Thompson 1965, p. 2).

Sectional conflicts would divide the church for more than a century, but the trauma of the Civil War, in which Presbyterians had taken up arms against one another, placed New and Old School divisions in a fresh light. In view of all they had endured together, Northern church members and leaders alike found it difficult to think of their old theological rivals as enemies. A broadened spirit of unity had again seized many Northern Presbyterians by 1870. At that year’s GA, the work toward reunion between the Northern Old/New School branches was largely completed, and the two assemblies formally reunited. At their reunion assembly, Northerners also “expressed the hope that the day would soon come when Presbyterians should be reunited in one great organization that would cover the land” (Thompson 1965, p. 2). The reunited Northern church then went so far as to “express the desire for a speedy reestablishment of cordial, fraternal relations with the Southern Assembly and appointed a committee to confer with a similar committee from that church in respect to opening a friendly correspondence between the two bodies” (Thompson 1965, p. 2). The Southern church reacted to these overtures with vitriol. The PCUS Assembly responded by “drawing up charges against the Northern Assembly,” which Thompson (a Southern Presbyterian), called “fully as severe and just as unpardonable as the charges leveled against it by the two Northern Assemblies at the war’s end” (Thompson 1965, p. 2).

Overtures from presbyteries would repeatedly call the question on reunion in the 117 years of sectional division that followed, but it would take generations for Northern and Southern Presbyterians to find their way back into an organic union. The Southern Assembly’s blunt response to an 1883 overture of the Upper Missouri Presbytery, which called for the appointment of a committee to address questions about reunion, was typical. The ruling stated emphatically, “the question of organic union is not to be entertained as a subject before the church” (in Thompson 1965, p. 4). In another refusal to hear questions about reunion, the 1894 assembly of the Southern church justified its action via a five-point response. The response echoed the scruples noted by some members at the 1729 assembly at which the Adopting Act was affirmed.

Southern Presbyterians expressed concerns over what they saw as the close relationship between the Northern church and the civil government.¹⁹ As a testimony to their ongoing refusal to hear the questions called by black Presbyterians and their allies, the Southern Assembly also asserted, “to enter into organic union with the Northern church involves the surrender of the plan of an independent [i.e., segregated] Negro church which this Assembly regards as essential alike to the religious and social welfare of both races” (in Thompson 1965, p. 5). Additionally, though the Northern assembly was hardly at ease regarding the role of women in the church, Southerners feared the inclusive trajectory

on which debates among their sectional interlocutors were heading. Hence, the highest governing body of the PCUS also made clear how they would have responded to the then emergent Women's movements and to Louisa Woosley's question to the Cumberland Presbyterians if women began to ask it in their midst. The PCUS assembly expressed grave concern over the "essential difference between the two Assemblies [PCUSA and PCUS] as to woman's sphere and work in the church" (in [Thompson 1965](#), p. 5). Debates over racial segregation and gender equality would rage throughout the first half of the twentieth century and would end in yet another major church schism shortly before Sindt made his bold stand on behalf of LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

3.5. "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"

By the late 1890s, a new ecumenical and missiological consciousness had arisen among mainline protestants in the north and, to a lesser extent, in the south as well. At the turn of the twentieth century, organizations like the Federal (now 'National') Council of Churches of Christ in the USA were founded and issued calls for cross-denominational unity. The NCC encouraged Christians at every level of ecclesial life to break down denominational barriers. Ecumenical groups also admonished believers to exhibit deeper concern for the poor who were oppressed under the weight of industrialization ([NCC 1908](#)). Meanwhile, the findings of historical criticism in biblical scholarship contrasted sharply with what conservatives would soon call 'fundamentals of the faith' ([Longfield 1991](#)). As a result of these developments, tensions between social gospel progressives, theological liberals/modernists, advocates for ecumenism, denominational loyalists who were generally moderate on theological issues, and fundamentalists (who opposed all other groups) exploded into the 'fundamentalist controversy', which engulfed the church for decades.

In 1892, Charles Augustus Briggs (1841–1913), Professor of Hebrew and Cognate Languages at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, was tried and convicted of heresy by the PCUSA's 104th General Assembly in Portland, OR. The result of the case is known today as the *Portland Deliverance of 1892*. The eight charges leveled against the noted biblical scholar were based primarily upon reactions to the inaugural lecture he had delivered upon his professorial appointment in 1891. Briggs' lecture affirmed 'higher criticism' of the Bible and endorsed aspects of what others called the 'documentary hypothesis.' Most horrifying for advocates of 'lower criticism', he denied the unitary authorship of the Book of Isaiah and mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch ([Briggs 1891](#)). Prominent among his interlocutors were the so-called 'Princeton Theologians.' Specifically, Briggs had run afoul of Archibald Alexander Hodge (1823 to 1886), son of Charles (see Section 3.3), and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851–1921). Though Briggs was considered a moderate, and while he defended the Bible's supernatural inspiration, his understanding of scripture did not meet the lofty standards of inerrancy advocated by the Princetonians ([Vermaak 2010b](#), p. 2).

Pursuant to the *Portland Deliverance*, in 1893, Briggs was defrocked and excommunicated, which eventually led him to join the Episcopal Church in 1899. Yet, the purity-conscious conservatives (they were not yet called 'fundamentalists') were unsatisfied with drumming one of their most prominent opponents out of the denomination. In addition to charging Briggs on eight counts, the *Portland Deliverance* also "decreed that anyone applying for the ministry must believe that the Bible 'is without error'" ([David 2015](#)). In a move that recalled Old Side/Old School efforts to block the itinerancy of New Siders and the installation of New Schoolers in Presbyterian pulpits in previous generations, the Portland assembly also instructed "ministers who believe otherwise [i.e., who endorse 'higher criticism'] are directed to withdraw from the ministry" ([David 2015](#)). In the final decade of the nineteenth century, it seemed that 'Princeton Theology' had won a major victory within the largest Northern Presbyterian denomination.

At a series of assemblies, including the 104th, which met in Portland in 1892, Briggs and his school had worked to revise the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. The results of their work were eventually approved by the majority of presbyteries in 1903

(Smylie 1996, pp. 98–99). The revisions carved out space for theological diversity and cleared the way for reunion with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in 1906 (Gore 2000).²⁰ Despite what both liberals and theologically moderate denominational ‘loyalists’ may have seen as progress toward the development of a shared mission; storm clouds were gathering.

An exacerbating dispute took place at the 1909 meeting of the Presbytery of New York over whether or not to ordain three men who would neither affirm nor deny the virgin birth of Jesus (Weston 1997, p. 13). Though the majority of presbyteries voted to ordain the men, the minority forwarded a complaint overture to the General Assembly. In disregard of right order, the assembly bypassed the synod, held a trial, and acquitted the ordinands. Yet, at the urging of a group of conservatives (who were by then known as the ‘fundamentalists’),²¹ the assembly instructed the Bills and Overtures Committee to step beyond the limits of the Adopting Act tradition and define which doctrines were ‘necessary and essential’ for future ordinands to affirm (PCUSA 1909). The result of the committee’s deliberations, which was endorsed by the next assembly, is commonly called the *Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910*. The document outlined beliefs known today as ‘the five fundamentals.’ According to the deliverance, candidates for ordained ministry must thenceforth affirm (1) the Bible’s inspiration and inerrancy, (2) Jesus’ virgin birth, (3) substitutionary atonement, (4) the bodily resurrection of Christ, and (5) the historical reality of his miracles.

Amid the conflict that engulfed the church in the following decades, the liberal Baptist preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878–1969) stoked the fires of denominational discord in 1922 when he called a question before the congregation of the First Presbyterian Church in New York. As his booming voice echoed through the sanctuary, he asked, “Shall the Fundamentalists win” (Sherry 1978, pp. 27–38)? After Fosdick’s sermon was published and circulated without his permission, Clarence E. Macartney (1879–1957), the moderate pastor of Philadelphia’s ornate Classical Revival-style Arch Street Presbyterian Church and Moderator of the 1910 Assembly, posed a question of his own. First to his congregants, and then in the form of pamphlets, Macartney asked, “Shall Unbelief Win?” (Macartney 1922, pp. 1–23).

In response to the uproar around Fosdick’s sermon, charges were issued that challenged the right of the Presbytery of New York to install him in the pulpit of the city’s First Presbyterian Church. The charges declared that Fosdick’s preaching directly contradicted the ‘essential and necessary articles of the Reformed faith’, as defined by the *Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910*. In anticipation of debate over the application of ordination standards in the context of a new theological dispute, Presbyterians from across the spectrum of belief once more armed themselves for an intra-ecclesial dogfight. In the controversies that followed, interlocutors on both sides evoked the institutional memory of historical conflicts over the Adopting Act, struggles between the New and Old Sides regarding the Itineracy & Education Acts of 1737, and the blows exchanged by the New and Old Schools over the Plan of Union of 1801.

Between 1910 and 1925, multiple assemblies had voted to sustain the *Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910*. In light of Fosdick’s case(s), moderates and progressives honed their critique of the deliverance and focused their attention not on systematic theological concerns but on questions of polity. In line with their eighteenth century forebears on the New Side, they declared that the GA had violated the church’s constitution when it mandated the arbitrary and universal application of the 1910 deliverance. They asserted that it was unlawful for that body “to proclaim essential doctrine without the concurrence of the presbyteries” (Weston 1997, p. 19).

In anticipation of the 1923 assembly of the Northern church, professors from the Auburn and Union (NYC) Theological Seminaries circulated a working paper that would become known as the *Auburn Affirmation*. Like the Apology of the Presbytery of New Brunswick in the eighteenth century, the document’s final version affirms the Westminster Confession of Faith and the *Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910* while also asserting, “by its law and history, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America safeguards the liberty of thought and teaching of its ministers” (PCA 1923). Additionally, though the

church had emphasized the need for sound doctrine among its clergy, and while the Five Fundamentals were affirmed as valid ‘theories’ as to how scripture is best interpreted, the Presbyterian tradition “manifestly does not require . . . assent to the *very words* [emphasis added] of the Confession, or to all of its teachings, or to interpretations of the Confession by individuals or church courts” (PCA 1923). The document goes on to discuss the 1870 reunion of the church’s Northern New and Old School branches and the 1906 reunion with the Cumberland Presbyterians. Based on those historical precedents, it asserts, “thus did our church once more exemplify its historic policy of accepting theological differences within its bounds and subordinating them to recognized loyalty to Jesus Christ and united work for the kingdom of God” (PCA 1923).

Debates over the Auburn Affirmation and Fosdick’s preaching cast new light on the unflattering silhouette of a faith community that was “burdened by major unresolved questions and comprehending some sharply different groups” (Quirk 1975, p. 122). In their responses to the Auburn Affirmation, fundamentalist faculty members of Princeton Theological Seminary employed the language of past debates and once again split with their moderate colleagues along ‘New School’ and ‘Old School’ lines. In 1929, the new generation of Old Schoolers would leave Princeton, where the faculty had long set the standard for Presbyterian theological education in the U.S., to form the Westminster Theological Seminary. John Grisham Machan (1881–1937), who led the exodus from Princeton, also founded the anti-ecumenical Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions in 1933. He then left the PCUSA to form the Presbyterian Church of America, later known as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, in 1936.²² The vehemence of the controversy led one scholar to assert that “neither unity nor liberty were secure during the major phase of the fundamentalist controversy in the Presbyterian Church” (Quirk 1975, p. 123).

Confounded by what they viewed as fundamentalist obstinance, modernists considered their options and contemplated division. Fearing schism, the 1925 assembly set up a Special Theological Commission of Fifteen, formally known as the *Special Commission of 1925*. In language that subsequent generations of Presbyterians would employ in hopes of holding the church together, the commission’s stated aim was to “study the present spiritual condition of our Church and the causes making for unrest” so that we might be encouraged to seek “her peace and purity and unity along the same path which she has traveled hitherto” (JPH 2001, p. 49).

In subsequent debates, the Special Commission of 1925 was often cited with reference to its chairperson, Henry C. Swearingen (Moderator of the 1921 Assembly). After being granted a continuance for its work in 1926, the ‘Swearingen Commission’s’ 1927 report called the assembly to acknowledge that the proper application of the 1729 Adopting Act tradition, the 1788/1789 constitutional affirmation of freedom of conscience, and the Radical Principles of 1797 should inform contemporary intra-ecclesial debates in two important ways. First, they precluded the GA from circumventing the church’s long-established appeals process, as it had done on various occasions when it bypassed synods and chastised presbyteries for ordaining or installing candidates who did not affirm the five fundamentals. Second, they barred the assembly from issuing universally binding mandates as to what constituted ‘essential and necessary’ articles of faith. The Swearingen Commission recognized that the Adopting Act was “a conciliatory measure designed to bridge a chasm between minds which otherwise could not meet” (JPH 2001, p. 46). Yet, while the Act’s initially humble aims may not have foreshadowed its lofty application in the intervening centuries, it had established the foundation for procedural mechanisms like those enshrined in the Radical Principles of 1797. According to those principles, consciences were to be protected through an appeals process that was outlined ‘from the ground up’ via Presbyteries, through synods, to the GA.

Based upon the Swearingen Commission’s interpretation of the Adopting Act tradition, the General Assembly and its judicial organs only possessed authority “in specific cases, and not a general authority” (Vermaak 2010b, p. 3). As Gilbert Tennent and his New Side allies in the Presbytery of New Brunswick had learned centuries earlier, when acting as a presbytery

(i.e., gathering of formally *sent* presbyters) within the appeals process and regarding a specific case, a higher judicatory could issue ‘deliverances’, which would eventually become known as ‘Authoritative Interpretations (AIs)’ of the church’s constitutional standards. In the PCUSA, the General Assembly maintained the right “from time to time to bear general witness as there may be need,” but future general assemblies could not be bound by the deliverances of their predecessors (JPH 2001, p. 48). Thus, while the Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910 might have included an apt summary of Christian beliefs, the five fundamentals could not be applied as general ordination standards since they had not been ratified as a constitutional amendment by the majority of presbyteries. Furthermore, a General Assembly, when acting as an ecclesiastical court, “can judge a candidate’s doctrinal beliefs in a judicial action and find whether the candidate is competent for office.”²³ However, “the General Assembly cannot decide that certain articles are essential and necessary to the system of doctrine contained in the scriptures” (in Vermaak 2009, p. 44). The process by which the church’s judicial organs would determine whether or not an ‘essential or necessary’ article of faith had been violated in a specific case, could only be initiated *after* an individual candidate had been formally charged or had declared scruples in the context of an examination. Additionally, the assembly could act only after the decision had been adjudicated by presbyteries and synods. Amid deliberations on a charge, previous GA deliverances could inform the church’s thinking on theological matters, but they could not be used as universal and arbitrary mandates to exclude candidates from ordination or installation.

The commission’s report further cautioned those who would leap to define as essential those doctrines they personally cherished when it stated, “a doctrine may be entirely true and yet not be an ‘essential and necessary article’” to the theological system enshrined in the church’s Confession(s). Thus, even if the GA, like the Old Siders believed regarding the synod in the eighteenth century, had been granted the right to “make new laws or acts, from time to time, binding on the smaller number to obey them” (Tennent 1741, p. 17), they should be mindful that “the exercise of this right may lead, as experience has shown, to disturbing results” (JPH 2001, p. 49). The GA’s acceptance of the Swearingen Commission’s report at its 1927 meeting marked “a turning point in PCUSA attitudes toward doctrinal Diversity” (JPH 2001, p. 46). More importantly, from an ecclesio-legal perspective, it outlined divergent doctrines of *stare decisis* regarding theological and (strictly) juridical cases. By asserting that GA deliverances on theological questions have *persuasive effect* but lack *binding authority*, the assembly’s reception of the Swearingen report formally ended the brief reign of the Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910. At the same time, the Swearingen Commission left some questions unanswered about the interpretation of strictly constitutional matters (e.g., extra-constitutional ordination standards or use of church facilities for ceremonies like same-sex weddings). Future assemblies would delegate their power to adjudicate matters of ‘atheological’ constitutional interpretation to the GA’s Permanent Judicial Commission (GA-PJC), whose decisions would have binding effect unless contravened by an assembly-wide and general AI or a constitutional amendment.

In light of the ecclesio-legal complexity of these developments, it is perhaps wise to pause our discussion of them for now and simply note yet another occurrence of a tendency that will again become evident in the analysis of ‘Amendment B’ in Section 4.6: Whenever conservatives have tried to insert biblical literalism or confessional stringency into the church’s polity mechanisms, they have usually won the day. Yet, their fleeting victories often hastened their ultimate defeat in intra-ecclesial debates. Like conservative maneuvers in subsequent disputes, fundamentalist advocacy for the Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910 “took the extraordinary step of attacking and undermining constitutional tradition”. In so doing, “they lost the competition for the hearts and minds of the centrists,” who have been the glue that binds ruling denominational coalitions together throughout the history of U.S. Presbyterianism (Weston 1997, p. 3).

3.6. “Unite with the Northern Presbyterian Church?” and Who Makes the Rules?

Despite the essential victory of Auburn proponents within the mainline Northern churches, in the mid-1940s, young Presbyterians from across the country returned from World War II with a hunger for a theological depth that seemed to be lacking in both fundamentalist and modernist expressions of faith. Global ecumenical conversations were also kicked into overdrive in the years following the official founding of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 and amid the lead-up to the Roman Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). As a result of these and other developments, many American Presbyterians again reevaluated their beliefs along the lines drawn by Neo-Orthodox theologians like Karl Barth (1886–1968). Indeed, following the reunion of the PCUSA and the UPCNA, the UPCUSA General Assembly approved the addition of two sections of the 1934 *Theological Declaration of Barmen*, which was written mainly by Barth, to the Book of Confessions in 1967.²⁴ Karl Barth’s son, Markus (1915–1994), and Karl’s student, Edward Dowey (1918–2003), both served on the drafting committee for the Confession of 1967, which was approved alongside the Barmen Declaration that same year (Gil 2009, p. 83).

In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the Confession of 1967 (commonly abbreviated as ‘C67’) codified the church’s prophetic witness against racism and social inequality. At the same time, it moved beyond the ‘secular’ language of ‘social justice’ and posited “a Christological interpretation of Scripture [as] the basis of a commitment to racial reconciliation” (Rogers 2006, p. 46). In a provocative move, the confession also named racism, gender inequality, domestic violence, and other forms of social injustice as consequences of human sin (PC(USA) 2016, 9.47). “In Sin,” the Confession declared, “men claim mastery of their own lives, turn against God and their fellow men, and become exploiters and despoilers of the world. They lose their humanity in futile striving and are left in rebellion, despair, and isolation” (PC(USA) 2016, 9.12).

The authors of C67 were aware that the years of the fundamentalist/modernist controversy had been accompanied by the church’s reevaluation of its ethical outlook, which led Presbyterians to reassess their historical stance on issues that were considered important, but not essential elements of belief. Presbyterians of the post-war age sought to understand the witness of scripture in light of the “rule of love” (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 13). Specifically, they argued that Jesus’ teaching mandates ‘a pastoral approach’ to controversial issues like heterosexual divorce and remarriage (Rogers 2006, p. 44).

Presbyterians had been debating their understanding of the bonds of marriage since well before the twentieth century, let alone the advent of the LGBTQIA+ inclusion movement. The 1647 version of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms included detailed regulations of Christian marriage. Chapter XXIII of the Westminster, which had been hotly contested during debates over the Adopting Act, dealt with the civil magistrate’s authority. Meanwhile, chapter XXIV comments on marriage and divorce. In that section, the Westminster Divines began with a phrase that was directed against polygamy but would later be used by anti-LGBTQIA+ groups to oppose the blessing of same-sex civil unions and (eventually) marriage. The Westminster Assembly wrote, “*marriage is to be between one man and one woman: neither is it lawful for any man to have more than one wife nor for any woman to have more than one husband; at the same time*” (emphasis added, BPC 1938a, XXIV-I). Articles V and VI condemn divorce in cases other than adultery or willful desertion “as can no way be remedied by the Church or civil magistrate” (BPC 1938a, Vm & Vin). Article V also condemned remarriage unless “the offending [adulterous] party were dead” (BPC 1938a, Vn).²⁵

Throughout the nineteenth century, various cases and overtures were brought before the general assemblies of the major U.S. branches of Presbyterianism. The most prominent of these cases centered around whether domestic violence was a justifiable reason for divorce (Staniunas 2014). Noting that Jesus permitted divorce only on the basis of adultery (Matthew 5:31–32) and with veiled references to the problems associated with maintaining family cohesion on America’s expanding frontiers, some Presbyterians even declared their

scruples over the Westminster assembly's perceived *laxity* when it allowed for 'willful desertion' as a basis for divorce (Staniunas 2014).

The PCUSA heard reports from its Special Committee on Marriage and Divorce between 1927 and 1931. After a brief hiatus amid the Second World War, in 1947, the committee took up its responsibilities again (Staniunas 2014). Building upon the newly reconstituted group's work, the PCUSA's 164th General Assembly in 1952 resolved official debates over divorce and remarriage for the largest Northern Church. Following the reunion between the two Northern branches (PCUSA and UPCNA) in 1958, the newly formed UPCUSA "amended the Westminster Confession of Faith 6.131-32 and 6.133-139 [modern numbering] to allow for divorce and remarriage on grounds other than infidelity—namely, when 'marriage dies in the heart, and the union becomes intolerable' (BOC 6.137)" (Vermaak 2010b, p. 1). Southern Presbyterians in the PCUS followed suit at their 1959 assembly with a resolution to the same effect.

After decades of consideration, new hermeneutical insights and ongoing pastoral reflection had created space for the church to widen its understanding of the grounds for divorce, which has implications for the church's LGBTQAI+ inclusion movement. Regarding an issue that also manifested the church's concerns about human sexual expression, Presbyterian denominations had "turned away from what they considered a legalistic approach to marriage and divorce based on a literal interpretation of biblical and confessional texts" (Rogers 2006, p. 41). The church's decisions had a profound impact on the lives of many Presbyterians, especially ministers for whom divorce may have previously blocked them from being installed in a pastoral call and thus entailed the possible sacrifice of gainful employment.

In its ninth chapter, the Confession of 1967 affirmed a theological foundation for the church's revised marriage policies. The document lamented the social ills and interpersonal differences that might lead to divorce, but it affirmed the all-encompassing nature of Christ's reconciling work within marital relations. After reflecting on the challenges facing modern society, C67 articulated the church's vision for marriage and family life, "a man and woman are enabled to marry, to commit themselves to a mutually shared life, and to respond to each other in sensitive and lifelong concern; parents receive the grace to care for children in love and to nurture their individuality" (PC(USA) 2016, 9.47).

In addition to reevaluating their stance on divorce, by the mid-1960s, the two major branches of Presbyterianism had finally answered Louisa Woosley's question to the Cumberland Presbyterians and ordained women as both teaching and ruling elders/ministers. Margaret Towner (b. 1925) was ordained as a minister in 1956 by the PCUSA. The Southern church ordained Rachel Henderlite (1905–1991) as its first female minister in 1965. These actions both substantiated and grew out of the church's evolving consensus on the efficacy of Christ's reconciling work in all areas of life, including relationships between gendered groups.

Though their church was moving in a similar direction, many Southern conservatives in the PCUS looked with ire upon what they viewed as C67's codification of the Northern church's lax sexual ethics and overly permissive policies on women's ordination. They also lamented the larger reunited Northern church's influence on their denomination. More than anything else, however, they were positively outraged by calls for the church to participate actively in the Civil Rights Movement. A pamphlet by L. Nelson Bell (1894–1973), medical doctor, missionary to China, patron of Montreat College, and one-time moderator of the PCUS assembly, exemplifies how many Southerners (including 'moderates') viewed the church's reckoning with race. He responded to conversations about racial reconciliation in the church in an article titled, with emphasis included, "Christian Race Relations Must be Natural, NOT FORCED" (Bell 1955). Upset by attempts to reunite with the more racially progressive Northern Presbyterians, the Southern lawyer and ruling elder, Chalmers W. Alexander (d. 1996), also composed an article titled, "Unite with the Northern Presbyterian Church? No!" (Alexander 1947).

