

June 14, 2021

A Pastoral Letter Outlining Recent Changes in Doctrine and Practices in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

The following motions were approved by the General Assembly (national council) of The Presbyterian Church in Canada at its annual meeting last week. Their adoption by this Assembly followed a long and properly conducted approval by the presbyteries (regional councils) in the denomination and votes at two General Assemblies.

This is now the policy of The Presbyterian Church in Canada:

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

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

The first motion on marriage was approved by 33 of the 45 presbyteries (73%) and by 957 of the 1302 presbyters who voted (73%). The second motion on ordination was approved by 30 of the 45 presbyteries (67%) and 870 of the 1303 presbyters who voted (67%). These results were then presented to this year's General Assembly for final approval. That approval was granted by a vote of 136 to 76 (64%) on marriage and by 130 to 83 (61%) on ordination.

This has been and remains an issue of zealous and bitter debate within our denomination. Throughout this debate, some congregations and individuals have

threatened to leave the denomination if their views were not adopted. We lament the fact that some may follow that course. At the same time, we will respect the integrity of their decision.

What we do want to note is that granting liberty of conscience and action on such matters follows a long-standing, though poorly-understood, practice of our denomination. That practice is rooted in a divinely-generated humility regarding the fullness of our understanding of our faith. We take very seriously Paul's recognition as he discerned what the Christ event meant for the world with the Corinthians – "We now see through a mirror, enigmatically." As the preamble to the ordination vows taken by teaching and ruling elders within our denomination affirms, we will consider and approve "such doctrine as the church, in obedience to Scripture and under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, may yet confess in the church's continuing function of reformulating the faith." (*Book of Forms*, Section 447).

Whatever those changes in our formulation of the faith might be, while considered and adopted through a long and prayerfully-conducted process to dialogical discernment, there is liberty of conscience (and in this matter action) for those who disagree. They are friends in our fellowship in Christ whose voices continue to provoke us to consider things more deeply as we continue to seek a fuller understanding the mysteries of God's forgiving and reconciling love. But, for the time being as we await the complete revealing of God's will, we make the best decisions we can and remain open to further inspiration, instruction, and transformation of the kind only God can generate.