At the 1973 PCUS assembly in Alabama, conservative Southerners formally broke with their fellow churchgoers and formed the National Presbyterian Church. The newly established denomination was quickly renamed as the Presbyterian Church *in* America (PCA), which should not be confused with the Presbyterian Church *of* America (see Section 3.5 above). Reflecting on the formation of the PCA, a pastor who remained within the PCUS after the split suggested that from the point of division onward, “the battle lines had been pretty well drawn. It was ‘good’ against ‘evil’, ‘conservative’ against ‘liberal.’ There was no middle ground” (Broyles 2008, p. 6). The mainline Presbyterian tradition was and remains theologically diverse. However, in the eyes of conservative Southerners, the Northern Presbyterians with whom the PCUS was trying to reunite “epitomized . . . many alleged bugaboos, [including] lax doctrine, racially liberal policies, women in ordained leadership, amorphous confessional standards, sexual freedoms, and conversations with other church bodies that did not adhere to the Reformed faith . . . ” (Broyles 2008, p. 7).

Amid the uproar in the Southern church, the UPCUSA assembly also made a subtle and seemingly minor alteration to its judicial processes, which was foreshadowed in the discussion of the Swearingen Commission’s report above. Concerned by the growing caseload of the General Assembly’s Permanent Judicial Commission (GA-PJC), the 1973 assembly voted to make GA-PJC decisions non-reviewable by the broader General Assembly. Thus, since the GA-PJC “does not utilize any theological discussion, but only deals with each issue based on the *current* polity of the church,” it was not necessary for particular cases to be adjudicated at national gatherings (emphasis added, Vermaak 2009, p. 6). Additionally, because commissioners to annual assemblies may or may not have been well-versed in the church’s polity, discussions over specific GA-PJC cases tended to develop into embattled free-for-alls that unsettled Christian communion and wasted precious time at annual gatherings.

Furthermore, since the UPCUSA had been formed by the reunion of the PCUSA and the UPCNA in 1958, the tension had been heightened between the power of presbyteries and that of the General Assembly and its derivative organs. The UPCNA, had been formed in 1858, when the predominantly Scottish-American members of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC-Covenanter and Sceder)²⁶ and the Associate Presbyterian Church (APC-Sceder) held their first united assembly in Pittsburgh. Inspired by the model employed in the Church of Scotland, the UPCNA’s General Assembly was “pre-eminent and was called the great presbytery in which the entire church is represented” (in Vermaak 2009, p. 23). In contrast, following the tradition of the Radical Principles of 1797 and the Swearingen Commission report, the PCUSA had increasingly emphasized “the rights and powers of presbyteries,” especially on matters pertaining to ordination (Vermaak 2009, p. 23).

The result of the UPCUSA’s 1973 attempt to clarify and streamline its judicial processes was that the GA-PJC, as a derivative organ of the General Assembly, received the assembly’s power to issue ‘Authoritative Interpretations (AIs)’ of the constitution, particularly regarding ecclesio-legal mechanisms and to the exclusion of *strictly* theological/confessional considerations. The decision to give the GA-PJC final say on the application of laws passed by the assembly and ratified by the presbyteries to specific cases may have been a pragmatic necessity, but it also opened the door to ongoing confusion and discord. The decision seemed to place authority over the application of church law into the hands of a small group of elected church insiders and implied that church courts were moving toward an absolute doctrine of *stare decisis* regarding atheological matters of constitutional interpretation.

Though the purpose of this project is not to examine specific adjudications of the GA-PJC, it is important to note that, because of the UPCUSA’s 1973 decision, whenever advocates on either side of the debate on LGBTQIA+ inclusion lost a case before the GA-PJC, they were at an impasse. Thenceforth, the assembly could not review a decision of the GA-PJC in a particular case. The only recourse for the ‘loosing’ side was to work within the denomination’s massive and often unwieldy structure to advocate on behalf of general AIs that would invalidate GA-PJC rulings for the future or to supplant them via

an amendment to the constitution, which had to be passed by an assembly and ratified by the majority of presbyteries. The goal of the 1973 provision was to alleviate intra-ecclesial tensions and ensure the consistent application of church law, but some have argued that this practical mechanism prolonged debate and stifled opportunities for reconciliation between disputants in LGBTQIA+ ordination and marriage cases (Vermaak 2009, p. 6). The decision was carried over into the PC(USA) constitution when the UPCUSA and the PCUS reunited in 1983. Since its promulgation, the 1973 adjudication on GA-PJC AIs has contributed to a now pervasive sense of mistrust over the actions of the General Assembly and their relationship to missional engagement at the congregational level.

It is important to recognize that it was but one year after the largest intra-Presbyterian schism of the twentieth century and the formation of the PCA in the south that David B. Sindt called his question on the floor of the Northern church's 1974 General Assembly. That same year, the Northern church had also engaged in a detailed review of its judicial processes, which prompted relief among some and frustration in others. Though many in the church may have longed for a respite from constant infighting, this section has attempted to make clear that when Sindt rose to call the question on LGBTQIA+ inclusion, he stood in a long line of Presbyterians whose consciences had compelled them to scruple within the bounds and by use of the polity principles established by their church.

4. Calling the Question on LGBTQIA+ Inclusion, Ordination, and Marriage

4.1. *Sin, Sexuality, and Christ's Reconciling Work*

In 1966, the Council on Church and Society (CCS) of the UPCUSA began a period of study on human sexuality. The 182nd assembly issued its first major report on the council's work in 1970; Two years later, the 184th assembly in 1972 failed to endorse the majority report as a position paper but commended it to the church as a study guide. The document's title was *Sexuality & the Human Community*. Homosexuality was but one of many topics addressed by the report, which was heavily influenced by the Confession of 1967. The confession asserted, "the church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by man when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time" (PC(USA) 2016, 9.47). The committee's use of the newly ratified confession suggested that Christians should view human sexuality and gender in light of Christ's reconciliation of the world to himself, yet it also outlined a consistently heteronormative vision of faithful Christian living (PC(USA) 2016, 9.47).²⁷ While not endorsing homosexual 'behavior', the church's early reflection made it clear that LGBTQIA+ people should not be taught that "their sexual preference is in irresolvable conflict with their membership in the Christian fellowship" (UPCUSA 1970, p. 18).

In line with the pre-1974 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (DSM II), the 1970 report articulated a growing sense that homosexuality was the result of 'sexual deviation', which was diagnosable under the broader category of 'sociopathic personality disturbance' (UPCUSA 1970). Yet, according to the report, the "condition" of homosexuality did not necessarily imply that one was uniquely sinful merely because of their identity. Homosexual persons could live full and rich Christian lives so long as they did not practice "homosexualism", i.e., proscribed sexual behavior, acts, or practices (UPCUSA 1970, p. 8). Thus, in the assembly's accompanying decision, Presbyterians declared, "we ... reaffirm our adherence to the moral law of God as revealed in the Old and New Testaments, that adultery, prostitution, fornication and/or the practice of homosexuality is sin" (UPCUSA 1970, p. 889). That said, though it did not mention either Leviticus 18:22 or 20:13, a footnote referenced Deuteronomy 22 and 23, which include lists of people who should be condemned to death due to proscribed sexual behaviors or ways of being, as "intolerable". (UPCUSA 1970, p. 9). The assembly also sounded a call for justice when it agreed with the CCS's assertion that "laws which make a felony of homosexual acts privately committed by consenting adults are morally unsupportable, contribute nothing to the public welfare, and inhibit rather than permit changes in behavior by homosexual

persons” (UPCUSA 1970, p. 20). The assembly then called for the repeal of civil laws that criminalized sexuality.

Though the church’s earliest formal round of engagement with questions about sexual diversity had shown considerable awareness of contemporary trends in biopsychosocial research, it was lacking in theological rigor and stopped short of charting a realistic path toward genuine intra-ecclesial equality for Presbyterians who had been marginalized due to their sexual orientation (PC(USA) 2016, 9.47). In the following years, David B. Sindt and other advocates for the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people would push the church toward what they believed to be a radical realization of Christ’s reconciling work, but the Presbyterian tradition of robust theological and ecclesio-political debate prolonged that realization for almost five decades.

4.2. *Inclusion as Members, Freedom of to Scruple for Allies, and More Light*

Despite the considerable efforts of Sindt and others following the 1974 assembly, Presbyterians for Gay Concerns (PGC), formerly known as the Presbyterian Gay Caucus (PGC),²⁸ was denied official recognition as a ‘special organization’ at the UPCUSA’s 187th General Assembly in 1975. The PGC sought approval under Chapter 28 of the UPCUSA constitution, which had emerged amid the growth of youth and women’s movements at the turn of the twentieth century, and permitted the organization of special groups, agencies, or programs to support the work of sessions, presbyteries, and synods.²⁹ The PGC’s report to the GA committee tasked with oversight of ‘special organizations’ expounded upon the new group’s mission. Employing the terminology of the time, the report stated that the PGC aimed “to facilitate the intelligent consideration by judicatories of support for legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of affectional or sexual preference and for legislation deleting restrictions on private sexual behavior of consenting adults” (Dugan 1975). Ruling Elder Robert Boyd from the Presbytery of North Central Iowa summarized the response of the assembly’s majority to the PGC’s request when he quipped, “if this is their purpose, I’m agin’ it” (Dugan 1975). Remarkably, Robert C. Lamar (1923 to 2019), who had served as the Moderator of the UPCUSA’s 186th General Assembly in 1974, at which Sindt posed his question, advocated for recognition of the PGC. Like many moderators after him, personal interactions with queer Presbyterians and knowledge of the church’s constitution prompted Lamar to assert, “we are not asked to approve, theologically or morally, of homosexuality . . . We are only asked to listen . . . , particularly to those with whom we disagree” (Dugan 1975).

After their failure to gain formal recognition in 1975, LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies continued to practice ministries of presence in the face of institutional barriers to their participation in church gatherings, grassroots activism, and disputes over AIs issued by the GA-PJC led various presbyteries to submit overtures that called the church to address policy questions around gender, sexuality, and ordination. In addition to rejecting the PGC’s request for recognition, the assembly reviewed seven overtures that would have reduced the power previously granted to the GA-PJC at the 1973 assembly (see Section 3.6 above). To that end, the overtures called the GA “to reaffirm the authority of the presbyteries in instances where rigid applications of the law would defeat its intent and destroy the peace of the church” (in Vermaak 2009, p. 70). Presbyteries sent the overtures mentioned above to the assembly because they feared that the recent GA-PJC decision in *Maxwell v. Pittsburgh Presbytery* (RC 1) was contributing to the usurpation of presbyterial authority over the ordination and examination of candidates. The case arose after the presbyterian minister J.M. Maxwell filed a complaint against the Pittsburgh Presbytery with the PJC of the Synod of Pennsylvania and West Virginia (now Synod of the Trinity) for ordaining W.W. Kenyon as a teaching elder/minister. Kenyon had declared his scruples with the church’s policy of ordaining women and stated that he would not fulfill his constitutional obligation to participate in the ordination of female church officers.

Following a series of developments, the case made its way up to the GA-PJC, which reversed the presbytery’s decision, stated that Kenyon could not be ordained, and reminded

the church that “neither a synod nor the General Assembly has any power to allow a presbytery to grant an exemption to an explicit constitutional provision” (UPCUSA 1975, p. 188). The GA-PJC based its ruling on Chapter XXX, Section IV of the UPCUSA constitution, which made it clear that a delegated commission of the GA could, indeed, “review cases where exceptions to constitutional requirements were requested on the basis of conscience” (in Vermaak 2009, p. 59). The ruling was further based upon the church constitution’s condemnation of discrimination based on gender, race, ethnic origin, marital status, or age, including with regards to ordination (VIII.II, IX.III), and the requirement of congregations to elect elders “giving attention to a fair representation of both the male and female constituency of that congregation” in XVII.I (UPCUSA 1975).

Due to his refusal to participate in the ordination of women, it was clear to the GA-PJC that Kenyon was unwilling to fulfill the constitutionally mandated responsibilities of a teaching elder. In their ruling, the GA-PJC contributed to the formation of yet another deliberative pattern, which had been foreshadowed in early eighteenth century synodal debates and would play a significant role in disputes over anti-LGBTQIA+ constitutional amendments and their application in particular cases in the late 1990s; It legislated *action*, not *conscience*. According to the GA-PJC, whatever Kenyon believed, if he was going to serve the church as a teaching elder, he had to abide by its constitution. The 1975 assembly concurred with the recommendation of its Committee on Bills and Overtures (CBO) and took no action on the overtures, which would have subverted the GA-PJC’s decision.

The Kenyon case and other maneuvers that followed it made clear that it was illegal for any minister, ruling elder, session, or presbytery to use their authority to bar women *as a class* from ordination under their jurisdiction. Though the GA-PJC legislated *action* and not *conscience*, concerns over the ordination of women and LGBTQIA+ inclusion contributed to calls for schism among evangelical Presbyterians, many of whom officially broke ties with the UPCUSA and formed the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) in 1983 (Fortson 2016).

In response to ‘Overture 9’ from the Presbyteries of New York City and the Palisades, the UPCUSA’s 188th General Assembly established a task force in 1976 under the auspices of its Advisory Council on Church and Society (ACCS) to reflect upon “Christian approaches to homosexuality, with special reference to the ordination of avowed practicing homosexuals” (PC(USA) 2004, p. 43). The task force was also instructed to provide a background report that would inform the assembly’s consideration of Overture 9’s request for “*definitive guidance* in regard to the ordination of persons who may be otherwise well qualified but who affirm their own homosexual identity and practice” (Emphasis added, PC(USA) 2004, p. 56).

Per the final version of Overture 9, the task force was to be composed of “people broadly representative of the life of our church, both ministers and laypersons . . . [including] experts in such fields as biblical interpretation, theology, ethics, psychiatry, sociology, and law” (PC(USA) 2004, p. 43). The group held hearings regularly between 1976 and 1978 to address “the major biblical, theological, historical, ethical, biomedical, and psychological issues” related to homosexuality (PC(USA) 2004, p. 44). In addition to holding formal hearings and soliciting responses from advocates for inclusion, the task force also heard from individuals who identified as ‘former homosexuals’ and attended events hosted by the conservative group Presbyterians United for Biblical Concerns (PUBC).³⁰

After distributing their findings for consideration and comment by various church bodies, congregations, and advocacy groups, the ACCS built upon the task force’s work and proposed five potential actions from which the 19th General Assembly could choose at its 1978 meeting. The majority of the task force supported option five. The cohort recognized that “no prohibition of the ordination of a self-affirming, practicing homosexual person currently exists in the explicit words of the [church’s] constitution” (PC(USA) 2004, p. 48). Thus, the majority of the task force asked and answered the question that would divide the church for years to come. They queried and responded, “may a self-affirming, practicing homosexual Christian be ordained? We believe so, if the person manifests such gifts

as are required for ordination” (in [Anderson 1997](#), p. 42). The majority opinion went on to state, “for some homosexual Christians growth toward mature Christian living may imply accepting celibacy; for some it may imply accomplishing reorientation to heterosexuality [presumably through conversion therapy]; however, for others it may imply remaining open to or attaining full companionship and partnership with a person of the same sex” (in [Anderson 1997](#), p. 42). Thus, while the task force’s majority espoused harmful psychotherapeutic misconceptions about sexual reorientation, they left open the door for ordinands who were in ‘full’ (an intentionally ambiguous and broad term) same-sex partnerships, which would presumably include sexual intercourse. The majority’s acknowledgement of the possibility for ‘full’ and *faithful* same-sex relationships among clergy cut through the veil of haughty moralizations about homosexuality. To reject it was to tacitly acknowledge the church’s fixation on sex, especially gay sex.

Rather than introducing a previously non-existent prohibition into the church’s law, the majority proposal recognized diversity of thought regarding articles of faith that the majority of presbyteries had never previously codified in the constitution as ‘essential.’ Thus, the task force’s majority proposal reaffirmed the long-standing norm that the church’s authority to examine ordinands is located in presbyteries (for teaching elders/ministers) and sessions (for ruling elders and deacons) rather than higher judicatories (i.e., synods and the General Assembly). If the assembly had endorsed it, option five would have remitted “the question [on LGBTQIA+ ordination] to the presbyteries and congregations for further discussion and for adjudications made by individual Christian consciences considering individual cases and circumstances” ([UPCUSA 1978](#), p. 48). Thus, the task force’s majority recommendation was that congregations (through sessions) and presbyteries should be permitted to decide on questions of whether to ordain an otherwise well-qualified ‘practicing’ LGBTQIA+ person.

On Monday, 22 May, the 1978 GA of the UPCUSA “devoted approximately ten hours to plenary debate” on the work of the ACCS and its task force ([PC\(USA\) 2004](#), p. 46). The assembly accepted a modified version of the task force’s report as a study document but rejected its proposed ‘definitive guidance’ on the constitution. Instead, the assembly endorsed the recommendations of the task force’s *minority*, which consisted of only three people and was the third option on the list of possible actions, as definitive guidance to the church’s lower judicatories. Like the task force’s majority recommendation, the assembly’s decision recognized that “the phrase ‘homosexual persons’ does not occur in the Book of Order of the United Presbyterian Church”. It also acknowledged that, “no phrase within the Book of Order explicitly prohibits the ordination of self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons to office within the church” ([PC\(USA\) 2004](#), p. 56). Therefore, both the task force’s minority and the assembly’s majority acknowledged that the constitution did not contain any formal exclusion of LGBTQIA+ people from service in the church’s ordered ministries. Yet, contrary to the recommendation of the *task force’s* majority, their solution was to side with those who, in previous generations, emphasized the authority of higher judicatories to police ordination standards.

In its rationale for the forthcoming definitive guidance, the assembly also testified to the prevailing moralistic monomania about gay sex, when it followed its recognition of the constitution’s silence on LGBTQIA+ ordination with the statement, “however, no phrase within the Book of Order can be construed as an explicit mandate to disregard sexual practice when evaluating candidates for ordination. In short, the Book of Order does not give explicit direction to presbyteries, elders, and congregations as to whether or not self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons are eligible or ineligible for ordination to office” ([PC\(USA\) 2004](#), p. 57). In contrast to the task force’s majority recommendation, the assembly took the request for definitive guidance as a prompt to exert its authority to police ordination standards rather than trusting ordaining bodies to fulfill their historic prerogatives with decency and order. In a phrase that may have recalled memories of the ‘overly severe’ actions decried by Tennent and others in the Apology of the Presbytery of New Brunswick in 1739, the assembly concluded, “unrepented homosexual practice does not

accord with the requirements for ordination set forth in the Form of Government” and thus ‘self-affirming’ LGBTQIA+ people cannot be ordained in the church (PC(USA) 2004, p. 57).

The assembly’s action stopped short of barring “self-affirming practicing homosexuals” from membership in local congregations, but it prevented “practicing homosexual persons” from being ordained to the “professional ministry or to the offices of Ruling Elder or Deacon” (PHS 2022g, RG-512). Thus, while it kept the door open for LGBTQIA+ people to join the UPCUSA as members, it trapped them in the nave and padlocked the door to the pulpit. In a statement that represented LGBTQIA+ people as devoid of hope and promise while simultaneously acknowledging the limited scope of the church’s understanding at any given time, the largest governing body of the UPCUSA formally asserted, “we believe that Jesus Christ intends the ordination of officers to be a sign of hope to the church and the world. Therefore, our present understanding of God’s will precludes the ordination of persons who do not repent of homosexual practice” (PC(USA) 2004, p. 54).

The assembly’s decision on Overture 9 was intended to clarify the application of ordination standards to LGBTQIA+ candidates, but its wording managed to introduce additional uncertainty into the discussion. The phrase ‘definitive guidance’ did not, and had never, appeared in the constitution of the UPCUSA. Was the definitive guidance offered by the assembly the same as an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) of the constitution akin to the one adjudicated by the GA-PJC in *Maxwell v. Pittsburg Presbytery*? Or was it intended to function like the Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910, which the Swearingen Commission report of 1927 had concluded was an advisory declaration that was non-binding on subsequent assemblies and presbyteries? Amid the confusion that followed, advocates for inclusion argued in numerous PJC cases at both the synod and GA levels that these questions were, ultimately, irrelevant. Their arguments were based on the fact that the GA cannot claim the authority of lower judicatories over ordination and “segments of the membership cannot be excluded except by constitutional amendment” (in Anderson 1997, p. 46). Unless the majority of presbyteries ratified an amendment to the constitution that explicitly precluded LGBTQIA+ ordination, which would likely have proven inconsistent with the spirit (if not the letter) of Chapter VIII, Section II and Chapter IX, Section III (see the Kenyon case above), it could not arbitrarily bar queer people from ministerial service.

Amid the confusion that followed the assembly’s decision, the church turned to its highest administrative officer for clarification. Based upon the authority delegated to him, Stated Clerk William P. Thompson (1919–2006) declared that the definitive guidance issued by the 1978 assembly was equivalent to an AI. His ruling would be buttressed by GA-PJC cases in subsequent years. Thus, according to Thompson and the GA-PJC, the ban on the ordination of openly LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians was binding on presbyteries and sessions (Van Marter 2006).

In the early years, Thompson’s decision was not without its critics, even among conservatives. Thomas Gillespie (1928–2011), eventual President of Princeton Theological Seminary and chair of the ACCS, which drafted the 1978 UPCUSA policy options, was hardly known as an advocate for LGBTQIA+ concerns. Nevertheless, he preemptively contradicted the Stated Clerk’s hard-line. Gillespie explicitly stated that the church should not consider the assembly’s ‘definitive guidance’ as equivalent to an AI. Mindful that GA adjudications which overreached and undermined the church’s constitution had never longwithstood well-organized counter maneuvers by those they hoped to exclude, he evoked a paternal understanding of the GA’s role in church disputes. In their initial report to the GA, Gillespie and other members of the ACCS concluded, “when your son or daughter comes to you and asks for guidance, you should not respond by laying down the law. We propose, therefore, that this General Assembly not exercise its right to render a constitutional interpretation. We propose, rather, that it offer the ‘definitive guidance’ requested . . . We believe this recommendation, if adopted, will provide this policy statement with more ‘staying power’ throughout the church than one which unnecessarily calls into question the constitutional rights of the presbyteries in the ordination process” (in Anderson 1997, p. 47).

Whatever his limitations, Gillespie possessed an ecclesio-political acumen and foresight that many in his camp lacked. Advocates for inclusion would repeatedly call for clarification on the meaning of the church's definitive guidance regarding LGBTQIA+ ordination until 1993. That year, the reunited church's 205th General Assembly's Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) would respond to four overtures from presbyteries by confirming that the 1978/1979 definitive guidance of the UPCUSA and the PCUS (see below), respectively, constitute an AI that is binding on the church's judicatories (PC(USA) 1993, pp. 315–25).

Despite the UPCUSA's decision against the ordination of LGBTQIA+ officers, the version of the task force report adopted by the 1978 assembly offered signs of hope for advocates of full inclusion. The report, entitled, *The Church and Homosexuality*, reiterated the Adopting Act's central principle and offered a measure of protection to those who would become allies in the cause for inclusion. It stated, "we . . . realize that not all United Presbyterians can in conscience agree with our conclusions. Some are persuaded that there are forms of homosexual behavior that are not sinful and that persons who practice these forms can legitimately be ordained. This is wholly in keeping with the diversity of theological viewpoint and the pluralism of opinion that characterize the United Presbyterian Church. The pluralism that can bring paralyzing weakness to the church when groups pursue their vision in isolation from one another can bring health and vigor when they practice pluralism-in-dialogue" (PC(USA) 2004, pp. 54–55). Thus, United Presbyterians affirmed the dual principles of the Adopting Act (confessional fidelity and the binding of the conscience to the word of God), when they stated, "diversity does not contradict either the principle of our Book of Confessions or our common commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior" (UPCUSA 1978, p. 48). Due to the contradistinction between freedom of *conscience* and freedom of *action*, which would be emphasized by conservatives in subsequent debates, the church's affirmation of 'permissible plurality' meant little for non-celibate LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians. If the GA's decision on the ordination question advanced their interests, it did so mainly by creating space for allies to become increasingly vocal 'scruplers' over the church's exclusionary policies, which the assembly had no authority to designate as 'essential tenets.'

Though debates in the larger Northern church received greater media attention, Southern Presbyterians in the PCUS also began their journey toward the greater inclusion of LGBTQIA+ Christians in the early 1970s. In 1972, the 112th Assembly of the PCUS issued a resolution that acknowledged, "there is in our culture today a great deal of discussion about homosexuality, both with approval and disapproval" (PC(USA) 2004, p. 31). Quoting Romans 1, the assembly "resolved . . . its conviction that homosexual behavior is a grievous sin, that marriages (so-called) between two of the same sex are contrary to the divine plan and under divine wrath" (PC(USA) 2004, p. 31). Yet, even while condemning homosexual 'practice' and same-sex marriage in principle, Southern Presbyterians "resolved that the Church express its deep love and compassion for all those struggling with this *problem* as other spiritual problems and offer its Christian help and counsel to assist them in making normal and wholesome adjustments to life" (emphasis added, PC(USA) 2004, p. 31). Thus, while the PCUS articulated its rejection of homosexuality, it claimed not to reject homosexual persons. The Southern GA also reminded the church that, even its most conservative adjudications had never suggested that being gay, or having gay intercourse, was somehow worse than 'sins' committed by heterosexuals.

It was also at the 112th assembly that the PCUS referred the overture it had adopted as 'Resolution 5' to its Council on Church and Society (CCS) for consideration. The resolution called for a period of intensive study of homosexuality. The work of the CCS would be referred to the Council on Theology and Culture (CTC) at subsequent assemblies, but intra-ecclesial discourse on LGBTQIA+ inclusion survived the vicissitudes of denominational maneuverings.

At the 117th PCUS Assembly in 1977, the CTC produced a report titled, *The Church and Homosexuality: A Preliminary Study*. The document was "printed, along with a study guide" and sent "to all PCUS ministers and Clerks of Sessions" (PC(USA) 2004, p. 3). The

study guide engaged with contemporary biopsychosocial discourse on human sexuality and outlined the church's ethical, theological, and hermeneutical concerns related to homosexual orientation. The guide also commended to its readers an introductory bibliography, which cited resources from across the disciplinary, theological, and ideological spectrums. Additionally, it included what it called "a synoptic of recent denominational statements on sexuality," which had been compiled by ecumenical officers at the National Council of Churches (PC(USA) 2004, p. 39). The text summarized the respective stances of the UPCUSA, Lutheran Church in America, Moravian Church in America, United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church.

According to the study guide, there was considerable disagreement among mainline Christians about homosexuality; some believed it was a sickness, others described it as a sin, and still others viewed it as a normal aspect of human life that should be accepted (PC(USA) 1986). Despite variance in Southern Presbyterian beliefs about homosexuality, the church revisited the 1972 GA's statement about "those struggling with this *problem*" (emphasis added, PC(USA) 2004, p. 31). In the new report, it acknowledged that "the 'homosexual problem' is also a heterosexual problem, the problem of ignorance, fear, anxiety, and prejudice of heterosexual people when they encounter homosexual people" (PC(USA) 2004, p. 28).

At its 119th General Assembly in 1979, the PCUS concluded an initial phase of discernment on LGBTQIA+ ordination. In response to various overtures, the majority of delegates endorsed the CTC's proposal. As evidence of the increasing cooperation between the PCUS and the UPCUSA, the Southern church's report stated, "we have reached the conclusion that the Policy Statement adopted by the 190th General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church states a clear position which is well-grounded biblically and theologically, is appropriate in the light of the guidance received by the Council from the members and courts of the Church, and represents the conclusions of the Council itself" (PC(USA) 2004, p. 53). Thus, with slight technical modifications, the 1979 assembly of the PCUS adopted the UPCUSA's text, *The Church and Homosexuality*, as its own policy statement under the title *Homosexuality and the Church: A Position Paper*. Southern Presbyterians thus joined their Northern coreligionists by affirming the presence of openly queer Christians in their midst as *members*, but not as ordained officers.

Basing its decision on a behavioralist model of sexuality, the PCUS assembly concluded that "the repentant homosexual person who finds the power of Christ redirecting his or her sexual desires toward a married heterosexual commitment or finds God's power to control his or her desires and to adopt a celibate lifestyle, can certainly be ordained, all other qualifications being met" (PC(USA) 1986, p. 1027). Yet, "members and officers" are not "free to adopt a lifestyle of conscious, continuing and unresisted sin in any area of their lives" (PC(USA) 1986, p. 1027). Despite the high-sounding nature of this promulgation, early conservative arguments recognized that their anti-LGBTQIA+ stances were not based primarily upon careful exegesis, scientific research, or ecclesio-legal deliberations. In a statement that probably would not have made it past the curation of anti-LGBTQIA+ leaders in later decades, the respective Northern and Southern assemblies concluded, "it appears that what is really important is not what homosexuality is but what we believe about it" (in Anderson 1997, p. 42).

Though both the Northern and Southern assemblies posited a clear distinction between freedom of *conscience* and freedom of *action* (i.e., permission to disobey the church's constitution or formerly adjudicated interpretations of its ecclesio legal provisions), there was unanimous agreement among the task force and broad consensus at the assemblies that a ban on LGBTQIA+ people from ordination *as a class* was dangerously out of step with the church's constitution and Christian values. Perhaps some anti-LGBTQIA+ voices accepted the church's nuanced, though still exclusionary, language because they were aware of the hard line taken by mainline Presbyterians against *class-based* refusals of ordination, which was exemplified in the previously referenced Kenyon case. A critical mass of anti-LGBTQIA+ advocates must have had the foresight to recognize that, if they openly defied

the precedent established by recent GA-PJC cases and assembly actions, either by excluding a class of people without a constitutional mandate or by trying to pass an amendment designed to exclude rather than broaden inclusivity, they might find their gains reversed. The relationship between social class and the church's ordination standards had, indeed, been a subject of debate during the UPCUSA task force's discernment process. The 1978 majority report of the task force asserted, "Spiritual maturity or the absence thereof is an attribute pertaining not to any *class* of people but only to *individual* persons. Thus, it must be distinctively identified and separately evaluated in each individual candidate for ordination as the church, led by the Spirit and guided by God's Word, seeks to discern and verify that particular candidate's gifts for ministry" (in [Anderson 1997](#), p. 42).

Despite the openness generated by the church's careful study of key questions regarding sexuality and gender, advocates for full inclusion believed the Northern and Southern assemblies had produced policy statements that were dangerously out of step with the Adopting Act tradition, and the Radical Principles of 1797. From their perspective, it was clear that by issuing *binding* 'definitive guidance', a phrase that did not appear in the church's constitution, on a polity question that was not addressed by the Form of Government, and based upon theological/belief convictions that had not been ratified in the constitution by presbyteries, the Northern and Southern assemblies had usurped the powers of the presbyteries and sessions to examine candidates for ordination. What argument could be offered in defense of the GA's action other than to claim that it was attempting to defend 'essential and necessary elements of faith?' Yet, even if heteronormative sexual ethics had been affirmed as 'essential and necessary' beliefs by previous GAs, the Swearingen Report of 1927 had made clear that (at least in the UPCUSA) the assembly had no authority to define such articles in a way that was binding on other church bodies. Advocates for *full* inclusion also believed that the GAs had ignored the past half-century of fruitful engagement on questions of heterosexual marriage and divorce. Even if one made a clear distinction between freedom of conscience and that of action, why choose homosexual sex as the one 'sin' that could exclude someone from ordination? Afterall, had not the church just spent decades pushing itself beyond legalistic understandings of divorce and remarriage? If a heterosexual divorcee could be ordained, why not a homosexual person in a committed relationship?

Oponents of the church's decision also believed that the new ordination policy was dangerously out of step with the Presbyterian theology of ministry. While neither the Northern nor the Southern assemblies excluded LGBTQIA+ people *as a class* from ordained service in *any* finalized GA policy statement, advocates for full inclusion would subsequently argue that both assemblies had imposed a theologically inconsistent and unconstitutional *class-based celibacy requirement* upon a specific group. Thus, despite the nuanced wording of the church's emergent policy statements, their effect was clear. "For the first time since women were finally accepted as full participants and members, this new policy . . . created two classes of members, with very different rules for the two classes" ([Anderson 1997](#), p. 43). Indeed, many Presbyterians called the system "a kind of ecclesiastical apartheid," in which LGBTQIA+ presbyterians "are governed by a set of separate laws, designed only for them" ([Anderson 1997](#), p. 43).

Additionally, the pragmatic question was asked, what about those deacons, elders, and ministers who were ordained before they came out or before the GA had issued its definitive guidance? Was the call congregations, sessions, and presbyteries had observed upon their lives to be disregarded? Could they be installed in a new call if they left their present one? Were they to be defrocked?

Though the application of their respective decisions on previously ordained LGBTQIA+ people would be repeatedly adjudicated in subsequent years, neither the 1978 UPCUSA assembly nor that of the PCUS in 1979 proposed to revoke the ordinations or installations of openly LGBTQIA+ individuals who were ordained prior to the issuance of the definitive guidance. While ecclesio-judicial consequences and difficulties finding employment or being installed in new calls often accompanied outed pastors, both churches attempted to

‘grandfather/grandparent in’ LGBTQIA+ people who were already ordained. In Paragraph 14 of their respective adjudications, the two churches stated, “the General Assembly declare that these actions shall not be used to affect negatively the ordination rights of any deacon, elder, or minister who has been ordained prior to this date in the” UPCUSA/PCUS (PC(USA) 1986, p. 1025F).

Paragraph 14 thus protected LGBTQIA+ clergy who had already been ordained prior to the 1978/1979 issuances of definitive guidance. The so-called ‘grandparent clause’ was grounded in the same Presbyterian theology of ordination and ministry that should have given the church pause before imposing class-based celibacy requirements upon a specific cohort. That theological understanding, which the church believes is grounded in biblical precedent, stipulates that once a person is ordained, their ordination is (1) perpetual and (2) universal. While Presbyterians ordain candidates to a *particular call*, a member’s ordination to the office of teaching elder (minister), ruling elder, or deacon is valid for the entire church. Ordination cannot be revoked unless a person renounces it or the church sees fit to defrock a particular individual after hearing a specific case (for example, see the Portland Deliverance in Section 3.5 above). Even if the majority of presbyteries took the radical step of ratifying a proposed amendment to the constitution that would arbitrarily impose class based requirements on ordinands in the present or future, the notion that such an amendment could be applied retroactively had been hotly contested since the New Side/Old Side debates of the eighteenth century (see Section 3.2 above). Presbyterians believe that ordination is an act by the church that affirms God’s call upon and gifts for ministry within a particular person’s life. If the church has borne witness to the gifts of ministry within a person, it is no small matter to deny what the church has seen by defrocking them.

In a desire to ward off the ‘gay witch hunts’ that would plague many denominations in the following years, both assemblies implied that the church would be wise to adopt a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ approach to the sexuality of ordained officers. Thus, they instructed ordaining bodies to “conduct their examinations of candidates for ordained office with discretion and sensitivity, recognizing that it would be a hindrance to God’s grace to make a specific inquiry into the sexual orientation or practice of candidates or ordained officers where the person involved has not taken the initiative in declaring his or her sexual orientation” (PC(USA) 2004, p. 58). Perhaps due to their respective experiences of the fundamentalist controversy and in line with the findings of the Swearingen Commission’s 1927 report, the assemblies cautioned Presbyterians who might set out in search of ways to exclude people with whom they disagreed.³¹ Ultimately, however, the church’s discretion meant little for LGBTQIA+ Christians who felt called by God to live openly and honestly. In the words articulated by the task force regarding ministers who had already been ordained and installed, the decision led to the violation of “legitimate individual Christian conscience within the church, forcing some . . . Presbyterians . . . to deny what they believe, to believe what they deny, or to withdraw from the church” (UPCUSA 1978, p. 47).

From both a pastoral and ecclesio-legal perspective, the efforts of the Northern and Southern assemblies to find a compromise that acknowledged the presence of openly gay and lesbian people within the church’s membership, but thenceforth forbade them from being ordained if their identity and relationship status were known, can be described as a step forward for LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Emphasizing the social consequences of Christ’s reconciling work, the 1978–1979 assemblies had likewise “called for civil rights for all people, regardless of sexual orientation” (PMA 2019). As previously stated, they also made clear that sexual orientation *in itself* cannot prevent a gay or lesbian person from fully participating in the life of the church. Yet, after all their deliberations, the churches still imposed a celibacy requirement upon an entire class of people and, thus, introduced a rigid class-based dichotomy between the church’s *membership* and *ordination* policies.

As Gillespie anticipated, by failing to address this creative tension and by undermining the constitution, the decisions of both the Northern and Southern churches ripped open historic wounds about the credentialing of ministers and judicial authority in the church.

Thus, Presbyterian leaders across the theological spectrum soon realized that little had been settled by the GA's decision. While Presbyterians have held their ministers to high educational and ethical standards since they outlined their church's ordination requirements in the Itinerancy & Education Acts of 1737, their commitment to the 'priesthood of all believers' calls for significant nuance in the relationship between clergy and laity. Queer Presbyterians and their allies accepted that, regarding ordained officers, "it is necessary to the integrity and health of the church that the persons who serve it in ordered ministries shall adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity as expressed in [the] constitution" (PC(USA) 2012, G-2.0105). Yet, upon surveying the Adopting Act tradition and the historical debates that had shaped Presbyterian life and witness, they found nothing to suggest that the church's theological decision-making bodies had previously described a commitment to heteronormative sexual practice as an *essential and necessary* element of belief or ordination standard. They were equally aghast at the church's hardline position toward homosexuality when the majority of Presbyterians had collectively rejected biblical literalism and legalistic understandings of heterosexual marriage in the first half of the twentieth century.

Anticipating the backlash that followed the 1978/1979 decisions, biblical scholars, and organizations like the Presbyterian Lay Committee³² mobilized to defend the decision against ordination, critique the church's ethical laxity regarding membership standards, and call for even stricter adherence to what they considered biblical principles. Via both explicit and implicit references to the church's confessions and to the Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910's attestation of the Bible's inspiration and inerrancy, they argued that the general trend toward greater acceptance of LGBTQIA+ members constituted a violation of the biblical witness and placed the church at risk of divine judgment (Presbyterian Layman 2022).

Presbyterians from across the theological spectrum recognized the limited nature of the church's understanding at any given time. They evoked Robinson's famous conviction that new light can break forth from the scriptures, and collectively agreed, "we need to seek more light" (PC(USA) 2004, p. 38). However, in the late 1970s, the "liberating power of the Holy Spirit" to revive the church through the shedding of new light became a rallying cry for LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies (in Holmen 2013, p. 365). With implicit reference to the Old/New debates of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and via explicit quotation of Robinson's famous statement, these Presbyterians boldly asserted, "there is yet more light to be shed upon the scriptures" (in PHS 2022g, RG-512).³³

West Park Avenue Presbyterian Church became the first congregation to identify as 'More Light' to protest the UPCUSA's 1978 decision to exclude openly LGBTQIA+ people from ordination in the future. On the day that his church announced its intention not to follow the higher judicatory's prohibition against ordaining gay and lesbian ruling elders, Rev. Robert Davidson (1928–1993) issued a firm but pastoral declaration. With the support of the session, he asserted, "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" (PHS 2018, RG-512).

In February 1979, Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (PLGC), which succeeded the PGC in 1977,³⁴ held their first formally organized annual meeting. Stated Clerk William P. Thompson invited the organization to submit an annual report to the GA in 1979. By accepting the report, the GA reversed the 187th Assembly's 1975 decision not to recognize the PGC/PLGC as a 'special organization' under Chapter 28 of the UPCUSA constitution.

Under its newly affirmed mandate to support the educational and missional efforts of the church, the PLGC organized at all levels of ecclesial life. In addition to their education efforts around human sexuality at the congregational and mid-council levels, and opposition to the national church's 1978 ruling, which members of the PLGC called the 'sin policy' (because it defined homosexual 'activity' as 'sin'), they also facilitated non-violent direct actions and organized within mid-councils (i.e., presbyteries and synods). In 1997, James D.

Anderson, Professor of Communication at Rutgers University, and long-time Editor of the *More Light Update* (See below), asserted “because of the polity of the Presbyterian Church, including annual [now bi-annual] General Assemblies, a major focus of the PLGC has been to use the political process within the church for education purposes aimed at eventually changing the policies of the church” (Anderson 1997, p. 44). Thus, even when the PLGC supported overtures that assemblies were unlikely to pass, the organization did so as a way of practicing a ministry of presence that continued to call the question on full inclusion.

The PLGC used West Park Avenue’s statement as a model for what would become known as a ‘More Light Statement.’ In disregard of the assembly’s definitive guidance, More Light Congregations (also known as ‘Welcoming Congregations’) declared their scruples with the church’s exclusionary position, issued an ‘apology’ (defense) against the assembly’s ruling, and committed to the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons within the life of their local church. In 1985, the 197th GA of the newly reunited PC(USA) affirmed the right of congregations, presbyteries and synods to scruple with the national church’s policy and issue More Light or ‘welcoming’ statements. Nevertheless, it condemned attempts to ordain LGBTQIA+ persons in contradiction to the GA’s ruling (see Anderson 1997, p. 43). In defiance of the GA’s admonition, More Light congregations (through sessions) continued to ordain LGBTQIA+ persons to the offices of ruling elder and deacon. Through their resistance to church law, they hoped to create safe spaces where all people could be “welcomed as full participants in the Body of Christ without having to hide or deny their sexual orientations” (in Holmen 2013, p. 365).³⁵

LGBTQIA+ Christians and their allies in other traditions took bold steps toward inclusion at the local level during the 1970s and 80s, but “there is a big difference between More Light Churches . . . and their counterparts in other denominations” (Anderson in Holmen 2013, p. 366). Among the mainline traditions, it was only the Presbyterian churches that had made it “illegal, under church law, to permit full participation by lesbian and gay Christians at the congregational level in such roles as a member of a governing council [ruling elder, deacon]” (Anderson in Holmen 2013, p. 366). As mentioned above, unlike other traditions that strictly demarcate priestly or pastoral ordination from the election of lay people to vestries or local governing boards of congregations, “presbyterian deacons and elders are both elected and ordained” (Vermaak 2009, p. 13). Presbyterian teaching elders/ministers of word and sacrament are not set aside or uniquely sanctified apart from other ordained leaders of the church. The constitutional ordination questions for teaching elders, ruling elders, and deacons differ only concerning the specific functions or responsibilities associated with their office. If a ruling elder or deacon moves to a different congregation from the one in which they were ordained, they remain ordained, even if they are not elected by a congregation and installed by a session in a new position. Thus, when a More Light congregation (through its session) ordained “a gay or lesbian, in defiance of the Constitution, or under scruple, their ordination [was] valid for the whole church” (Vermaak 2009, p. 14).

More Light Congregations blatantly called their question before the church in a format that was ‘out of order’, but they did so within the discursive framework that had been passed down to them from previous generations of Presbyterians. Like the New Siders/New Lights, who ordained revivalists ministers in contradiction of synodal decrees in the eighteenth century, More Lights strategically broke church laws that they believed to be out of accordance with historic Presbyterian polity principles and thereby performed an apologetic ministry of presence that confounded the myth of queer-Christian nonexistence. Through the efforts of More Light congregations and the church’s ongoing theological reflection, Presbyterians continued to awaken to the needs and concerns of a previously unrecognized population. While advocates for inclusion employed historic Presbyterian discursive patterns and drew upon long-standing polity principles, in the church, as in society, “a new gay politics of recognition was clashing with old establishment politics of social control” (Johnson 2006, p. 5).

4.3. Harmarteology, Homophobia, and Reunion

Conversations about human sexuality changed dramatically with the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. Fundamentalist pundits either implied or openly asserted that the ‘gay cancer’, as the infection was often called at the time, was God’s judgment on homosexuals for their sinful behavior. Other Christians, including many Presbyterians, called for science-based solutions, and mobilized to meet the needs of suffering people. The crisis of the 1980s and Christian responses to it prompted notable church leaders and theologians like Howard Rice (1932–2010), William Sloane Coffin (1924–2006), and Beverly Wildung Harrison (1932–2012) to advocate for the problematization of traditional hamartiology concerning homosexuality along the lines envisioned by the PCUS’s 1977 preliminary study document. Drawing connections between emergent social discourses and the church’s promulgations on sexuality from the late 1970s, these well-known scholars reflected theologically on the world’s awakening to LGBTQIA+ concerns in a controversial issue of the Presbyterian journal, *Religion and Society*. The volume’s title effectively summarizes its argument, *Homophobia: The Overlooked Sin* (Larson and Langella 1982). In addition to revisiting the church’s policy statements in light of the events of the emergent ‘Gay Rights Movement’, this text continued the Presbyterian tradition of calling questions and practicing apologetic ministries of presence beyond the confines of the GA hall via publications and pamphlets.

Though the infamous journal issue situated the church’s growing concern over the treatment of LGBTQIA+ people within a broader social context, its approach was in line with that of previous assemblies in both the Northern and Southern churches. The 192nd General Assembly of the UPCUSA had reminded Presbyterians in 1980 that, while its definitive guidance barred openly LGBTQIA+ people from serving in the ordered ministries, it also “committed the church to actions relating to homophobia and justice issues” (Vermaak 2009, p. 106). Meanwhile, the 120th General Assembly of the PCUS, which also met in 1980, had adopted multiple working papers on matters of concern for the church. Among them were, *Marriage: A Theological Statement* and *The Nature and Purpose of Human Sexuality*. The first paper did not discuss the issue of same-sex marriage. Nevertheless, the document noted historic Presbyterian unease with the behaviorist ethics that often seemed to accompany celibacy requirements in other faith traditions. In words that would typify discussions over Amendments B and A (see Section 4.7) at the turn of the twenty-first century, the report stated, “the Reformation dignified marriage again as equal to celibacy” (in Vermaak 2009, p. 108).

The PCUS’s 1980 report, the *Nature and Purpose of Human Sexuality*, articulated a fundamentally heteronormative understanding of sexual expression. Consequently, references to homosexuality within the text are sparse and marginal. That said, the document reflected an evolving awareness among Southern Presbyterians that homosexual *orientation*, like heterosexual orientation, is not a matter of choice. Additionally, the report asserted that the church should “be open to more light on what goes into shaping one’s sexual preferences and reexamine its life and teaching in relation to people who are seeking affirmation and needing acceptance and who are apparently not free to change their orientations” (PCUS 1980, p. 213).

The Southern assembly had already emphasized its need for ‘more light’ on sexuality in its 1977 preliminary report, commissioners to the 1980 GA were undoubtedly aware that More Light congregations had been using the term to define their ecclesio-political acts of strategic disobedience. The church’s decision to employ a term that had become loaded with new ecclesio-political meaning may point toward the early impact of apologetic ministries of presence. Indeed, since 1974 Sindt, Glaser, and others had been publishing bi-monthly magazines that went by several names but were eventually called ‘More Light.’ In 1980, the PLGC professionalized the pamphleteering efforts of Sindt and Glaser by publishing a nationwide monthly newsletter called *The More Light Update*. Though the newsletter’s circulation never came close to rivaling that of the PLC’s *The Layman*, which approached the 100,000 mark, by 1996, more than 5000 copies of the More Light Update

were being printed and distributed each month (see [Anderson 1997](#), p. 44). Thus, even as early as 1980, it is difficult to imagine that the advent of the More Light Movement had gone unnoticed by commissioners to the PCUS assembly.

While the fledgling intra-Presbyterian LGBTQIA+ inclusion movement was gaining ground at the turn of the twentieth century's eighth decade, the early 1980s included a genuinely momentous event for all mainline U.S. Presbyterians. On 10 June 1983, the jointly held UPCUSA and the PCUS assemblies approved the *Articles of Agreement of 1983*. After 122 years of division, the Northern and Southern churches came back together. The Articles of Agreement included the adoption of a new Book of Order (constitution), affirmed that the AIs of the UPCUSA and the PCUS would remain in effect until "rescinded, altered or supplanted" by the reunited assembly ([PC\(USA\) 1996](#), Appendix B-3), modified and established the questions that the church would ask of its ordinands, reaffirmed majority rule in intra-ecclesial meetings, clarified the relationship between church councils (i.e., sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly), elucidated the role of 'special organizations', and restructured the life of the church in many other ways. Much of the church's reflection in the lead-up to the 1983 reunion centered around a re-evaluation and reapplication of the Radical Principles of 1797, which the reunited church included in its constitution as "Principles of Presbyterian Government" ([PC\(USA\) 2019](#), F-3.02).

As mentioned above, though the PGC had been denied standing as a 'special organization' under Chapter 28 (XXVIII) of the UPCUSA constitution at the 187th assembly of that church in 1975, advocates and allies had gained a proverbial seat at the table by 1979. Since 1902, 'special organizations' had been permitted to participate in the Northern church's life, though they were not officially recognized as ecclesial bodies; This development had carried over into the UPCUSA constitution when the UPCNA and the PCUSA reunited in 1958. In light of debates around the PGC in 1975 and ongoing difficulties with the conservative Presbyterian Lay Committee (PLC), which had been founded in 1965 in opposition to the ratification of the Confession of 1967, it was clear that "the existence of special organizations within [the church was polarizing] the denomination and intensified the battle over who controls the polity" ([Vermaak 2009](#), p. 118). Fearing that special organizations were getting out of hand, multiple assemblies between 1967 and 1983 in both the Northern and Southern churches attempted to reign in the conduct of special organizations by requiring that they communicate with the appropriate ecclesial judicatories through annual reports. The church's acceptance of an annual report did not imply an endorsement of the organization's activities nor grant any special status to the group (see [Vermaak 2009](#), pp. 118–21).

Though ongoing consternation would eventually prompt the church to abolish constitutional acknowledgements of special organizations, in 1983, the newly reunited PC(USA) addressed those bodies in G-9.0600 of its Book of Order. Advocacy groups from across the political spectrum thus gained constitutional recognition (though not 'status'), along with the right to attend assemblies and organize events between national gatherings. They also submitted to some level of control as they were thenceforth accountable to "the appropriate governing body" ([PC\(USA\) 1996](#), G-9.0602), which included sessions for locally organized congregational associations, and higher bodies (presbyteries, synods, general assemblies) according to the scope of a special organization's work. Thus, while the PLGC and other LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups gained a place at the table in the lead-up to the 1983 reunion assembly, they also gave up certain direct-action methodologies.

In the years to come, informal advocacy groups would coalesce, and new organizations would arise. Unofficial groups on both sides of the ideological spectrum also arose or split from their more 'mainstream' counterparts to pursue change through comparatively radical means (e.g., civil disobedience at assemblies). Some groups eventually came to resist what they saw as denominational tyranny over their internal matters and failed to submit annual reports, but it may be helpful to note here that conservatives have historically engaged with the church through the previously referenced Presbyterian Lay Committee (PLC-1965),

Presbyterians for Renewal (PFR—informally founded in 1988), the Presbyterian Coalition (early 1990s), and other networks that will be mentioned below.

Though the relational dynamics between LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups are exceedingly complex, and while clear demarcation lines between various organizations would not form until the early 2000s, queer believers and their allies have engaged with their church through (among others) Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (PLGC-1980–1999), the More Light Churches Network (MLCN-1992–1999), That All May Freely Serve (TAMFS—1993–2020), and the Covenant Network (1997—see Section 4.7). LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians also received invaluable support from the socially progressive Witherspoon Society (1973), which was named in honor of John Witherspoon (1723–1794), signer of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, presbyterian minister, and Sixth President of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). The Witherspoon Society’s official mission was to work for “inclusiveness in church and society, social and economic justice, lifestyle concerns, and just international relations” (Eller 1992, p. 262 in Vermaak 2009). Though LGBTQIA+ concerns were but one of many ‘issues’ that drove the society’s work, Witherspoon initiatives provided opportunities for queer Presbyterians to locate their goals within an intersectional network of concerns for social justice and human rights.

Due to its recognition as a special organization, by “1980, the PLGC was allowed to rent a space in the exhibit hall”, and with the cooperation of the Witherspoon Society, to host “annual luncheons and rent . . . a hospitality suite” (Holmen 2013, p. 380). From the 1980s onward, it also became common practice that, during their examinations on the floor of the assembly, “candidates for moderator would be questioned regarding their attitudes toward homosexuality” (Holmen 2013, p. 380). Since those who sought the moderator’s gavel were expected to answer openly and honestly regarding their positions during the examination phase, and because delegates were empowered to vote in accordance with their conscience rather than in line with the wishes of their sending presbyteries, advocates for inclusion invested considerable energy in connecting with candidates who might support (or at least not vehemently oppose) their cause.

4.4. *The Call to Hear New Questions and the Limits of Ecclesial Arguments for Equality under Civil Law*

In 1982 the 194th General Assembly of the UPCUSA produced a resource document titled *Biblical Authority and Interpretation*. In the lead-up to the 1983 Atlanta reunion assembly, the PCUS adopted the same document at its 123rd General Assembly under the title, *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture*. The third section of the document outlined “guidelines concerning what the [biblical] text says” (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 6). The reports were approved and commended for the edification of Presbyterians across the country and at all levels of church life. However, they would play a special role in future debates at the General Assembly of the newly reunited PC(USA). Thenceforth, the guidelines would shape discourse about biblical, theological, ethical, and governmental concerns in the reunited church.

Consequently, it is necessary to introduce the way Presbyterians ‘gather around the word’ before addressing the specific issues that emerged in the next phase of the debate over LGBTQIA+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage in the church. First, the guidelines reminded all parties to intra-ecclesial debates and dialogues that “the biblical text in Hebrew and Greek is to be used in theological work. Translations are to be tested by these original languages. The church recognizes no official translation; all the current English versions are subject to evaluation in light of the original languages when being used for theological discussions in the church” (PC(USA) 1999b, pp. 6–7). Second, participants in church dialogues were instructed to use the best available manuscripts of disputed texts “as determined by textual criticism . . . as the basis for study and translation” (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 7).

The importance of analyzing texts in light of their original language and use of the best available manuscripts was applied not only to debates regarding the use of words like ‘homosexuality’ in modern translations of the Bible but also to interpretations of the church’s

confessions. For example, amid disputes over the ‘fidelity and chastity’ amendment in 1996 (see Section 4.6 below), Presbyterian scholars and their ecumenical partners in the Reformed Church in America (RCA) called ecclesiastical judicatories to correct their official translations of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. They argued, “recent scholarship has shown that in [1962]/1963 two Reformed Church in America translators [the PC(USA) version is based on the RCA/World Alliance (now Communion) of Reformed Churches (WARC/WCRC) version] made several unauthorized and theologically unwarranted changes to the Heidelberg Catechism” (Rogers 2008).³⁶ Based on mid-twentieth century debates over the proper translation of 1st Corinthians 6:9–10, which the catechism quotes, the clandestine redactors chose to insert a previously non-existent reference to homosexuality into the document.³⁷

Upon review of pre-1963 versions of the catechism, including the 1586 Latin manuscript of Zacharius Ursinus (b. 1534) and a German version from 1765, no reference to homosexuality was found. Since clinical concepts of hetero and homosexuality had not existed before the late nineteenth century,³⁸ it was anachronistic to supply the word in translations of a German document from 1563 and even more so to uncritically impose said concept on a first-century Christian epistle (Davidson 2001, p. 182).³⁹ Outraged by this discourse analytical approach to the church’s confessions, conservatives like Robert A.J. Gagnon, who was then Associate Professor of New Testament at Pittsburg Theological Seminary and a leading voice in the Presbyterian Coalition, decried the attempts of what he called “homosexualist forces” to revise the translation. He then called for a “literal translation” of the biblical text referenced by the confession and argued from silence that “the only logical reason for sixteenth-century reformers to omit terms having to do with sexual immorality, especially homosexual practice, is that these behaviors were viewed as obscene and thus wholly inappropriate to mention, especially in a catechism that would be used to instruct children” (Gagnon 2008, p. 4).

The debate over the appropriate translation of the Heidelberg Catechism is instructive for historians of the LGBTQIA+ inclusion struggle in the PC(USA); It would be the subject of scholarly review until the majority of presbyteries adopted a new translation that corrected the mistake in 2014 (Wilton 2021, p. 43). Yet, perhaps ironically, given how much energy was expended in the debate, the church’s decision on this matter should never have been determinative for its ordination policies. The reports on homosexuality promulgated by the 1978 UPCUSA and the 1979 PCUS assemblies had noted the redacted Catechism’s brief mention of homosexuality. Nevertheless, the respective assemblies did not base their policy judgments upon that text because they agreed that, even if the confession referred to homosexuality, it did not do so in the context of ordination. Consequently, the UPCUSA and PCUS had declared “that article of the Catechism does not of itself presently act as a legal restriction on the power of the congregation to elect, and elders to ordain, ruling elders and deacons or of the presbytery to approve and ordain ministers of the word” (UPCUSA 1978, p. 47). Though the text did not function as an ecclesio-legal norm regarding LGBTQIA+ ordination, the fact that scholars on both sides of the debate expended considerable energy over the proper translation of a sixteenth-century text from Germany sheds additional light on the vital role played in this debate by the Adopting Act tradition and Presbyterian’s self-conception as ‘confessional Christians’.

The third guideline for interpreting and using scripture in church disputes prioritized the “plain sense of the text” (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 7). To ward off proof-texting, the church instructed its leaders to pay special attention to the literary contexts of specific quotations, including the passages, paragraphs, and pericopes in which they appear. Interpreters also needed to recognize the “cultural conditioning of language” (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 7).⁴⁰ Thus, the “right use of holy scripture” in church discussions, while not “prescribed by a set procedure,” can “be conducted and tested by a set of concerns, criteria, and responsibilities that belong to our tradition of interpreting Scripture” (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 8). To that end, “Holy Scripture is normative with respect to its theological subject”. Yet, “it is not an encyclopedia of information about every area of human knowledge and understanding” (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 8). Thus, the church must always approach scripture with its ultimate

purpose in mind, even as it affirms the Bible's precedence and priority "in matters of faith, life and salvation . . . over all other authorities" (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 8).

As they have affirmed since the adopting assembly in 1729, Presbyterians strive to order their life around what scripture leads them to believe and do, but they also use extra-biblical knowledge and experience to instruct their Christian conduct. Therefore, those who follow the guidelines respect the church's tradition and the findings of scientific research in its various forms because "scripture as norm does not exhaust or limit what faith needs to know in seeking the most faithful course of obedience and confession" (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 9). Striking an ecumenical tone, in line with Methodism's (Wesleyan) Quadrilateral, the guidelines affirm scripture as the church's norm, but also recognize other sources of knowledge as hermeneutically illuminative; Namely, reason (and the scientific knowledge that flows from its use), tradition/confessions, and an appreciation for the Spirit's witness through the experiences of all members of the community. Presbyterians thus believe that whatever the distinctives of their identity, all believers are "both a resource and a participant in the [interpretive] process" (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 9). Consequently, while employing a Christocentric hermeneutic, "the church in its institutional life must not discount the experience of its members but hear their questions and receive their insights as opportunities to read scripture again in the continuing search for positions and patterns of contemporary faithfulness" (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 10).

In the years to come, LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies would call the church and its judicatories to "hear their questions" and receive their contributions to the life of the church as a resource in the interpretive process (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 10). In their efforts, they claimed their inheritance as heirs to the Reformed tradition and asserted that "no understanding of what Scripture teaches us to believe and do can be correct that ignores or contradicts the central and primary revelation of God and God's will through Jesus Christ made known through the witness of Scripture" (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 11). As advocates for LGBTQIA+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage would argue for decades to come, affirming biblical authority did not imply the rejection of other sources of knowledge, nor did it demand the literal reading of scripture and dogmatic conformity to the very words of the church's confessions. Thus, according to queer members and their allies, while Presbyterians relied on the extra-biblical traditions passed down to them as resources that inform Christian conduct, their arguments about sexual and gender diversity were guided by an affirmation of the efficacy of Christ's reconciliation of the world unto God as attested in scripture.

While maintaining the historic Reformed commitment to "the interpretation of scripture by scripture," as enshrined in various confessions, the guidelines also gave pride of place to the Augustinian rule of love (PC(USA) 1999b, pp. 12–13). In language that advocates for full inclusion would strategically employ in the years to come, the guidelines stated, "any interpretation of Scripture is wrong that separates or sets in opposition love for God and love for fellow human beings, including both love expressed in individual relations and in human community (social justice). No interpretation of Scripture is correct that leads to or supports contempt for any individual or group of persons either within or outside the church" (PC(USA) 1999b, pp. 12–13). The guidelines noted the church's reliance upon God's tendency to shed more light upon scripture when they stated, "no doctrinal or ethical interpretation of Scripture whether long-established or new, is to be accepted as a final word, but is always subject to possible revision and correction as a result of further study of scripture" (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 15). It was because of their close reading of the biblical text through the lens of the doctrinal system enshrined in their church's confessions, not in spite of it, that many Presbyterians responded passionately to the unequal treatment of LGBTQIA+ persons in society.

The 197th General Assembly (1985) condemned More Light churches that "continued to exercise congregational autonomy by ordaining gay elders and deacons" (Koch and Curry 2000, p. 206). That assembly's action triggered "heated debate over the next several years" (Koch and Curry 2000, p. 206). At the same time, the church's commitment to *civil*

rights for all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, remained constant. The majority of commissioners at the 199th General Assembly in 1987 made the social policy elaborated at previous church gatherings more explicit when they again declared their support for “the elimination . . . of laws governing private sexual behavior between consenting adults [and the passage] of laws forbidding discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, housing, and public accommodations . . . ”. (PC(USA) 1987, p. 776). Though the church would affirm this conviction at future assemblies, the statement did not prevent many church leaders from supporting both civil and ecclesial bans on same-sex marriage and LGBTQIA+ ordination. That said, the 1987 assembly’s decision constituted an implicit endorsement of Presbyterians who had responded compassionately to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It also fit well within the broader social discourse of human rights and equal protection under secular law, but it proved impotent as a tool in the fight over ordination standards.

Though the phrase ‘ordination rights’ is commonly used, ultimately, ordination is not a right granted to all but a privilege and responsibility conferred upon some.⁴¹ Ordination takes center stage in ecclesiastical disputes over sexual orientation and gender identity across most denominational traditions because churches ordain those whom they believe God has called and equipped for leadership. Whether churches consider ordination a sacrament or, as in the case of Presbyterians, embrace a functionalist view of the rite, ordination is one of the ways churches affirm their beliefs and insure their community’s faithfulness to the Christian tradition. Advocates for full inclusion knew they could not rely simply on the church’s commitment to social justice as a basis for LGBTQIA+ ordination; Their cause had to be built upon theological foundations that honored the church’s distinct history and polity.⁴²

4.5. *Hearing the Voices of Peoples Long Silenced*

Following the 1987 GA’s endorsement of the church’s duty to uphold the fundamental human rights of all people, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex characteristics, many Presbyterians believed it was time for the church to revisit the ‘topic’ of human sexuality in general. To that end, the 1987 assembly also approved an overture from the Presbytery of Cayuga-Syracuse and a resolution from the assembly’s Committee on Justice and Rights of Persons to “engage in a comprehensive study of human sexuality” (PC(USA) 1991, P). Pursuant to this resolution, the assembly created the Human Sexuality Committee (HSC) and tasked it with addressing broad questions about human sexuality.

After three years of intra-ecclesial discernment, the committee presented a lengthy report to the 203rd General Assembly in 1991. The majority report was titled *Keeping Body and Soul Together: Sexuality, Spirituality, and Social Justice*. It was published along with a minority report as *Presbyterians and Human Sexuality* (PC(USA) 1991). The report quickly “became the most widely read (at least the most widely purchased) report ever issued by a General Assembly task force” (Anderson 1997, p. 49). As evidenced by the document’s content, PLGC and their allies were well represented on the HSC (Holmen 2013, p. 280), but its membership reflected the broad spectrum of opinion within the church on sexual orientation and ethics.

Since its first official meeting in 1988, the HSC took its mandate seriously. Building on feminist critiques of contemporary sexual ethics, the majority report asserted, “in a patriarchal culture, permission is granted only for sex between a man and a woman within the institution of male-dominant marriage . . . It is our conviction that this patriarchal code, not the persons questioning and deviating from it, is what is morally deficient and unjust. Far from being natural, much less divinely decreed . . . Feminists and gay persons, in particular, are pressing the church to acknowledge that its traditional moral code about sex is patriarchal . . . Any model of sexuality and sexual relations which serves to keep heterosexual women, lesbians, and gay men subordinate is fundamentally unjust. It deserves not our allegiance but our strongest critique” (PC(USA) 1991, pp. 16–17). The committee’s findings reflected the multi-vectored impact of apologetic ministries of presence on church

leaders. Throughout their years of discernment, HSC members from across the theological spectrum encountered one another in a spirit of openness and dialogue.

The *Brief Statement of Faith of the PC(USA)*, also formally adopted at the 1991 assembly, was designed to support the church's efforts to find unity amid diversity. As the confessional culmination of the efforts that led to and sustained the 1983 reunion of the major Northern and Southern churches, the Brief Statement celebrates the church's "rediscovery that for all our undoubted diversity, we are bound together by a common faith and a common task" (PC(USA) 2019, p. 309). The church's then-newest confession summarized and restated the assertions of the other historic confessional texts, alongside which it would soon be included in the Book of Confessions. Drawing upon the insights of Native American Presbyterians and the work of scholars like George E. 'Tink' Tinker, the new document called Presbyterians to "hear the voices of peoples long silenced" (PC(USA) 2019, 11.3-6/70). In that same spirit, the HSC stated, "by decentering the 'patriarchal' voices of our culture and by inviting the voices of the marginalized to be heard, we believe we heard the cries of God's spirit of love and justice and hope" (PC(USA) 1991, p. 55). The report then recounted stories of gay and lesbian Presbyterians who spoke to the committee about their experiences in life and faith (PC(USA) 1991, pp. 55–56).

Echoing the Christological focus of the Confession of 1967 and the UPCUSA Task Force to Study Homosexuality's 1978 majority report, the 1991 HSC's majority implored the church to view debates about human sexuality through the lens of an "ethic of justice and love" founded upon Christ's reconciling work in the world (Smith 2022, 1.1). Drawing on the Adopting Act tradition, its 1788 codification in the constitution, debates over the Auburn Affirmation, the 1927 report of the Swearingen Commission, and other developments, supporters of the HSC's policy recommendations asserted that ordaining judicatories (sessions for ruling elders and deacons, presbyteries for teaching elders/ministers), not the General Assembly, maintain the right and responsibility to ordain candidates to the ordered ministries. Thus, as advocates for full inclusion had argued since the early 1970s, the HSC's majority concluded that rather than proscribing the ordination of LGBTQIA+ people who otherwise conformed to the church's historical expectations of candidates, responsible judicatories should again be trusted to faithfully examine potential entrants to the ordered ministries.

While GA sponsored working groups that had studied issues closely often called the church to reevaluate long-held beliefs on any number of issues, in the words of one scholar, the HSC issued a powerful declaration that was "true, perhaps. Honest, perhaps. Forward thinking, perhaps. But it was all too much" (Holmen 2013, p. 385). The HSC had taken seriously its task of revisiting the church's entire conception of human sexuality. However, by challenging basic assumptions on almost every page without reflecting on the relationship between debates over human sexuality and the church's historic polity principles in detail, they asked too much of commissioners and delegates to the 1991 assembly. Unfortunately for LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies, the HSC's "recommendations were not even considered" by the assembly (Anderson 1997, p. 49). Instead, the majority of commissioners endorsed the HSC's *minority report* and thus maintained a ban on the ordination of openly non-celibate LGBTQIA+ officers. Furthermore, though it was not yet legal in many U.S. states, the 1991 assembly followed previous GAs when it rejected *Christian* (i.e., church-sanctioned/blessed) same-sex marriage in principle.

In 1992, the decision against adopting the HSC's majority proposal compelled leaders connected to PLGC and the broader More Light Churches Movement (which often functioned as a catch-all referent for LGBTQIA+ advocacy in the church) to form the More Light Churches Network (MLCN). The goal of the organization was "to strengthen their joint witness to the inclusive nature of the gospel and to work more effectively to change denominational policies that are a scandal to the gospel, and that continue to oppress and exclude people on the basis of sexual orientation" (LPPC/MLCN 1999, p. 1). Queer Presbyterians and their allies also performed another apologetic ministry of presence on the General Assembly floor; This time, no one was expected to stand atop a chair and call

their question alone. The group that organized the protest called themselves ‘Presbyterian Act-Up.’ Both supporters of the PLGC and the loosely connected More Light Movement had been strategic in their decisions to break church laws by ordaining LGBTQIA+ persons as elders and deacons. Though members of Act-Up were associated with the PLGC and the More Light Churches Movement, amidst the political maneuvering that led to the creation of the MLCN, the informal group felt compelled to perform a comparatively forceful ministry of presence at the church’s national gathering. A leader in Act-Up declared, “PLGC is the ‘decency and order’ organization, and in indecent times, the Holy Spirit may not always have the time or patience for orderly procedures” (Anderson in [Holmen 2013](#), p. 384).

Despite the radical ethos of Act-Up, protests at the 1991 assembly were, in fact, conducted with both decency and order. Moved by his encounters with LGBTQIA+ people, Moderator Herbert Valantine permitted demonstrators to occupy the assembly hall. Somewhere between 500 and 1000 Presbyterians took to the convention center floor (see [Anderson 1997](#), p. 50). Some protestors wore pink triangles as a reclaimed symbol that evoked memories of the NAZI regime’s confinement of gay people to concentration camps; Others wore symbols of their ecclesial office ([Settingington 2013](#)). Protestors formed a procession, carried a large wooden cross above their heads to the front of the assembly hall, hammered nails into its cruciform beams, and began singing hymns in affirmation of their identity as LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and allies. The sound of iron crashing against iron echoed throughout the space as protestors drove nails into the dry arms of the makeshift cross. The most widely recognized symbol of the Christian faith took on new meaning in that place as queer people and their allies bore gruesome witness to the violent reality of their exclusion ([PMA 1991](#), video time stamp 17:37).

LGBTQIA+ groups refined their efforts following the 1991 assembly, but they were not the only ones to recognize the critical phase of discernment through which the church was moving. In the lead-up to the 205th General Assembly, which was scheduled to meet in Orlando in 1993, five conservative students at Princeton Theological Seminary considered an overture from the Presbytery of New Brunswick (Princeton is located within its geographic bounds) that would have removed the ban on LGBTQIA+ ordination. In consultation with Ulrich W. Mauser (1926–2008), Professor of New Testament at the seminary, they produced and widely circulated a document known as the “Princeton Declaration.” The text sounded a humanitarian tone when compared to the denunciations issued by the ‘Princeton Theologians’ in past generations (see Section 3.5 above). Nevertheless, this new group of conservative Princetonians asserted, “the Bible is unambiguous in its affirmation of male-female covenantal sexual relationship and its condemnation of homosexual practice” ([Reformed Fellowship 2020](#)). The students, and those who subsequently signed the document, then affirmed their support of the denomination’s exclusionary stance toward LGBTQIA+ ordination.

When commissioners met in Orlando that year, the New Brunswick and accompanying overtures failed to garner enough support, and the ban on the ordination of ‘practicing’ LGBTQIA+ candidates was upheld by a 72% majority of assembly commissioners ([OCRT 2001](#)). Before and after the 1993 meeting, important cases about the ordination of gays and lesbians as deacons, ruling elders, and ministers were also heard by the GA-PJC.⁴³ These cases centered not only around ‘illegal ordinations,’ but also around those ordinations and installations which had been sustained under the ‘grandparent clause’ (Paragraph 14) of the 1978/1979 definitive guidance. Contradicting both the letter and the spirit of Paragraph 14, the church set up a “catch-22” for those queer Presbyterians who had already been ordained. According to the GA-PJC, pre-1978/1979 “Ordinations were ‘safe’ but no call to serve in a position requiring ordination is permitted” ([Anderson 1997](#), p. 53).

Recognizing that the church was at an impasse, the assembly called for a three-year intra-ecclesial dialogue on the ordination question, which was set to conclude at the 1996 assembly. Over the course of the next three years, special organizations and assembly commissioners from across the theological spectrum engaged one another with varying degrees of cordiality and articulated their competing visions for the church’s future. With

trepidation, the commissioners and advisory delegates packed their bags in the summer of 1996 and set out for the 208th GA in Albuquerque, where overtures on LGBTQIA+ ordination awaited adjudication. Many feared the debates to come would be “apocalyptic” and even asserted, “nothing less than the survival of the faith is at stake” (in [Holmen 2013](#), p. 396). Thus, the stage was set for a decade and a half of vitriol over amendments to the church’s constitution regarding ordination standards.

4.6. Fidelity, Chastity, and the Stole

As LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies feared, U.S. President Bill Clinton’s decision to sign the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) into law in 1996 was paralleled by the passage of an amendment to the PC(USA)’s *Book of Order* (BOO). The amendment passed at the Albuquerque assembly in 1996 and was ratified by the majority of presbyteries in 1997. Commonly referred to as the ‘fidelity and chastity’ amendment, G-6.0106B (often called simply ‘Amendment B’) codified a prohibition of LGBTQIA+ ordination in the church’s constitution for the first time in its history.

Dismayed, LGBTQIA+ advocates and allies again took to the floor of the assembly in an act of solemn protest. They believed the GA’s decision to codify the exclusion of openly queer Presbyterians from the ordered ministries in the church’s constitution was a denial of their baptismal identity in Christ that had deadly consequences for LGBTQIA+ people. Recognizing the gravity of the moment, they refused to yield the symbols of their office to those who might use them as instruments of domination and exclusion in the name of Christ. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported about the protest as follows “After the vote on the ordination amendment, six gay ordination activists, mimicking pallbearers carrying a casket, silently carried in a prone cross draped with white clerical stoles. They were followed by hundreds of mourners who stood silently in front of the assembly, some men with arms around men, some women hand in hand, many weeping openly. After several minutes of silence, they left singing a song whose only lyric was ‘we are marching in the light of God’” (in [Anderson 1996a](#)).

As we will see below, Amendment B did not explicitly mention homosexuality, but its intent to exclude ‘practicing’ gays and lesbians from office was clear. Amending the constitution for the purpose of excluding a group of people from ordained office was, indeed, a drastic move that was out of step with the church’s historic polity principles. As early as 1978, the UPCUSA’s Task Force to Study Homosexuality, which included Presbyterians from across the ideological spectrum, had asserted, “the General Assembly may initiate an amendment to the Constitution to prohibit the ordination of a self-affirming, practicing homosexual person. However, the task force *unanimously opposes* such an action” (Emphasis added, [UPCUSA 1978](#), p. 47). The task force further noted the blatant inconsistency of such an amendment with the church’s historic affirmation of freedom of conscience on non-essentials and warned of the dangers that might proceed from such an unabashed ecclesio-political maneuver. The report stated, “in no other case does the Constitution bar from ordination a specific type of person. In no other case does the Constitution single out a specific category of behavior as an automatic bar to ordination . . . Such a constitutional amendment would violate legitimate individual Christian conscience within the church, forcing some . . . Presbyterians . . . to deny what they believe, to believe what they deny, or to withdraw from the church” ([UPCUSA 1978](#), p. 47).

The passage of Amendment B was celebrated by conservatives, but it shocked the consciences of many ‘moderate’ Presbyterians who had sought to avoid conflict and feared that the emphasis on sexuality (on both ‘poles’ of the ideological spectrum) was distracting the church from its mission. Thus, like Old Side/School policies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Portland Deliverance of 1892, and the Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910, if Amendment B was a victory for opponents of full inclusion, it was a costly and temporary one. Though the text that became G-6.0106B added a legally enforceable clause to the constitution in accordance with the church’s procedural mechanisms, it undermined historic Presbyterian polity principles and was discordant with the tone and tenor of the

constitution itself. As Gillespie predicted decades earlier, the debates that followed the passage of ‘Amendment B’ galvanized the support of many moderates for the removal of the church’s new constitutional ban on ordination because they believed Amendment B supplanted the power of presbyteries, disturbed the church’s peace, and threatened denominational cohesion.

Reflecting on the growing number of LGBTQIA+ advocates and allies present at the church’s annual (soon to be bi-annual) assemblies, a contributor to the *More Light Update* wrote, “I want us to keep remembering, to not forget what happened in Albuquerque. Because I think in many ways we won. We won because so many of us came. We won because so many of us learned and had our eyes opened to what it is we need to do on the local level to get our people behind pulpits . . . We won because we came together as a faith community and witnessed to the entire Assembly what it is to be gay and lesbian Christians . . . We won because we had heterosexual allies in larger numbers than ever before speaking out for us and joining us as members of our family . . . We won because we never stopped singing and dancing and believing that justice will come” (in [Anderson 1996b](#)).

In anticipation of Amendment B’s passage, Martha Juillerat and Tammy Lindahl launched the ‘Shower of Stoles Project’ (SOSP). Juillerat decided to set aside her ordination to live openly with her partner and “protest institutionalized homophobia within the church” ([Juillerat and Lindahl 2014](#), video time stamp 9:41). While embodying the principles that compelled Sindt and his cohort to perform an apologetic ministry of presence, Juillerat made her presence felt through strategic withdrawal.

After readying herself for the last presbytery meeting she would attend as a presbyter, Juillerat went to the 207th GA in 1995 and invited LGBTQIA+ faith leaders to send in their stoles as a reminder that “it wasn’t just us [Juillerat and Lindahl] . . . that if we left, this problem wouldn’t just go away” ([Juillerat and Lindahl 2014](#)). In a reflection on the discernment process that led to the project, Juillerat explained, “we sat around trying to think of a symbol. A friend of ours came up with the symbol of a stole, and she said, why don’t you ask people to just send you stoles with their stories on them” ([Juillerat and Lindahl 2014](#))? The project started small but grew to include “over a thousand liturgical stoles and other sacred items from lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender . . . people from twenty-six denominations in six countries” ([Juillerat and Lindahl 2014](#)). LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and allies had sojourned to Albuquerque in droves. Indeed, the pallbearing protest was possible because queer presbyterians and allies had brought their stoles with them and wore them throughout the assembly. In the days before and after the passage of Amendment B, hundreds performed a ministry of presence by “wearing stoles, their own, their friend’s, their children’s, or a stranger’s” (in [Holmen 2013](#), p. 399).

Following the 1996 assembly and the ratification of G-6.0106B by the majority of presbyteries in 1997, conservatives celebrated while LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians regrouped and strategically mobilized the army of moderate allies who had now rallied to their cause. The SOSP exhibit made its way through Presbyterian churches around the country and was featured in the exhibition hall at subsequent GAs. The project celebrated “the gifts of LGBT+ people of faith while also lifting up those who have been excluded from service” ([Juillerat and Lindahl 2014](#)).

4.7. Fidelity, Integrity, and Covenant

In 1997, the 209th General Assembly met in Syracuse. Though they were not permitted to protest on the assembly floor, advocates for inclusion filled the hallways and exhibit areas singing, shouting, and waving signs. That same year, a group of mostly allies formed the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, which sought to further the cause of full inclusion while moderating the seemingly radical elements within More Light and other groups. Founders of the network included recent GA Moderators like Bob Bohl (206th Assembly in 1994) and John Buchanan (208th Assembly in 1996), along with other prominent leaders in the denomination.⁴⁴ They employed the biblical language of ‘covenant’ not only as a reminder that many queer Presbyterians lived in life-giving covenantal relationships but

also that the church itself is a covenantal community. In a press release on 15 August 1997, Bohl and Buchanan asserted, “John Calvin’s great vision ‘that we may dwell in perfect unity’ seems more critical than ever for our beloved church” (PHS 2022a, RG-531 B1/F1). They then pledged “to seek the common ground that will allow us to move beyond differences on specific issues to the vital mission the Spirit has in store for us (PHS 2022a, RG-531 B1/F1).

The leaders of the Covenant Network recognized that, though the GA was the epicenter of national church life, that body could only speak *to* the church in accordance with the powers enumerated to it. Real authority rested in Presbyteries. Based upon this recognition, the Covenant Network buttressed the longstanding mid-council efforts of the PLGC by organizing among presbyteries to nominate pro-inclusion commissioners and help draft overtures that called for the repeal of the ‘fidelity and chastity’ clause (G-6.0106B) in favor of what they called the ‘fidelity and integrity’ amendment (97-A).

In an affirmation of both the impact of queer Presbyterian ministries of presence at GAs and the efficacy of intra-ecclesial politicking at the mid-council level, a version of the revised ordination standard passed in the 1997 assembly. Unfortunately for pro-inclusion groups, the amendment was voted down by the majority of presbyteries in 1998. If ‘Amendment A’, as it was also known, had been ratified by the presbyteries, it would have modified the language Amendment B had added to the Book of Order a year earlier. The amended version of the new constitutional ordination standard would have replaced the prescription of “chastity and singleness” for all people living outside of heterosexual marriage with an admonition that called all candidates “to demonstrate fidelity and integrity in marriage and singleness, and in all relationships of life . . . ” (PHS 2022a, RG-531).

Advocates for full inclusion believed replacement of G-6.0106B with the text of Amendment 97-A would have both removed the most formidable barrier to LGBTQIA+ ordination and brought the church’s constitution back into alignment with historic Presbyterian polity principles. Since the differences between G-6.0106B and Amendment A are subtle, a detailed comparison of the respective clauses is necessary. Table 1 tracks the textual differences between the two clauses.

Table 1. Interlinear Comparison of Amendments B and A.

G-6.0106B (Amendment B-1996):	Amendment A (Proposed Text-1997):
“Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life of 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” (PC(USA) 2001, G-6.0106B).	“Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture and instructed by the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to demonstrate fidelity and integrity in marriage and singleness, and in all relationships of life.” (PHS 2022a).
Obedience: “Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life of <i>obedience to scripture</i>”	Obedience: “Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in <i>obedience to Jesus Christ, under the Authority of Scripture</i>”
Confessional Standards: “ . . . and <i>in conformity to</i> the historic confessional standards of the church.”	Confessional Standards: “ . . . and <i>instructed by</i> the historic confessional standards of the church.”
Relationship Standards: “ . . . Among these standards is the requirement to <i>live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity and singleness.</i> ”	Relationship Standards: “Among these standards is the requirement to <i>demonstrate fidelity and integrity in marriage and singleness, and in all relationships of life.</i> ”
Proscription of ordination/installation Based Upon Sexual Activity/Relationship Status: “ . . . <i>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 Word and Sacrament.</i> ”	Prescription of ordination/installation Based Upon Sexual Activity/Relationship Status:

The differences between Amendments B and A become apparent upon comparison. Amendment B called for ‘obedience to scripture’, while Amendment A would have mandated that the church’s officers must ‘lead a life in obedience to Jesus Christ under the authority of scripture.’ Many Presbyterians glimpsed the specter of the Portland Deliverance of 1892 and the Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910 lurking behind the wording of Amendment B’s first sub-clause and feared it was another attempt to “write biblical literalism into the constitution” (Holmen 2013, p. 404). Amendment A, in contrast, bore witness to the Christocentric nature of biblical authority as enshrined most visibly in the 1934 Barmen Declaration, Confession of 1967, Brief Statement of Faith of 1991, and the guidelines for the interpretation of scripture, respectively, affirmed by the Northern and Southern assemblies in 1982 and 1983.

Whereas Amendment B required Presbyterian ordinands to live ‘in conformity to’ the church’s confessional standards, Amendment A challenged ordinands to be ‘instructed’ by them. In the eighteenth century, Old Side Presbyterians had argued for conformity (i.e., absolute subscription) to the so-called ‘Westminster Standards’, outlined in the Confession and the 1644 Directory for Worship. However, their perspective was one that, at least among mainline Presbyterians, had become a minority in the intervening centuries. As U.S. Presbyterians on all ‘sides’ and in every ‘school’ had affirmed since 1729, Reformed confessions are ‘subordinate standards’ to scripture. While the church’s historic affirmations bear witness to the timeless truth of the gospel to which the Bible testifies, they are directed at particular concerns within a specific time and locality. Indeed, the 209th Assembly asserted in its 1997 report on the *Confessional Nature of the Church*, “even when their writers have believed they were formulating Christian truth valid for all time and places, their work has been directed not only to but limited by their particular time and place” (PC(USA) 2019, p. ix). Therefore, “the confessions are not honored if they are robbed of historical particularity by imagining that they are timeless expressions of truth” (PC(USA) 2019, p. iv).

In light of the numerous inconsistencies between the documents included within the Book of Confessions, it is clear that the first volume of the church’s constitution is meant to be read as a synoptic compilation. As the 1997 assembly stated, “this multiplicity of confessions, written by many people in many places over such a great span of time, obviously means that the Reformed tradition has never been content to recognize any one confession or collection of confessions as an absolute, infallible statement of the faith of Reformed Christians for all time” (PC(USA) 2019, p. xii). Consequently, in the words of the preamble to the Confession of 1967, “no one confession is exclusively valid, no one statement is irreformable. Obedience to Jesus Christ alone identifies the one universal church and supplies the continuity of its tradition” (PC(USA) 2019, 9.03).

Advocates and allies of inclusion may have wondered, if the wording of Amendment B were followed to its logical conclusion, would Presbyterians be expected to ‘conform’ to the anti-Roman Catholic polemics contained in the church’s sixteenth and seventeenth-century documents? Would they be forced to endorse the misogynistic declarations against women’s civil authority in the Scots (XXV) and Second Helvetic Confessions (XX)? How should believers judge between confessions when those documents interpret scripture in ways that place them in tension with one another, as is evidenced by their inconsistent treatment of the doctrine of double predestination?⁴⁵ As these rhetorical questions make clear, the PC(USA)’s confessions are used in accordance with that church’s tradition when they are empowered to instruct the reading of scripture upon which Presbyterians believe God’s Spirit is continually shedding new light. Conversely, they are misused when set up as timeless dogmatic adjudications or infallible encyclicals that limit debate and demand uncritical obedience. Additionally, if Presbyterians are not free to engage earnestly and in good conscience with historic confessional standards, how can they be expected to act according to the church’s historic principles of government as codified in the Radical Principles of 1797 and again in the post-1983 Form of Government?

In contrast to Amendment B's call for all ordinands to 'live in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or in chastity and singleness', Amendment A asserted that candidates must 'demonstrate fidelity and integrity in marriage and singleness, and in all relationships of life.' Far from rejecting the church's historic concerns for sexual ethics, marriage, and family life, supporters of Amendment A often expressed their hope that those bonds might be strengthened by repealing G-6.0106B. While the notion of clerical celibacy was considered out of step with the Reformed tradition, the call to live with 'fidelity and integrity in all areas of life' is a commandment that all Christians can affirm.

Some overtures to the 1994 assembly, which had called for the changes subsequently codified in Amendment B, used the phrase 'fidelity and celibacy' rather than 'chastity and singleness.' However, the final version of Amendment B, which emerged from the appropriately tasked constitutional advisory committees, included the modified wording, which obscured the earlier version's more obvious focus on the sex lives of clerics. Furthermore, the committees also presumably thought the requirement of 'chastity' for clergy might be easier for Reformed Christians from across the theological spectrum to stomach. Yet, the adjusted wording problematically limited the scope of 'chastity', which can include sexual abstinence, but also embraces a range of 'Christian' behaviors such as moral purity, innocence, goodness, decency, decorum, and modesty. Thus, many Presbyterians from across the theological spectrum believed that consigning 'chastity' to either abstinence or heteronormative marital intercourse "wholly skewed the traditional meaning of chastity and assigned a new meaning of single persons not having sex" (Vermaak 2009, p. 240). Thus, advocates for full inclusion argued that "whether 'celibacy' or 'chastity' (which essentially meant celibacy in this context) is used as a requirement for candidates of office to be ordained and/or installed, it runs counter to the Reformed tradition" (Vermaak 2009, p. 241).

Additionally, Reformed believers have long confessed that 'Godly' behavior is a response to faith rather than its precedent. Therefore, in words that recalled both Ephesians 2:3 and the Confession of 1967, supporters of Amendment A argued that G-6.0106B had established a dangerous precedent not only for LGBTQIA+ people but for the entire church. In the words of one advocate for repeal, Amendment B "moves us from the faith-based criteria of the Reformed tradition to a behavior-based criteria that places us in judgement of one another". Thus, "new dividing walls of hostility are built, and reconciliation is abandoned" (in Holmen 2013, p. 403).

Finally, Amendment B also asserted that '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 Word and Sacrament'. The version of Amendment A proposed in 1997 would have deleted that clause from the constitution entirely. In addition to prohibiting the ordination of openly LGBTQIA+ candidates, Amendment B targeted openly queer ministers who had already been ordained and were currently *installed* in church offices. As the records of the GA-PJC reveal, G-6.0106B contributed to the development of anti-gay witch hunts or "inquisition[s]" that the 1978/1979 assemblies had tried to avoid (see Anderson 1997, pp. 57–58). It also prompted an existential crisis among many queer clergy who were now more at risk than ever of losing opportunities for gainful employment and the ability to house, clothe, and feed themselves or their families.

Amendment B's wording also implied that the Book of Confessions is replete with condemnations of specific sinful behaviors. However, upon review of the first volume of the church's constitution, advocates for inclusion found only two clauses that seemed to affirm the second volume's newly ratified admonition. First, one's attention must turn toward the previously referenced erroneous translation of 1st Corinthians 6:9 that was added to the Heidelberg Catechism in 1962. Adding fuel to the fires of efforts to repeal Amendment B, the UPCUSA's 1978 report and the PCUS's 1979 position paper had already shown that, even if the term 'homosexual' was rightly added into the Heidelberg (see Section 4.4 above), the Catechism's inclusion of sexual immorality on a list of condemned behaviors did not constitute an ecclesio-legal ban on LGBTQIA+ ordination or marriage.

Second, the 139th question of the Westminster Larger Catechism lists ‘sodomy’ in a compendium of sins that were thought to be condemned by the seventh commandment.⁴⁶ However, the Book of Confessions makes clear in its general notation on the Larger Catechism’s use of scripture in the 139th and other questions, “at several points the Larger Catechism is more specific in its statements than in Scriptures. These statements are inferences from the Scriptures [i.e., deductions that are subject to further scrutiny], or from statements based on the Scriptures, or from the experience and observation of the church” (PC(USA) 2016, 7.249. 7).⁴⁷ If the 139th question of the Westminster Larger Catechism was raised in a particular debate over human sexuality and ordination standards, advocates for inclusion might have been excused for asking sarcastically whether or not their interlocutors planned to apply the same standards to *all* the other ‘sins’ listed in the answer given by the Westminster Assembly. Indeed, several of the behaviors listed in the catechism remain unacceptable to Christians from across the ideological spectrum. That said, advocates for inclusion may have wondered, did their interlocutors plan to desist in the practice of listening to comedians, cracking ‘impudent’ jokes, dressing in ways that a seventeenth century cleric might consider ‘immodest’, (perhaps ironically) taking too long to get married, listening to rowdy songs, dancing, or going to the theater? More poignantly, since the 139th question condemns the ‘entangling vows of [celibate] single life’ taken by Roman Catholic clergy alongside ‘sodomy’, had advocates for Amendment B no shame when they used that catechetical question as a justification for imposing similar ‘vows’ (though Presbyterian ordinands do not technically take ‘vows’) on LGBTQIA+ ordinands?

Upon review of the Heidelberg Catechism’s 87th and the Larger Catechism’s 139th questions, we have now exhausted the Book of Confession’s supposed references to homosexuality. Before the passage of Amendment B, Presbyterians from across the ideological spectrum had recognized that neither of the confession’s clauses could function as a ban on openly LGBTQIA+ ordination. Consequently, the reader will not be surprised that more than one scholar has deduced, “for all the bluster about conforming to confessions and denouncing that which the confessions call sin, there really was nothing in any of the confessions that pertained to LGBTQ relationships” (Holmen 2013, p. 402).

Neither the differences between Amendments B or A nor the respective precedents upon which they drew were lost on those Presbyterians who were deeply involved with the church’s life. In the previously referenced pamphlet that advertised Amendment A prior to the 1997 assembly, the Covenant Network also quoted a section of the 1788 codification of the Adopting Act. The flier asserted, “since 1788 when faced with disagreement, we Presbyterians have said, ‘we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other’ [quoting PC(USA) 1996, G-1.0305]. That means getting along. Staying together. Even when we don’t see eye to eye on everything. We agree on essentials and trust each other to interpret them faithfully” (PHS 2022a, RG-531 B1/F1). In an earlier text, Bohl and Buchanan had also criticized Amendment B on the grounds that a prescription of chastity for LGBTQIA+ persons constitutes a departure from the historic Reformed understanding of ordination. Members of the newly formed Covenant Network, who sought to hold their desire for inclusion and commitment to unity in creative tension, believed that Amendment A would clarify “that our obedience is to Jesus Christ. It restores the Reformed understanding of vocation by acknowledging that service in ordained office is possible only because of God’s grace—not because of our human efforts” (PHS 2022a, RG-531 B1/F1). Yet, far from endorsing sexual licentiousness, Amendment A would “require moral sexual behaviour” within the bounds of covenantal relationships (same-sex marriage was not yet legal in many U.S. states) and remind all ordinands of their charge to live with integrity in all areas of life (PHS 2022a, RG-531 B1/F1).

As the *de facto* leaders of the Covenant Network in its early days, Bohl and Buchanan also moved beyond exegetical and confessional arguments to demonstrate their belief that Amendment A “offers a real opportunity for unity and expresses the feeling of the broad middle of the church” (PHS 2022a, RG-531 B1/F1). They sought to reframe the debate around LGBTQIA+ ordination as a side issue that was distracting the church from its

larger mission. Since its founding in 1965, groups like the Presbyterian Lay Committee had criticized the denomination for being ‘distracted’ by social justice concerns (PLC, History). By arguing that the church’s collective neurosis about gay sex was a distraction from its broader mission, the Covenant Network reversed conservative critiques of inclusive arguments. They suggested that the church’s unhealthy fixation on sexuality hindered its mission and ministry. Thus, in spite of their diversity viewpoint on specific issues related to human sexuality, members of the Covenant Network claimed to support Amendment A and subsequent overtures because they believed doing so would “allow us the grace and the space to grow toward rebirth as a community of God’s people. It will allow us to concentrate on our call to the Great Ends of the Church” (PHS 2022a, RG-531 B1/F1).

By itself, Amendment A would not have abolished the ban on LGBTQIA+ ordination; various AIs and GA-PJC precedents would have remained in effect. However, if it had been ratified by the majority of presbyteries, it would have removed the recently added *constitutional* ban and opened the door for other assemblies to supplant GA-PJC AIs that had been adjudicated based upon either G-6.0106B or the 1978/1979 ‘difinitive guidance’ in future cases. Prior to the rejection of Amendment A by the majority of presbyteries, a rare joint press conference was held with representatives of the PLGC and a member of the board of the conservative group Presbyterians for Renewal (PFR). PLGC representatives celebrated Amendment A’s passage as a “mid-course correction, not a stunning reversal” (OCRT 2001). Scott Anderson,⁴⁸ who would become the first openly gay minister to be ordained in 2011, said the amendment was “a nuance, not so hard, more gracious” (in OCRT 2001). In contrast, the PFR representative lamented that it would “water down the historical standards of the church” and send “a fuzzy message to young people” (in OCRT 2001).⁴⁹

4.8. Pragmatism, Purity, and “Getting This Question Answered”

Like participants in other organic movements, those who debated the church’s policies on human sexuality never coalesced into a monolithic organizational structure; Multiple cohorts arose on all sides of the dispute. Nevertheless, as with the developments following the 1991 General Assembly’s rejection of the HSC report, a degree of consolidation did occur within the ranks of those calling for more inclusive policies following the passage of Amendment B. Building upon relationships established since the 1991 restructuring of special organizations and informal advocacy groups, in 1999, some members of the PLGC formally united with the More Light Churches Network (MLCN) to form More Light Presbyterians (MLP). Others who had supported the work of the PLGC but found the pragmatic impulses of the Covenant Network more appealing joined that organization. Moving forward, people from across the theological spectrum would coalesce into the Covenant Network based on their pragmatic concerns for the church’s unity and the fact that membership in that body did not imply an endorsement of the inclusion movement’s more radical MLP wing.

Regarding real and perceived tensions between the two major pro-LGBTQIA+ organizations, Tricia Dykers-Koenig reported in a 2022 interview conducted for this project, “More Light and Covenant Network worked together in some things but had tension in other things. It was not, generally speaking, about goals; differences were strategic and tactical” (Smith 2022, 3.4). Dykers-Koenig, who had worked with the PLGC and served as the National Organizer of the Covenant Network from 2000 to 2017, spoke openly of the conflict between pragmatism and purity that often shaped relations between the Covenant Network and MLP. She said, “purity on the left is different than on the right, but there is definitely a purity party on the left” (Smith 2022, 3.5). She associated purity with MLP and pragmatism with the Covenant Network. Dykers-Koenig also implied that MLP created spaces where openly LGBTQIA+ people could organize and advocate for their interests while the Covenant Network funneled much-needed institutional power into the movement. She confirmed the broadly pragmatic and centrist vision of the organization whose agenda she shaped for a decade-and-a-half when she explained, “the Covenant

Network was more center-left. It was founded by people based on their understanding of scripture. They recognized that they could use the power that they had in the church, which was considerable in some cases (lots of leaders in big churches and seminaries).⁵⁰ Institutional power needed to be turned toward change; it needed to be used to help the church by getting this question answered in the way the gospel would have it answered” (Smith 2022, 3.6).

On the one hand, the Covenant Network’s concerted efforts and pragmatic approach mobilized the ‘vast middle’ of the church by helping Presbyterians from across the theological spectrum see LGBTQIA+ ordination and marriage through the lens of their faith community’s historic polity principles. On the other, it is difficult to imagine that Presbyterian leaders would have pushed so forcefully if ‘radical’ elements that coalesced into the MLP had not repeatedly performed ministries of presence that called the question on LGBTQIA+ concerns before the church. Though they often disagreed about best practices, both organizations along with the methodologies and dispositions they represent were indispensable to the movement toward full inclusion in the PC(USA).

4.9. *A Call to Sabbatical, Conversion Therapy, Same-Sex Unions, and ‘PUP’*

Exhausted and fearful that ongoing disputes over G-6.0106B would lead to schism, in 1998, “leaders from both sides of the debate over ordination came together to issue a ‘Call to Sabbatical’” (PHS 2018). In the meantime, the question of same-sex unions rose to the fore. At the 212th General Assembly in Long Beach in 2000, three overtures called “for constitutional amendments prohibiting Presbyterian ministers from conducting same-sex unions and forbidding the use of Presbyterian church facilities for the ceremonies” (Adams 2000a). The assembly combined and approved these measures as ‘Amendment 00-O’, but the majority of Presbyteries rejected it in 2001 (PC(USA) 2001). Despite the call to sabbatical, some advocates for inclusion also supported ‘Amendment 01-A’, a descendent of Amendment 97-A (numbers before ‘letter’ indicate the year in which the assembly acted on the proposed amendment), which would have removed the ‘fidelity and chastity’ clause (PC(USA) 2001).

The Presbyteries of Detroit and New York City also sent overtures to the 211th Assembly in 1999 that called the church to move beyond abstract condemnations of homophobia and repent for its complicity in that sin. Some presbyteries also called the church to condemn conversion therapy, which some of its earlier statements implied was a viable ‘treatment’ for homosexual orientation (see Section 4.2 above). The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) adjusted the language to bring the overtures into accordance with the church’s constitution, and the assembly, remarkably, approved the modified overture. The GA reaffirmed its now long-standing policy of welcoming all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, into its membership and issued a non-binding resolution on pastoral care of LGBTQIA+ individuals. The assembly stated clearly, “no church should insist that gay and lesbian people need therapy to change to a heterosexual orientation, nor should it inhibit or discourage those individuals who are unhappy with or confused by their sexual orientation from seeking therapy they believe would be helpful” (PC(USA) 1999a, p. 80). Building upon its long history of affirming the validity of scientific methods and drawing insights from biopsychosocial research, the assembly also declared “the [PC(USA)] affirms that medical treatment, psychological therapy, and pastoral counseling should be in conformity with recognized professional standards” (PC(USA) 1999a, p. 80). The modified overture’s use of the term ‘should’ meant that the assembly’s statement on conversion therapy *strongly advised* ministers not to employ or recommend such practices. Yet, since the statement did not use the term ‘shall’, officers or congregations could not be punished for disregarding this statement.⁵¹

During the sabbatical on ordination standards, conservatives relentlessly argued their position and unleashed a broadside against the consistent use of the Adopting Act by pro-inclusion groups. They suggested that a review of Baird’s highly regarded 1856 account of the 1729 synod meeting and the structure of the clause as codified after the first meeting

of the General Assembly in 1788 ought to prevent the historic principle from being applied to challenge the church's exclusive ordination clause. Ignoring both the long history of application, the precedents established by the Swearingen Commission, and the plain sense of the Adopting Act itself, they asserted that it pertained exclusively to the role of the civil magistrate in handling intra-ecclesial disputes (Adams 2000b). Conveniently, this restrictive reading gave rise to critiques of the perceived influence of secular law on the church in cases where pastors had blessed same-sex civil unions or marriages in states where it was legal. It also fit into broader critiques of inclusive arguments as being unduly influenced by secular forces.

Indeed, as previously noted, the scruples declared amid the 1729 debate pertained to the twentieth and twenty-third chapters of the Confession and had to do with the power of the civil magistrate. Concerning the twentieth and twenty-third chapters, American Presbyterians of previous generations had declared that regarding those "clauses the Synod do unanimously declare, that they do not receive those articles in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority; or power to persecute any for their religion, or in any sense contrary to the Protestant succession to the throne of Great Britain" (in Baird 1856, p. 5). Obviously, early disputes over the scope of the Adopting Act centered around the immediate challenges of early eighteenth century British colonial life and reflected a concern for the church's freedom from civil constraint that would accompany it throughout its history. Yet, as members of the Covenant Network and other groups knew well, the Act also explicitly states that candidates can declare "*any* scruple with respect to *any* article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms" (Emphasis added, in Baird 1856, p. 5). In the centuries following the Act's promulgation, it has been evoked upon the declaration of manifold scruples. Its scope has always included the relationship between church and state, but its application has never been limited to concerns over the civil establishment of religion.

The scope of the Adopting Act and the purpose of the ecclesial bodies that have repeatedly codified it has long been to maintain a healthy tension between the peace, unity, and purity of the church. Since the publication of the Swearingen Commission's report in 1927, Presbyterians have remained acutely aware of their responsibility to further those three essential characteristics of ecclesial life (JPH 2001). Today, at Presbyterian ordination/installation services, deacons, ruling elders, and ministers are asked eight questions, including, "do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church" (PC(USA) 2019, W-4.0404g)?

In light of this three-fold concern for ecclesial health and wellbeing, it is understandable that, in 2001, the 213th General Assembly created the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church (PUP). The assembly charged the group "to lead the [church] in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st Century" (PC(USA) 2001, p. 29). Moderator of the 213th General Assembly, Jack Rogers (1934–2016), who would become a passionate advocate for LGBTQIA+ ordination and marriage, appointed twenty members to the committee.

After more than four years of discernment, the task force submitted its final report to the 217th General Assembly in 2006. The group was not expected to take a position on the constitutionality of the 'fidelity and chastity' clause, and it did not do so (PC(USA) 2006, p. 20). Yet, the majority of its members buttressed the church's long-standing position on LGBTQIA+ membership when it asserted, "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" (PC(USA) 2006, p. 20). Furthermore, in line with the church's 1978 and 1979 adjudications, the group also agreed that "sexual orientation is, in itself, no barrier to ordination" (PC(USA) 2006, p. 20). While remaining within the bounds of its mandate, the report called for "Christ-like alternatives to the 'yes/no' forms in which questions about sexuality, ordination, and same-gender covenantal relationships have been put to the church in recent decades" (PC(USA) 2006, p. 21). The cohort also commended the

church's historic guidelines for the faithful study of scripture and evoked the Adopting Act tradition as a resource in the struggle to balance the mandates of peace, unity, and purity (PC(USA) 2006, p. 24). Consequently, "a critical insight of the ... report was the reaffirmation of the legacy of the scruple applicable to the fidelity and chastity requirement for ordination" (Holmen 2013, p. 436).

While its members recognized the right of ministers and members to scruple, the PUP task force reflected the extra-judicial influence of the Presbytery of New Brunswick's Apology, the Auburn Affirmation, and other important works upon the church's development. It asserted that the PC(USA) and its predecessor denominations have always recognized the theological and practical necessities of defining certain doctrines, polity, and practices as essential and "indispensable for ordained service" (PC(USA) 2006, p. 37). Thus, in the tradition of the Swearingen Commission, the group proposed an AI of the constitution. The AI placed the authority to decide on questions about ordination firmly back into the proverbial hands of the ordaining judicatory (congregations, through sessions, for ruling elders and deacons, presbyteries for teaching elders/ministers) but emphasized: "as well the power of higher governing bodies to review ordination and installation decisions *if they are challenged*" (Emphasis added, PC(USA) 2006, p. 38). Thus, higher church organs would retain appellate jurisdiction over *specific cases* in which ordinations or installations had been challenged. Though the church could not preemptively ban LGBTQIA+ people from ordination or installation *as a class*, when examining candidates and reviewing judicial matters, higher bodies were required to apply the church's law as it is stated in the constitution. Since Amendment B functioned as a ban on the ordination of 'practicing' homosexuals, sessions, presbyteries, synods, the GA, and their judicial commissions had to enforce it in specific cases.

After the 217th General Assembly approved the PUP Task Force's recommended AI in 2006, advocates for inclusion in progressive presbyteries and congregations professed a willingness to ordain individuals on a 'don't ask, don't tell' basis. Yet, so long as the 'fidelity and chastity' clause remained in effect, any LGBTQIA+ person who was not either celibate or dishonest about their relationship status was effectively barred from ordination. Consequently, though the task force's report formally "linked the time-honored concept of scruple with LGBT ordination under Amendment B" and reemphasized the possibility for "disagreement" with the church's policy, it did not leave room for "disobedience" of the constitution (Holmen 2013, pp. 436–37). Presbyterians were free to express their conscientious objections to the church's policy, but they were not free to disobey its rulings: As had been recognized since the eighteenth century and has been noted multiple times above, freedom of conscience and the right to scruple as then enshrined in G-6.0108 of the constitution did not imply freedom of *action* (i.e., the freedom to disregard G-6.0106B).⁵² So long as Amendment B remained in the constitution, responsible bodies were not permitted to ordain non-celibate officers. If they did, and a case was brought that challenged the action, said ordinations would be overturned.

At the 218th Assembly in 2008,⁵³ advocates for inclusion again managed to pass an overture known as "Amendment 08-A," which would have modified the language of the church's ordination standards and allowed for LGBTQIA+ clergy, but it failed by a mere 51/49 percent margin to gain the support of a majority of presbyteries when it was sent to them for ratification in 2009. The 2008 assembly also issued what some have called the 'Knox AI.' This Authoritative Interpretation of the Constitution resulted from an overture from the John Knox Presbytery (South-West Wisconsin and North-East Iowa) that followed debates in that body over the candidacy of Scott Anderson for ordination. The Knox AI essentially reiterated the previous assembly's AI, which was based upon the recommendation of the Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. It asserted, "examining bodies [are required] to give prayerful and careful consideration, on an individual, case-by-case basis, to any departure from the ordination standard in matters of belief or practice that a candidate may declare during an examination. However, the examining body is not required to accept a departure from standards" (in Holmen 2013, p. 438). Thus, while

all candidates have the right to declare scruples with the church's constitution, ordaining bodies are not automatically required to accept them.

Despite the Knox AI's appeal to the previous assembly's decision, and in hopes that Amendment 08-A would be ratified, Anderson followed in the Presbyterian tradition of issuing a written 'apology.' He submitted a document to the John Knox Presbytery's Committee on Preparation for Ministry (CPM), which he called an "Affirmation of Conscience". Another LGBTQIA+ candidate for ordination looked back to the Protestant Reformation for inspiration and evoked the tone and tenor of Martin Luther's alleged statement before the Diet of Worms in 1521. Recalling the sixteenth-century reformer's brave stand, Lisa Larges denounced the fidelity and chastity requirement and declared her scruple; "by my conscience, faith and theology, I cannot and will not accept the terms of this standard" (PC(USA) 2009). Yet, because the church's understanding of the Adopting Act tradition allowed for freedom of *conscience* but not freedom of *action*, in so doing, she gave up her right to be ordained, at least for a time.

At the 2008 assembly, the Shower of Stoles project was complemented by an MLP ministry of presence that provided hand-knit or crocheted rainbow scarves to any commissioner or advisory delegate who supported full inclusion and wished to wear one.⁵⁴ As a result, one thousand scarves were knit for the 2008 assembly by people from around the world; Thousands more were created for successive gatherings. When delegates approached the More Light booth, they were confronted by a massive pile of rainbow scarves. After digging through and selecting the scarf they most appreciated, a More Light representative approached them. The More Light team clarified the meaning of the scarf and then offered a 'charge', which was not unlike the charge given in Presbyterian ordination services (Engardio 2010). Thus, despite continual setbacks, LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and allies from across backgrounds continued employing historic symbols of Christian ordination as a ministry of presence at national church gatherings to confront the myth of Queer-Christian non-existence. Clearly, the 'problem' of LGBTQIA+ ordination was not going away.

5. The Question Finally Answered

5.1. nFOG, Ordination, and Amendment 10A

After decades of tension, the church recognized that it needed to reform its constitution from the ground up. To that end, a pared-down version of the Book of Order, known then as the New Form of Government (nFOG), was affirmed by the 219th General Assembly in 2010 and ratified by the majority of presbyteries in 2011. Many saw the new structure as a return to core principles of Presbyterian polity and theology. Most also realized that it could open the doors for the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in the church.

The commissioners and advisory delegates to the 2010 GA again passed an overture calling for an amendment that would remove the fidelity and chastity clause from the constitution. If passed, LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies hoped against hope that the revised standard would finally bring the church's law back into conformity with their reading of the Adopting Act tradition and remove exclusive ordination policies. In a shocking affirmation of the notion that historical change arrives slowly but happens fast, 'Amendment 10-A' was ratified by the majority of presbyteries in 2011 and became G-2.0104b of the new Book of Order. The amendment reasserted a critical provision of the Adopting Act tradition when it confirmed that the decision of whether to ordain openly LGBTQIA+ persons to ministry rests with "the governing body responsible for ordination or installation [sessions for ruling elders/deacons, presbyteries for teaching elders]" (PC(USA) 2019, G.14.0240 & G-14.0450).⁵⁵

Predictably, conservatives were outraged by the decision. Though many in the church saw the new amendment as a return to historic policy principles, contributors to *The Layman* denounced the action and continued sounding the horn for schism. One author saw fit to quote Joshua 24 in an ominous article titled, *Choose this Day Whom you will Serve*. He asserted, "in rejecting the concept that the Bible means what it says, the current ruling

majority in the PC(USA) has departed from the founding principles of both the PC(USA) and historic Presbyterianism . . . the question is what will you do? . . . How you respond to 10A will communicate a lot about where you stand regarding the nature of God, sin, the authority of the Scriptures, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and the nature of Christian doctrine" ([Presbyterian Layman 2011](#)).

After years of organizing, in 2014, the conservative members of the Fellowship of Presbyterians and Presbyterians for Renewal (PFR) finally declared their intent to separate from the PC(USA) and found the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO). In response to the church's movement toward greater inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people and general dissatisfaction with the denomination, the New Wineskins Association of Churches (NWAC), which was often referred to as the non-geographic 'New Wineskins Presbytery', also organized multi-year exodus plans for ministers and congregations of the PC(USA) who wanted to leave for the more conservative Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). In conjunction with the efforts of the 'Confessing Church Movement', which co-opted the German church struggle against the NAZI régime to defend its anti-LGBTQIA+ views, the work of the NWAC was supported by the Presbyterian Lay Committee. In the ensuing debates, intra-ecclesial disagreement frequently escalated to civil/legal disputes following the decision of congregations and ministers to leave the PC(USA).⁵⁶

Though conservatives believed 10A had forced a decision upon them, in her announcement of its ratification, GA Moderator Cynthia Bolbach (1947–2012) clearly articulated the church's revised policy. Per the Adopting Act tradition, she announced, "this amendment does not require any session or presbytery to ordain a gay and lesbian person. It leaves it up to the discretion of the local body which knows the person best" (in [Sepic 2011](#)). Therefore, though the 2010 GA would be accused of provoking conservatives to leave and either join or form other denominations in the years to come, the consciences of all Presbyterians, regardless of their ideological persuasion or identity, remained protected within the church. The only difference was that now, conservative Presbyterian's could no longer (mis)use the church's polity to impose their beliefs about sexuality and gender identity on the national level. Though conservatives vented their outrage over this reversal of fortunes, for LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies, the long wait was over. The church had finally answered Sindt's question in the affirmative. Yes, there were many more Presbyterians out there who identified as LGBTQIA+. Thenceforth one would have to look no farther than the pulpit to witness that truth. Now it was time for marriage equality.

5.2. *Belhar, Same-Sex Marriage, and Amendment 14-F*

In the lead-up to the 221st Assembly in 2014, the church prepared itself for a rancorous debate over the addition of the *Confession of Belhar* (1986) to the Book of Confessions. The Belhar had been commended to the global Reformed family by the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA) after the formal collapse of racial apartheid in South Africa. Supporters of Belhar's ratification believed it would further codify the PC(USA)'s commitment to the global struggle against racism and injustice. Many also celebrated the inclusion of the first post-Reformation confession from outside Europe or the United States in the first volume of the church's constitution. Despite broad optimism about the document, some conservatives wondered, "is the Belhar just another way to promote church acceptance of homosexual ordination and marriage?" ([PC\(USA\) 2014b](#), p. 2). Their concerns were based upon the confession's rejection of, among other things, any doctrine "which professes that . . . spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation" ([PC\(USA\) 2016](#), 10.3).

This clause of Belhar may have reminded LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians, who claimed the same confession (i.e., faith tradition) as their coreligionists, of their class-based exclusion from marriage in the church. As previously noted, some Presbyterians had called the church's post 1978/1979 exclusionary ordination policies, "a kind of ecclesiastical apartheid" ([Anderson 1997](#), p. 43). From its early years, some had also understood the More Light

Movement as “a local response to apartheid and oppression” (Anderson 1997, p. 44). Acknowledging the fears of conservatives, the Working Group that proposed the new confession for ratification stated, “Belhar makes no mention of sexuality or marriage issues. Once a confession is adopted, the church may find that confession to shed light on a wide variety of issues; however, Belhar is focused on unity, reconciliation, and justice within a context of forced separation of races” (PC(USA) 2014b, p. 2). The 221st GA approved Belhar’s inclusion in the Book of Confessions, and in April 2015, the majority of presbyteries ratified the assembly’s decision.

The stage was also set at the 2014 assembly for a vitriolic debate over requests for new AIs, which would have reinterpreted the church’s constitutional definition of marriage. When the UPCUSA and the PCUS reunited in 1983 to form the PC(USA), a new statement was added to the united church’s Directory for Worship, which is included in the Book of Order. The document distinguished between marriage as a civil ‘contract’ and as a Christian ‘covenant.’ It asserted, “marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the wellbeing 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 service to 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” (PC(USA) 2022).

Amid debates over the report of the Human Sexuality Committee, the 1991 GA also accepted a report from its Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC). In light of societal discussions about same-sex unions, the ACC argued that, while the constitution makes no mention of the subject, “[i]f a same-sex ceremony were considered to be the equivalent of a marriage ceremony between two persons of the same sex, it would not be sanctioned under the Book of Order (in Vermaak 2010b, p. 2). In addition to adopting the minority report of the HSC, the 1991 assembly followed the ACC’s recommendation and issued an AI that forbade the blessing of same-sex unions that were considered the equivalent of marriages.

Building upon the precedent established by the 1991 AI and following the ratification of G-6.0106B, multiple GA-PJC cases dealing with same-sex unions were adjudicated. Though the deliberations of the GA-PJC are not the primary subject of this article, a brief reference to that derivative body’s work is again necessary here. In 2000, the GA-PJC’s landmark ruling in *Benten et al. v. Presbytery of Hudson River* asserted, “same-gender unions were permissible, as long as they are not considered the same as marriage ceremonies” (Vermaak 2010b, p. 2). The GA-PJC decided, “[it] would not be proper for a minister . . . to perform a same-sex union ceremony that the minister determines to be the same as a marriage ceremony” (in Vermaak 2010b, p. 2). While no formal liturgical guidelines for the blessing of same-sex unions were ever included in the Directory for Worship, ministers were told that they “should . . . instruct same-gender couples that the service to be conducted does not constitute a marriage ceremony and should not be perceived as such” (Emphasis added, Vermaak 2010b, p. 2).

Ministers and sessions were instructed that they ‘should’ clarify the distinction between the blessing of a same-sex civil union and a marriage, but the GA-PJC did not assert that they “shall” clearly distinguish between the two ceremonies. The former advises as to what is or is not ‘strongly recommended’ while the latter constitutes a binding mandate. Thus, in accordance with the Adopting Act tradition, “the GAPJC’s use of ‘should’” allowed “governing bodies to exercise freedom of Conscience” regarding the liturgies and pastoral practices used when conducting same-sex unions. Unfortunately, it also generated confusion over the church’s policy and “created a climate which was rife for judicial complaints” (Vermaak 2010b, p. 2).

Despite its complexities and the adjudications that would follow in various GA-PJC cases, the *Benten v. Hudson River* decision was considered a step forward for marriage equality within the church. In addition to affirming the church’s witness to life-giving relationships between same-sex couples, the decision also made clear that, while G-6.0106B

provided clear guidelines for the ordination of ministers prior to its repeal in 2011, it did not pertain to the blessing of same-sex unions of non-ordained persons. The GA-PJC argued that a “determinative distinction between a permissible same-gender ceremony and a marriage ceremony is that the latter confers a new status whereas the former blesses an existing relationship” (in [Vermaak 2010b](#), p. 2). Based upon *Benten v. Hudson River* and subsequent GA-PJC cases, it was clear that Presbyterian ministers could participate in same-sex union blessings so long as those ceremonies were not viewed as liturgical acts that were essentially equivalent to marriage, which both the PC(USA) and the U.S. federal government then still reserved as a privilege for heterosexual couples.

In light of ongoing litigation over same-sex unions, the 218th assembly established a Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage in 2008. The 219th Assembly approved the report in 2010. The report advocated for the equal treatment of LGBTQIA+ people under civil marriage law, but it did not recommend any changes to the Book of Order’s definition of marriage ([PC\(USA\) 2010b](#)). This seemingly incongruous ruling was based upon the constitutional distinction between marriage as a civil *contract* and as a Christian *covenant*. Thus, no policy change was possible. Though the committee felt that its limited mandate did not permit further re-evaluation of the church’s policy ([Vermaak 2010b](#), p. 4), following the ratification of Amendment 10A, LGBTQIA+ advocates and allies continued to call the church to refine its definition of marriage.

In response to pervasive uncertainty about the implications of the Book of Order’s definition of marriage for same-sex couples, new overtures requesting yet another AI of the constitution were sent to the 221st General Assembly in 2014. The proposal called for “an authoritative interpretation which would allow the exercise of pastoral discretion and freedom of conscience in conducting a marriage service for any couple as permitted” in states where same-sex marriage was legal (in [Fowler-LaBerge 2014](#)). The Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) asserted that the constitutional definition of marriage clearly prohibited *Christian* same-sex marriages. It then recommended that the assembly vote down the overture.⁵⁷

Contrary to the ACC’s recommendation, advocates for inclusion asserted that while the church’s officers were expected to abide by its constitution, the BOO’s definition of marriage was, indeed, ambiguous and in need of clarification. The constitution defined marriage as being ‘between a man and a woman.’ However, by using that phrase, the drafters of the 1983 Formula of Agreement attempted to make clear that the Westminster’s call for marriage to be between “one man and one woman” ([BPC 1938a](#), XXIV-I) was no longer understood as a limitation on the rights of divorce and remarriage between “a man and a woman”. Thus, the 1983 constitutional definition of marriage codified the church’s mid-twentieth century rejection of the exclusive affirmation of “the idea of a lifelong marriage, which could only be ended through the death of a spouse or divorce on the grounds of adultery” ([Vermaak 2010b](#), p. 1). It also drew wisdom from the Confession of 1967’s location of marriage and divorce within a broader pastoral awareness that broken relationships must be viewed through the theological and pastoral lens of Christ’s reconciliation of the world to God. The original aim of the constitution’s drafters was to broaden the definition of marriage to protect divorced people from being excluded from service in the church’s ordered ministries. It was not written as an attempt to exclude same-sex couples from Christian marriage. In light of the clause’s provenance, advocates for inclusion argued that the church did, indeed, need to problematize the constitutional basis on which same-sex couples had been excluded from Christian marriage.

To the surprise of more than a few interlocutors on both sides of the intra-ecclesial debate, the assembly decided against the ACC’s recommendation. A sixty-one to thirty-nine percent majority voted to issue an AI of the constitution which located the authority to decide whether or not to perform same-sex marriages in states where it was legal in the hands (and consciences) of ministers and sessions ([Fowler-LaBerge 2014](#)). The GA then issued an AI that permitted same-sex marriages via its authority to clarify the application of the constitution to a question raised by a presbytery. Though the AI opened the door to

full inclusion, it did so on similar grounds to that of the exclusionary 1978/1979 ‘definitive guidance’ on LGBTQIA+ ordination, which advocates and allies had decried for its lack of constitutional basis. Thus, members of the Covenant Network and other groups knew the right to Christian marriage for queer couples had been built on unstable ground. They still had work to do if they wanted to build a solid foundation for marriage equality in the church.

To that end, the partial victory that came with the passage of the same-sex marriage AI was soon made irrelevant by yet another momentous event. In 2015, debates within the PC(USA) over the definition of marriage were finally confined to the history books. Anticipating that the AI allowing for marriage of same-sex couples would be challenged and possibly reversed at future assemblies, advocates for inclusion also supported overtures from presbyteries that would amend the Book of Order’s definition of marriage. Amid great apprehension, the majority of commissioners followed the assembly’s advisory delegates when they voted to pass ‘Amendment 14-F.’ If ratified by the majority of presbyteries during the following year, the new amendment would remove gendered references in the Book of Order’s definition of marriage and describe the institution as “a unique commitment between two people” (PC(USA) 2019, G-4.0240).

In a nod to conservatives, members of the Covenant Network offered a revision to 14-F from the assembly floor. With the revision, which was also affirmed by the GA and is noted in italics below, the amendment was sent to the presbyteries for ratification. It would modify the previous definition of marriage to “[m]arriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the wellbeing of the entire human family. Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, *traditionally a man and a woman*, to love and support each other for the rest of their lives” (emphasis added, (PC(USA) 2019, W-4.0601)). While enshrining language that may have helped the amendment slip under the proverbial noses of some non-allied commissioners to the impending presbytery meetings, the amendment also removed the exclusivity of gendered language. Amendment 14-F thereby empowered ministers and congregations (through sessions) to bless same-sex marriages.

Though many in the assembly hall applauded 14-F’s passage, the celebration was subdued. LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies had been disappointed before when presbyteries failed to ratify the actions of previous assemblies on ordination standards. Additionally, advocates and allies knew well that many of their conservative coreligionists lamented what felt like a loss. Showing pastoral awareness of these complexities, Moderator Heath Rada led the assembly in an impromptu rendition of the 1551 Genevan Psalter’s ‘Old Hundredth’ (author’s eye-witness account and (PC(USA) 2014c, pp. 777–820)). The congregation needed no prompting as the tune is used weekly in almost every Presbyterian church. Thousands of Presbyterians sang a prayer of praise and plea for unity together with the words, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise God all creatures here below. Praise God above ye heavenly host. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen” (Eicher 2013, p. 606).

On 17 March 2015, Palisades Presbytery “became the 86th presbytery to approve amendment [14-F],” which then became W-4.9000 of the Book of Order (W-4.0600 in the 2019–2023 BOO). Thus, the Office of the General Assembly could proclaim, “it appears that a majority of the 171 presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. have approved a change to the current description of marriage” (Smith 2015). The policy change would not take effect until 21 June 2015. However, as of that day, ecclesial bans on ordination and same-sex marriage had come to an end in America’s largest Presbyterian communion.⁵⁸ Per the tradition of the Adopting Act, the new clarification allowed teaching elders and sessions to decide if they felt called to perform LGBTQIA+ weddings in states where it was legal (PC(USA) 2014a, p. 16). Today, no minister or congregation can be forced to perform or host a wedding to which they object, but since 2015, those who wish to bless same-sex marriages can do so without fear of rebuke from a higher ecclesial judicatory. Perhaps more importantly, LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians who have been baptized, confirmed, nurtured, and called as members of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ can be blessed by God

through the presence of their pastors and faith communities during one of their life's most formative moments.

5.3. *Adopting a Wounded Conscience & Moving Beyond Apologetics to Re-de-Normalization*

An overture from the Presbytery of New York City to the 222nd General Assembly in 2016 challenged the PC(USA) to apologize for the harm it had inflicted on LGBTQIA+ persons in the decades-long debate over their full inclusion. By a margin of 463 to 51, the majority of assembly commissioners approved an adapted version of what was commonly called the 'Apology Overture' (11-05). The final version expressed 'deep sorrow' about disunity. Though the language of the apology had been clarified to prevent impositions upon the consciences of individual Presbyterians, the majority of the assembly's commissioners saw fit to adopt a wounded conscience in the name of their church's highest judicatory. In addition to recognizing the pain and suffering caused by disunity, the overture also quoted Romans 15:7 and acknowledged that "actions we and our members have taken over the years have at times led God's beloved children who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning to feel that they are standing outside the grace of God and are unwelcome in the PC(USA). We deeply regret that, due to human failings, any person might find cause to doubt being loved by God. We affirm the God-given dignity and worth of every human being, and renew our commitment to 'welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed {us}, for the glory of God'" (PC-Biz 2016).⁵⁹ Affirming that apologies are often, perhaps surprisingly, a first step in discovering new truths and working toward reconciliation, the concurring presbyteries offered a clear rationale for the 'Apology Overture.' They stated, "we believe there will be no chance for healing and reconciliation until the PC(USA) admits its mistakes and makes a statement of apology. There are many faithful sisters and brothers [*sic*] who have been estranged by the church because of its teachings, practices, and disciplinary actions towards ministers and others who identify as LGBTQ/Q" (PC-Biz 2016).

Some advocates for inclusion in the Covenant Network and MLP feared that the 2016 'Apology Overture', was performative and served only to humiliate conservatives who remained in the denomination; others saw it as an essential step in the process of transitional justice. According to Dykers Koenig, who viewed initial discussions over the Apology Overture as problematic, some measures employed by advocates for inclusion went too far. Regarding vocal supporters of the Apology Overture and other similar ecclesio-political moves, she said, "there were times when it helped, but then there were those . . . that I thought were completely ineffective" (Smith 2022, 5.5). She went on to recall that some LGBTQIA+ advocates and allies "wanted to move more toward, 'you have to agree with us.' They wanted the so-called 'Apology Overture.' The assembly needs to apologize, they said. I agree that the church owes an apology, but I didn't think it was worth the humiliation of the conservatives who were still in the PC(USA) at that point. More Light couldn't be as oppositional to the Apology Overture as Covenant Network, but they also thought it wasn't a good idea" (Smith 2022, 7.3).

Given the temporal proximity between the passage of the 'Apology Overture' and this article's publication, it is impossible to pass judgment on the historical significance of the assembly's provocative statement. Yet, from a theological and pastoral perspective, one might ask, is the church finally ready to move 'beyond' the now historical debates over LGBTQIA+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage to a more profound realization of what it means to be a church that welcomes and *unapologetically* affirms all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics? Though theologians, ministers, and church members will have to answer this question in future generations, it appears that the denomination is committed to a path toward an ever-widening understanding of divine embrace.

In 2018 at the 223rd General Assembly in St. Louis, the church voted unanimously to pass three overtures (11-04, 11-12, and 11-13), which firmly established non-discrimination policies for LGBTQIA+ people. The assembly also sought to clarify Presbyterian's his-

toric commitment to religious liberty and freedom of conscience through the Adopting Act tradition by acknowledging “the misuse of the term ‘religious freedom’ in denying fundamental human rights and reaffirms that faith and religious liberty cannot be used to discriminate against anyone simply because of who they are” (PMA 2019). Stating its regret about its past mistreatment of transgender and non-binary individuals, the GA finally passed an overture “affirming and celebrating the full dignity and humanity of people of all gender identities”. It celebrated “the gifts of people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in the life of the church” (PMA 2019). Furthermore, in 2018, the assembly appointed a task force to explore the potential need for a permanent LGBTQIA+ Advocacy Committee, which would operate alongside similar bodies dedicated to gender equality and racial justice.

The 224th General Assembly in 2020 was scheduled to debate the proposal for an LGBTQIA+ Advocacy Committee, but since that gathering was held online due to the pandemic, action on non-essential business was postponed until the 225th Assembly in 2022. Shortly before the submission of this article for publication, the GA’s Ministry Coordination Committee (MCC) responded in favor of the overture to create a permanent committee to ensure the protection of LGBTQIA+ members and ministers. While some commissioners hotly contested the decision, Heather Macintyre of Charlotte Presbytery summarized the majority’s belief when she applauded the denomination’s recent steps to ensure equality “on paper”. At the same time, she asserted, “the fact of the matter is, the work is not done. There are micro- and macro-aggressions against LGBTQIA siblings in Christ every day, in different levels of our denomination’ and it’s not always clear who to go to for help” (in Carter 2022). Indeed, reversing exclusionary policies at a national level does not mean that LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians are free from repression either in the church or society. Nevertheless, perhaps due to the ultimate effectiveness of the church’s multi-generational self-critique (and it is a *self-critique*, because many LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians remained in the church throughout their struggle), queer Presbyterians will now have institutional support for their ministries of presence; Ministries that can henceforth be conducted from behind pulpits, at the Lord’s Table, or alongside a same-sex couple during a wedding ceremony.

In a 2018 monograph, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics*, Lynn Marie Tonstad noted the peripheral relationship of ecclesio-political debates about inclusion to both the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ Christians and the rich theological heritage to which they are heirs. She writes, “many of the arguments depend on conditions that are peripheral to central Christian concerns [i.e., based on non-essentials], while others depend for their effectiveness primarily on gaining Christian sanction for same-sex relationships” (Tonstad 2018, p. 47). LGBTQIA+ experiences in churches and religious organizations have long been, and continue to be, an apologetic ministry of presence. However, as Tonstad insightfully points out, “Queer theology is not, or should not be, about apologetics” (Tonstad 2018, p. 47).

In the mid-twentieth century, the church and the world awakened to the needs of an underrepresented group of people who were marginalized due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics. Throughout the ensuing decades, LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies have confronted institutionalized phobias, called for inclusive membership policies, reversed class-based celibacy requirements for ordained officers, and modified heteronormative readings of the church’s marriage law. In so doing, they have *normalized* their faith experiences by practicing ministries of presence that problematized myths of queer-Christian nonexistence and *de-normalized* repressive uses of historic polity principles. In so doing, they also deconstructed theological and ecclesio-legal inconsistencies which they believed contradicted the church’s stated mission of hearing “the voices of people’s long silenced” (Brief Statement of Faith of 1991) and viewing all human distinctions through the lens of Christ’s reconciliation of the world to God (Confession of 1967).

By practicing apologetic ministries of presence, a diverse subaltern cohort and its allies gained a hearing within their faith community. Perhaps a safe space has been created for LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians to embrace Tonstad’s admonition and move beyond apologetics. Maybe the time has come for Queer Presbyterians to engage in what this author would like

to call “*re-de-normalization*,” a process by which formerly marginalized members of a faith community are freed to explore not only how they are the same (as children of God who are baptized in Christ) and how their experiences are unique, but also how those experiences provide valuable subject-matter for theological reflection.

5.4. *Sindt’s Question Answered, a Brief Epitaph*

In the letter that launched the Presbyterian Gay Caucus (PGC) almost five decades ago, David B. Sindt suggested that his friends and colleagues in ministry should “focus [their] initial efforts nationally on a ministry of presence . . . to work for change within the denomination, not attack it from either within or without” (in Holmen 2013, p. 353). By posing his provocative question, Sindt confronted the myth of Queer-Christian nonexistence that still plagues the global church today. His fateful stand was a turning point in the history of American Protestantism and a watershed moment in the global LGBTQIA+ movement. Unfortunately, Sindt died on 3 December 1986, due to AIDS-Related complications and thus did not live to see the fulfillment of his vision. Nevertheless, inspired by his witness, those who worked with and came after him continued to ask bold questions, practice ministries of presence, and use historic polity principles to help the church see LGBTQIA+ experiences as matters of Christian concern and sources of life-giving theological reflection.

6. Conclusions: The Role of Ministries of Presence and Polity Principles in the World Church’s Struggle over Human Sexuality and Gender Identity

The previous sections have explored how various individuals and groups within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessor denominations drew upon historic apologetic discursive patterns and polity principles when ‘calling the question’ on LGBTQIA+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage within their faith community. The forgoing argument grappled with ecclesio-legal traditions associated with the Adopting Act of 1729, and evidenced by historical debates over the Itinerancy & Education Acts of 1737, 1788/1789 codification of the Adopting Act in the post-revolution church constitution, 1797 Radical Principles, 1801 Plan of Union, Doctrinal Deliverance of 1910, report of the Special Commission of 1925/Swearingen Commission (1925–1927), the Confession of 1967, and other essential documents like the Brief Statement of Faith of 1991 and the Belhar Confession of 1987. This article has shown how U.S. Presbyterians sought to maintain creative tension between confessional fidelity and openness to the Spirit’s movement in the world when they debated the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in their church. The framework provided by historic polity debates shaped the way LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies worked for change within their faith community.

Advocates for full inclusion achieved their goals by simultaneously (1) practicing apologetic ‘ministries of presence’ through collective action, which confronted the myth of queer-Christian nonexistence via distinctly Presbyterian patterns of intra-ecclesial engagement, and (2) grounding their arguments in the church’s long-standing polity principles. Consequently, when the PC(USA) and its predecessor denominations articulated an inclusive stance toward openly LGBTQIA+ members in 1978/1979, removed barriers to their ordination in 2011, permitted same-sex marriages within Presbyterian communities in 2015, and opened the church to receiving new theological insights from queer people via the passage of the ‘Apology Overture’ in 2016, the church’s collective discernment drew on historic Presbyterian principles of theology and governance to respond (often imperfectly) to contemporary challenges. Perhaps, in light of recent efforts to create an Equity Advocacy Committee for LGBTQIA+ concerns at the denominational level, the time has finally come for Queer Presbyterians to engage in what this author calls “*re-denormalization*”; i.e., a process by which formerly marginalized members of the faith community explore not only how they are the same as others (as children of God who are baptized in Christ) or, conversely, how their experiences are unique, but also how their experiences provide valuable subject-matter for theological reflection.

While engaging in this liberative theological work, if the Shakespearian truism holds, and the past is, indeed, prologue, Presbyterians across the ideological spectrum should engage in their theological projects with great care and pastoral sensitivity. The forgoing analysis reveals that, whenever an intra-ecclesial party loses the ‘vast middle’ of the church, the specters of schism or marginalization often peak over the horizon. As previously stated, the church’s historical reception of the Adopting Act tradition is based upon the belief that the Christian’s conscience is bound to the word of God. It may be as painful as it is frustrating to affirm this truth when oppression and marginalization scandalize communion, but the deeply Reformed theological conviction that one’s conscience is caught up in an asymmetrical relationship with God’s word and thus must be free from human manipulation, is the linchpin of Presbyterian life and witness. The ultimate hope of the church thus rests not in imposing diversity and inclusion by use of polity mechanisms but upon its witness to God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ.

The struggle for LGBTQIA+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage in the PC(USA) and its predecessor denominations is, in a way, a case study that supports the realist notion that significant change in the church or any other institution requires sustained political engagement. Yet, it is also an affirmation of those who ground their worldview in that lofty and, at times, radical idealism which empowers marginalized people to hope against hope that they are not alone and that, one day, justice will come. Arguments and political maneuvers rarely heal broken relationships, bring about an acceptance of previously unknown truths, or point toward the possibility of reconciliation. For the kind of healing needed in the Presbyterian communion, we can look to the past, but we must also look forward and continue to seek more light.

Perhaps the time has come for the church to receive the new light God’s Spirit has shed upon the scriptures through the questions called by LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians and their allies over the past five decades. Maybe it is time to move beyond apologetics and disputes over the church’s historic polity principles and create spaces for queer Christians to ‘re-de-normalize.’ Yet, despite these ambitious pontifications, it is important to acknowledge that regardless of the decisions of the General Assembly of the PC(USA), the conclusion has not yet been written for the historic struggle for LGBTQIA+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage in American Presbyterianism, much less in the world church. Since the passage of Amendment 14-F in 2014, hundreds of thousands of conservative evangelical pastors, members, and congregations have broken ties with the national body to join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) or to form the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO). Will this article become a dusty *artifact* before Presbyterians again reunite?

In the interim, how can those who remain the PC(USA) best participate in the painful task of mending broken relationships? Additionally, what do ecclesial divisions mean for the thousands of LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians who are members of congregations that have left the PC(USA)? How might the church’s division impact people’s lives when a congregation in which an LGBTQIA+ child was baptized, confirmed, and nurtured refuses to host their wedding ceremony or bear witness to God’s call upon their lives as a candidate for the ordered ministries? Are the days of apologetic ministry, calling questions before the church, and being ruled out of order, over for these LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians? Hardly. Indeed, the Presbyterian tendency toward cantankerous communion, and the divisions that often occur when the church finally answers hard questions, should sober celebrations over any policy victory. Nevertheless, in the eyes of many, the PC(USA)’s full and unequivocal affirmation of LGBTQIA+ people has furthered efforts to “build a church that reflects God’s heart” (MLP 2010).

Conservatives who opposed the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ Christians within the life of the church drew upon various interpretations of the U.S. Presbyterian tradition. Yet, advocates for inclusion were unwilling to seed the polity principles, and discursive theological traditions, to which they were also heirs. The church, with varying degrees of success, had always attempted to maintain a creative tension between opposing groups, such as the Scots-Irish and Anglo-Welsh cohorts that debated the Adopting Act in the early

eighteenth century, Old/New Sides, Old/New Schools, Northerners/Southerners, Fundamentalists/Modernists, conservatives/liberals, and so on. Anachronistic typologies that draw definitive connections between earlier intra-ecclesial disputants and the interlocking groups that debated the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians are problematic. At the same time, the foregoing analysis has shown that queer Presbyterians did not ‘call their question’ in a theological or historical vacuum. Presbyterians had been calling questions long before Sindt climbed atop his chair, and they are likely to continue doing so in the future.

Church historians have a fiduciary duty to remind religious communities how they arrived at the beliefs and practices they hold dear so that people of faith and goodwill can live more deeply into their identities. Religious archives have preserved biographical data, ecclesial adjudications, collected papers, and correspondences related to LGBTQIA+ inclusion movements that have yet to be processed. At least in the PC(USA), a safe space has now been created in which scholars of the church can carry out the work of complexifying historical accounts of a discourse that remains profoundly relevant to ecclesial life. Other communions find themselves at different places regarding policies on LGBTQIA+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage. The time is ripe for scholars of religion to hone their understanding of the church’s historical engagement with sexuality and gender identity, not only in mainline American traditions but in other contexts as well.

The author hopes that this article provides a framework that other scholars can either critique or employ in their efforts to ‘flesh out’ the historical account provided here. Much work remains to be done from the perspective of historical analysis of intra-ecclesial debates on LGBTQIA+ inclusion, ordination, and marriage. This project would be greatly complemented by additional systematic analysis of GA-PJC adjudications related to human sexuality, academically rigorous biographical explorations of key figures in the struggle to build more inclusive churches, and updated reflection on intra/extra-ecclesial developments through the lenses of Open Systems Theory and hybridization. Analysis of the discursive practices and polity principles employed in other denominational traditions, as well as non-denominational communities, would be equally useful. Comparative projects between various U.S. denominational bodies, as well as intercultural, ecumenical, and trans-contextual explorations, might also shed more light on well-trodden paths.

From a pastoral and theological perspective, given that various communions are currently at odds over questions raised by the presence of LGBTQIA+ Christians in their midst, historical reflection on intra-ecclesial debates like the one offered here could prove both academically fruitful and beneficial to the world church. The author hopes that this lengthy article will serve not merely as an epitaph for the PC(USA)’s decades-long internal scruple over sexuality and gender identity but as a spur that drives members of the theological and historical academe to complexify, critique, and elaborate upon similar or divergent narratives across religious groups. While an attempt to provide a well-balanced account of historical developments has been made, this author makes no secret of his desire to see the culmination of Sindt’s dream of a church that unapologetically embraces sexual and gender diversity as a gift from God to world Christianity and the entire human family. Perhaps this text is, in itself, a ministry of presence that seeks to “work for change within” the global church rather than to “attack it from within or without” (in [Holmen 2013](#), p. 353). Indeed, queer people of faith from around the world are confounding myths of their nonexistence and asking their own version of a question to which they already know the answer; ‘Is anyone else out there LGBTQIA+?’

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Data Availability Statement: The Reverend Tricia Dykers Koenig Interview, 18 March 2022. Interview notes are available upon request.

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Notes

- ¹ Chris Glaser went on to found the Lazarus Project in West Hollywood Presbyterian Church. The organization worked for reconciliation between the church and the LGBTQIA+ community. Glaser also authored several books and served as the editor of multiple publications that sought to break down barriers to the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in the church ([LGBTQIA+ Religious Archives Network 2022](#)).
- ² In a preface to the account of Sindt's life that was included in a bulletin at his memorial service and later reprinted in the More Light Update from February 1987, the MLP website calls Sindt's stand "our Stonewall" ([MLP 2022](#)).
- ³ The UPCUSA's 1978 report *The Church and Homosexuality* indicated its awareness of questions about "gender identity and role". It even recognized, "it is possible for a biological male to develop the central psychological conviction, 'I am a female'" ([UPCUSA 1978](#), pp. 9–10). Yet, the report's interest in gender identity was shaped by the so-called 'nature versus nurture' debate regarding sexual orientation. The committee was exploring how people's gender identity conformed to their sexual behavior or "gender role," as they called it. The church's collective understanding of gender dysphoria, transgender, and non-binary identities would develop in the following decades.
- ⁴ Amanda Buglass and Aden Hakimi released a documentary titled, "Out of Order" in 2016. It was shown in theaters around the U.S. and featured the stories of LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians ([Buglass and Hakimi 2016](#)).
- ⁵ Though this article references several significant schisms within the life of the church, it does not provide an exhaustive list. For a brief survey, see the following table ([PHS 2022e](#)).
- ⁶ It is frequently noted that "Makemie ... played an important role in the development of American freedom of religion" ([Holmen 2013](#), p. 340). Nevertheless, it should also be recognized that Makemie's affirmation of human freedom was of a pale variety. Before arriving in New York, he lived in Barbados, where he benefited from enslaved labor. Records show that, while living in the colonies, he and his family 'owned' thirty-three chattel slaves.
- ⁷ The twelve PC(USA) Confessions include the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed, Scots Confession, Second Helvetic Confession, Westminster Confession with Shorter and Longer Catechisms, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, the Brief Statement of Faith, and the Belhar Confession.
- ⁸ A footnote to Baird's account states that the remaining scrupler was a "Mr. Elmer. He gave his assent at the next meeting of the Synod". ([Baird 1856](#), p. 5).
- ⁹ The *Directory for Public Worship* was produced at the Westminster Assembly. Together with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, it makes up the so-called 'Westminster Standards.' The directory was designed to replace the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer* in the Church of Scotland. Today, the directory for worship, which has been consistently updated by U.S. Presbyterians, is included in the 'W' section of the Book of Order. The directory does not prescribe specific liturgies for particular moments in the church's life. Rather, it "describes the theology that underlies [Presbyterian] worship, outlines appropriate forms for worship, and highlights connections between worship and Christian life, witness, and service" ([PHS 2022f](#)) Though congregations of the PC(USA) continue to use a diverse array of service orders and worship resources across contexts, since the Northern church produced the *Book of Common Worship* in 1906, Presbyterians have turned to that text's most recent version as their primary liturgical resource.
- ¹⁰ 'Sessions' are governing bodies consisting of a teaching elder who moderates the gathering and ruling elders, who are elected by congregations for a designated term but ordained by their fellow elders on behalf of the entire church. While all teaching elders/ministers are members of a presbytery not the local congregation, ruling elders, who are elected for service in particular congregations can be sent by said congregations as commissioners to higher judicatories. Today, Ruling Elders can, and do, serve at all levels of the PC(USA)'s institutional life.

- 11 The “Radical Principles” of Presbyterian Church government are “(1) that the several different congregations of believers, taken collectively, constitute one Church of Christ, called emphatically the Church; (2) that the larger part of the Church, or a representation of it, should govern the smaller, or determine matters of controversy which arise therein; (3) that, in like manner, a representation of the whole should govern and determine in regard to every part, and to all the parts united: that is, that the majority shall govern: and (4) consequently that appeals may be carried from lower to higher governing bodies [councils], till they be finally decided by the collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church. For these principles and this procedure, the example of the apostles and the practice of the primitive Church are considered as authority” (numerology added, [PC\(USA\) 2019](#), p. 13).
- 12 Scholarly research into the relationship between pan-Reformed mission on the Western ‘frontier’ and the Native American Boarding School Movement is still in its infancy. However, since the 222nd General Assembly in 2016, “the PC(USA) has sought to address historic injustices toward Indigenous peoples harmed by the Presbyterian Church and its exercise of” the Doctrine of Discovery ([Scanlon 2022](#)). A clear documentary trail between the policies of the church’s national judicatory and local/regional practice is still being established. Nevertheless, the extensive involvement of Presbyterians in the subjugation and ‘reeducation’ of Indigenous peoples cannot be denied. The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition’s extensive list of U.S. boarding schools “includes 21 with Presbyterian connections—second only to the number of schools affiliated with Catholics, although it states the list may not be complete” ([Scanlon 2022](#)). Most Presbyterian boarding schools appear to have been established in the mid to late nineteenth century. Yet, as early as 1820, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), established a mission among the Cherokee named for the Congregationalist pastor Timothy Dwight (1752–1817). The ABCFM was founded by Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and German Reformed graduates of Williams College, who embodied the pragmatic pan-Reformed approach to Western mission outlined in the 1801 Plan of Union. The Dwight Mission took several forms throughout its long history, but eventually developed into a co-educational school for Native American students. It remained in operation until 1948, when it became a Presbyterian camp and conference center. In June 2021, the PC(USA) returned the property to the Cherokee Nation ([PHS 2022b](#)).
- 13 Specifically, they drew inspiration from his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746) and his posthumously published text, *The Nature of True Virtue* (1765). The latter text called for a ‘disinterested’ form of love that its author believed to be incumbent upon all converted Christians.
- 14 Advocates for New England Theology were commonly associated with academic institutions like Yale Divinity School, and the no longer extant Lane Seminary. New England Theology soon developed factions within its own ranks between the ‘Edwardians’ and ‘New Divinity Men.’ The radical wing of the New Divinity cohort went on to argue for universalism; Many also became Unitarians when that movement gained ground at Harvard Divinity School. Increased liberalization at Harvard prompted the founding of Andover Theological Seminary as a regional moderate/Old School counterweight to the radical wing of the New School movement.
- 15 In practice, the policing of the Lord’s Table varied by region, the GA officially forbade Presbyterians to admit universalists to communion in 1792 and again at a 1794 meeting ([Baird 1856](#), p. 32).
- 16 In 1839, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania issued a decision in *Commonwealth v. Green* (4 Wharton 531, 1839 Pa. LEXIS 238 (1839)). The case confirmed that the Old School branch, not its New School counterpart, was the legal representative of Presbyterianism in the United States and had the right to call itself the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. When the New and Old Schools reunited in 1870, they combined ‘into’ the Old School institution. The reunited church was thus considered the legal descendent of the 1706 meeting of the (General) Presbytery of Philadelphia, the constituting assembly of the (General) Synod of Philadelphia in 1716, and the Post-revolution constituting General Assembly of 1788/89. Debates about the church’s name and legal constitution would emerge amid discussions about reunion between the Northern and Southern Assemblies in the second half of the twentieth century. Southerners in the PCUS feared that reuniting ‘into’ this tradition would force them to give up the unique practices around property holdings that had developed in the years following division. Concerns around property holdings would arise once again when conservative churches sought to leave the PC(USA) over LGBTQIA+ inclusion.
- 17 Today, the name of Samuel Miller (1769–1850), a one-time slave owner and Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government at Princeton Seminary, has been removed from the chapel where the assault occurred and the school’s world-renowned theological library bears Wright’s name.
- 18 The proposals were named for their most ardent proponent, Gardiner Spring (1785–1873), who was then serving as the pastor of New York’s Brick Presbyterian Church.
- 19 See above regarding the Gardner Spring Resolutions of 1861.
- 20 Two-thirds of the Cumberland Presbyterians chose to reunite with the larger denomination, but one third of the group remain separated and continue today as the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.
- 21 That same year, Lyman Steward (1840–1923), an executive of Union Oil, Presbyterian, and advocate for dispensationalism began publishing a series of pamphlets called *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*. The booklets lambasted higher biblical criticism, and railed against social gospel progressives, ecumenists, and moderate church leaders. Though few conservative Presbyterian leaders endorsed the dispensationalist ideas of their radical wing, opponents of liberal theology became collectively known as ‘fundamentalists.’

- 22 In a formal reply to the *Auburn Affirmation*, Machen argued that the document constituted an “absurd confusion between New Testament fact and interpretation” (in [Quirk 1975](#), p. 133). He also asserted that it “challenged Christianity’s basis in historical facts and destroyed the significance of the creed by claiming liberty of interpretation” (in [Quirk 1975](#), p. 133).
- 23 Since 2011, the church’s constitution no longer refers to ministers as holding an ‘office’ or to the ‘offices of ministry.’ Instead, the constitution uses the term ‘ordered ministries’ (G-2.20102). “This is in order to distinguish the functional Presbyterian theology of ministry from the official concept prominent in the Roman Catholic and Episcopal traditions” ([Wilton 2021](#), p. 54).
- 24 In the debate over LGBTQIA+ inclusion, people on both sides employed the Theological Declaration of Barmen in support of their arguments. Advocates for inclusion tended to emphasize the Lordship of Christ over all human divisions and social constructs. Conservatives went so far as to compare LGBTQIA+ acceptance to an endorsement of the *Deutsche Christen* movement and even organized their own version of a ‘Confessing Church Movement’ against what they saw as secular influence on the church ([Gill 2009](#), pp. 88–91).
- 25 Additionally, the confession explicitly condemned incestuous marriages ([BPC 1938a](#), XXIV-IV) and asserted that “marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife” ([BPC 1938a](#), XXIV-IIa). Article II of chapter XXIV suggested that the purposes of marriage included the “increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the church with an holy seed . . . and for preventing uncleanness” ([BPC 1938a](#), XXIV-IIb,c). With an eye toward ethnic and cultural divisions, the Westminster stated that it is “lawful for all sorts of people to marry, who are able with judgment to give their consent” ([BPC 1938a](#), IIId). Based upon dedication to the essentials of the Reformed faith, the document also mandated that Presbyterians should marry only those who “profess the true reformed religion” and not “with infidels, papists, or other idolaters” ([BPC 1938a](#), IIIf).
- 26 This church should not be confused with the currently operating Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC). When the Northern members of the ARPC united with the APC, the Southern representatives continued their separate existence as the ARPC, which had been founded in 1782. Today, the ARPC is one of the oldest socially conservative Christian denominations in the U.S.
- 27 While it did not explicitly mention homosexuality, the *Confession of 1967*, from which the committee drew inspiration for its work, asserted; “The relationship between man and woman exemplifies in a basic way God’s ordering of the interpersonal life for which he created mankind. Man’s perennial confusion about the meaning of sex has been aggravated in our day by the availability of new means of birth control and the treatment of infection, by the pressures of urbanization, by the exploitation of sexual symbols in mass communication, and by world overpopulation. The church, as the household of God is called to lead men out of this alienation into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ” ([PC\(USA\) 2016](#), 9.47).
- 28 As previously stated, Sindt had first created the ‘Presbyterian Gay Caucus,’ but “Soon thereafter, the name was changed to “Presbyterians for Gay Concerns,” to emphasize the fact that it was not just for gay people, but also for their friends and supporters” ([Anderson 1997](#), p. 39).
- 29 Specifically, the constitution stated that such groups could be organized, “for the conduct of special work for missionary or other benevolence purposes, or for the purpose of instructing in religion the development in Christian nurture” ([Dugan 1975](#), p. 1).
- 30 Presbyterians United for Biblical Concerns (PUBC) was a network of conservative evangelical Presbyterians that actively opposed certain elements of the *Confession of 1967*. Members of this group also lead the charge against the recommendations of the Task Force on Human Sexuality at the 1978 General Assembly of the UPCUSA. According to the PHS archival summary, “in the Summer of 1989, the PUBC merged with the Covenant Fellowship [not to be confused with the Covenant Network] to create Presbyterians for Renewal. This organization later merged with the Presbyterian Coalition to form The Fellowship in 2014” ([PHS 2022d](#), RG-518).
- 31 In its caution against uncritical analogs between the permanent judicial organs of the General Assembly and the U.S. Supreme Court system, the Swearingen Commission had pointed to the “sacred character of the functions performed by” ministers and the pastoral consequences that may follow intra-ecclesial attacks on fellow church leaders ([JPH 2001](#), p. 61). Regarding the removal of embattled pastors from their charges, the 1927 report stated, “if the General Assembly had the power claimed for it and should set aside and hold for naught the ordination of a minister from the very beginning [i.e., since the minister had been ordained], it would cast doubt upon all the rites and ceremonies performed by him and bring humiliation and suffering into the lives of many innocent persons” ([JPH 2001](#), p. 62).
- 32 The Presbyterian Lay Committee (PLC) was established in 1965 amid debates over the document that eventually became known as the *Confession of 1967*. In 1968, the PLC established a newsletter known as *The Layman*, which provided an avenue through which conservatives would respond to events within the church. The PLC remained staunchly against LGBTQIA+ inclusion, ordination, marriage throughout the intra-ecclesial debate. It also supported the efforts of congregations to leave the PC(USA) so they could join groups like the EPC and ECO.
- 33 According to a pamphlet produced by Lincoln Park Presbyterian Church and the More Light Churches Network (c. 1999), More Lighters were first prompted to track down the Robinson quote after singing George Rawson’s (1807–1889) hymn from c. 1856. The hymn reads, “We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind, by notions of our day and sect, crude, partial and confined; no, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred; for God has yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word” (in [LPPC/MLCN 1999](#), p. 1).

- 34 Prior to the formation of the Covenant Network in 1997, the PLGC debated “whether to add the term ‘bisexual,’ and possibly ‘transgender,’ or whether, instead, to adopt a symbolic inclusive name like ‘illumination,’ ‘lavender people,’ ‘inclusion,’ ‘rainbow,’ or ‘Covenant’” (Anderson 1997, p. 40).
- 35 While this article focuses upon developments in the PC(USA) and its predecessor denominations, the PLGC and the More Light Movement had an impact upon mainline American faith traditions beyond the Presbyterian fold. The “Open and Affirming Congregations” movement in the United Church of Christ (UCC) drew inspiration from the work of the More Light Movement. Similarly, More Lighters supported the work of advocates and allies in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which developed ‘Reconciled in Christ’ Congregations, and the United Methodist Church, where affirming communities continue to identify as ‘Reconciling Congregations.’ Other similar movements also developed within the “Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the American Baptist Churches, Brethren and Mennonite churches, and the Unitarian Universalist Association” (Anderson 1997, p. 45).
- 36 The corrupted text of the Heidelberg Catechism reads, “Q. 87 Can those who do not turn to God for their ungrateful, impenitent life be saved? A. Certainly not! Scripture says, ‘Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake; no fornicator or idolater, none who are guilty either of adultery or of *homosexual perversion*, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or slanderers or swindlers, will possess the kingdom of God” (in Rogers 2008).
- 37 In an interview with one of the translators of the 1963 version, listeners were stunned by his response to a question about the insertion of the phrase ‘homosexual perversion’ into the text. According to Rogers, the translator admitted, “we just thought it would be a good idea” to add the word, though it did not correspond to any previous version of the confession (Rogers 2008).
- 38 This revelation did not come as a surprise to those familiar with the work of Michel Foucault (1926–1984) who had famously argued that the binary concepts of hetero and homosexuality originated in an 1870 article by the German psychiatrist Karl Westphal (1833–1890) titled, *Contrary Sexual Feeling* (Foucault 1978).
- 39 After lengthy debate, both the PC(USA) and the RCA approved a corrected translation of the text, which reads, “Q. Can those be saved who do not turn to God from their ungrateful and unrepentant ways? A. By no means. Scripture tells us that no unchaste person, no idolater, adulterer, thief, no covetous person, no drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like will inherit the kingdom of God” (PC(USA) 2019, 4.0807-7).
- 40 In other words, “language itself is a historical phenomenon. Every text was written by someone, sometime, somewhere, for some reason, using the genres of types of communication available in the cultural setting. The validity of implications drawn from what a text says and the appropriateness of using it for theological purposes depends upon the recognition of its historical character” (PC(USA) 1999b, p. 7).
- 41 Conservatives made this argument about both ordination and the right to *Christian* marriage as a religious ritual, which the church’s constitution distinguished from a civil ceremony (PC(USA) 2010a).
- 42 In an interview conducted for this project, Rev. Tricia Dykers Koenig, who played a pivotal role in the church as an advocate for inclusion, summarized the challenge facing the movement. Regarding her early involvement with the PLGC, she said, “A lot of people could understand that the way gay and lesbian people were being treated didn’t seem right to them on a human and love your neighbor as yourself level, but they thought God required it because of what they had been told the scripture said it. People needed permission from God to do what they already knew was the right thing to do instinctively” (Smith 2022, 2.0).
- 43 Prominent among the GA-PJC cases tried during this period was that brought against Jane Adams Spahr (b. 1974). Spahr came out as a lesbian and maintained an open relationship with her partner after she had been ordained in 1974. Because of the church’s ‘grandparent clause,’ Spahr had been able to serve as a minister member in good standing of the Presbytery of the Redwoods despite the church’s exclusionary stance. She had even founded the ‘Ministry of Light’ (later known as Spectrum) to meet the needs of LGBTQIA+ people in the 1980s. In 1993, the Downtown United Presbyterian Church of Rochester, NY called her to be its co-Pastor. The Presbytery of the Twin Cities then certified her ready to receive the call based upon its belief that the ban on LGBTQIA+ service in the church “applied to ordination, not to certifying that all requirements [for a previously ordained person] had been met” (Anderson 1997, p. 51). To the shock of many, the GA-PJC reinterpreted the Paragraph 14 of the 1978/1979 rulings (also known as the ‘grandparent clause’) and altered its meaning. The GA-PJC stated, “Paragraph 14 ... provides protection from the removal of ordination for homosexual practices which occurred prior to its adoption. ... [it] provides amnesty for past acts but not license for present or future acts” (in Anderson 1997, p. 52). Though the GA-PJC blocked her call, the Rochester congregation hired Spahr anyway as what she called a “lesbian evangelist” to the church. She quoted a phone conversation in a pamphlet some years later, “Janie, would you consider becoming an evangelist to spread the good News of God’s love for all people and personalize the ‘issue’ so that folks could come to know a real-live [*sic*] lesbian person (we know many folks know us already in their families and communities)” (PHS 2022g). With the support of the Rochester congregation, Spahr and others founded ‘That All May Freely Serve’ to practice a ministry of presence that would help folks come to know the real-life stories of LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians. The organization remained in operation until 2020.
- 44 Congregations within the Presbytery of New York City also came together in 1997 to form an organization known as Presbyterian Welcome, which is now called Parity. Like the Covenant Network, Presbyterian Welcome supported various overtures from presbyteries that would have changed the church’s official stance toward LGBTQIA+ ordination. The organization also provides spiritual, emotional, and practical support to queer people seeking ordination in the PC(USA) and other traditions (Parity 1993).

- 45 “The doctrine of ‘double predestination’ in Chapter III of the Westminster Confession is not taught in the doctrine of election in Chapter VIII of the Scots Confession, or in Chapter X of the Second Helvetic Confession. The Heidelberg Catechism has no explicit doctrine of predestination at all” (PC(USA) 2016, xvii-c).
- 46 The catechism lists “adultery, fornication, rape, incest, sodomy, and all unnatural lusts; all unclean imaginations, thoughts, purposes, and affections; all corrupt and filthy communications, or listening thereunto, wanton looks, impudent or light behavior, immodest apparel, prohibiting of lawful, and dispensing with unlawful marriages; allowing, tolerating, keeping of stews, and resorting to them; entangling vows of single life, undue delay of marriage; having more wives or husbands than one at the same time; unjust divorce, or desertion; idleness, gluttony, drunkenness, unchaste company; lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancings, stage plays; and all other provocations to, or acts of uncleanness, either in ourselves or others” (BPC 1938b, p. 139).
- 47 This ‘general notation’ has a basis in the church’s sixteenth century confessions themselves. For example, the Scots confession asserts, “when controversy arises about the proper understanding of any passage or sentence of Scripture, or for the reformation of any abuse within the Kirk of God, we ought not so much to ask what men have said or done before us, as what the Holy Ghost uniformly speaks within the body of Scriptures and what Christ Jesus himself did and commanded (PC(USA) 2016, 3.18).
- 48 Scott Anderson was the first (openly) gay man to be ordained in 2010. In fact, he had already been ordained, but gave up his ordination in 1990. Perhaps ironically, in the late 1980s, the denomination had borne witness to Anderson’s gifts for ministry when gave its Ecumenical Service Award to Bethany Presbyterian Church in Sacramento, California, where he served as pastor. Following his resignation, Anderson remained connected with the life of the church through his service in leadership positions within ecumenical organizations like the National Council of Churches. Betram Johnson would become the first (openly) gay black Presbyterian to be ordained as a minister in 2014. Anderson, Johnson and other gay and lesbian Presbyterians were followed by Jess Cook who was the first non-binary person to be ordained as a minister and Alex McNeill who was the first trans man to be ordained in 2019.
- 49 This statement evoked the memory of the controversy between PLGC and the PLC in the early 1990s over the 1988 distribution of two pamphlets by the PLGC. *I think I might be a Lesbian, now What do I do?* and *I think I might be Gay, Now What do I do?* had been prepared by various LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups to support young people in the coming out process. The PLGC shared them with the youth of the church at the Presbyterian Youth Triannual (tri-annual nation-wide Presbyterian youth conference), which lead the PLC to charge that the PLGC was using their status as a ‘special organization’ to ‘recruit’ kids for their cause or to ‘corrupt the youth.’ Debates over the publication of youth materials contributed to the eventual abolition of Chapter 9 of the Book of Order, and thus to the formal illimination of ‘special organizations’ (see Anderson 1997, pp. 47–48).
- 50 In addition to serving as moderators of previous assemblies, Robert W. Bohl was the Senior Pastor of the Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, KS and John Buchanan was the Senior Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, IL; Both churches are among the largest Presbyterian congregations in the United States.
- 51 ‘Amendment I’ was passed by the 1996 assembly and ratified by the presbyteries in 1997. It clarified that, in the book of order, “(1) SHALL and IS TO BE/ARE TO BE signify practice that is mandated, (2) SHOULD signify practice that is strongly recommended, (3) IS APPROPRIATE signifies practice that is commended as suitable, (4) MAY signifies practice that is permissible but not required”. A fifth clarification was subsequently added following the ratification of nFOG, and states that “(5) ADVISORY HANDBOOK signifies a handbook produced by agencies of the General Assembly to guide synods and presbyteries in procedures related to the oversight of ministry. Such handbooks suggest procedures that are commended, but not required” (PC(USA) 2019, Preface).
- 52 As the GA-PJC asserted in *Bush et al. v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh* (RC 218-10-11 Feb. 2008), “the Freedom of conscience granted in G-6.0108 allows candidates to express disagreement with the wording or meaning of provisions of the constitution but does not permit disobedience to those behavioral standards. The fidelity and chastity provision may only be changed by a constitutional amendment. Until that occurs, individual candidates, officers, examining and governing bodies must adhere to it” (in Holmen 2013, p. 437).
- 53 The church had began conducting its assemblies on a bi-annual, rather than an annual, basis after the 216th Assembly in 2004.
- 54 Inspired by a 2007 gathering of Lutherans, which “successfully used rainbow scarves to raise awareness and open dialogue,” Presbyterian advocates for inclusion decided to incorporate the practice into their work at the general assembly (PHS 2022a).
- 55 The full text of the revised constitutional clause reads, “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” (PC(USA) 2019, G-2.0104b).
- 56 As with other U.S. denominations that faced schisms during this time, ecclesial and legal disputes centered not on theological concerns but church property and jurisdiction. According to the Book of Order, presbyteries, not congregations, hold local church properties ‘in trust’ (PC(USA) 2005, G-8.0201). Thus, if a congregation votes to leave the PC(USA), they must resolve a civil property dispute claim with the presbytery under whose jurisdiction they had heretofore operated.

- 57 The church's polity experts asserted, "freedom of conscience is a foundational principle of the PC(USA) (G-2.0105) but must be exercised within certain bounds. The exercise of freedom of conscience in and of itself is not necessarily a violation of polity or an obstruction of constitutional governance. Such freedom of conscience, however, is not freedom of action. All persons in ordered ministry have a duty to fulfill constitutionally mandated responsibilities" (in Fowler-LaBerge 2014). Thus, while recognizing the importance of freedom of conscience, as affirmed in the Adopting Act tradition, the ACC *once again* distinguished between that freedom and freedom of 'action.'
- 58 Depending on their state of residence, some couples also had to wait to be married until 26 June 2015 when the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage on a federal level via its decision in Obergefell v. Hodges.
- 59 The 2016 assembly was hardly the first time advocates and allies called the church to apologize for its actions toward LGBTQIA+ people. As early as 1997, the Presbytery of the Twin Cities responded to the passage of Amendment B by issuing a statement of its own that apologized "to all persons whose Christian faith and relationship with the church, as well as their personal God-given dignity, have been assaulted or in any other way diminished by the inclusion of Amendment B in the Constitution of the PC(USA). To those of our Christian sisters and brothers so terribly betrayed by their church we say, 'we are truly sorry'" (in OCRT 2001).

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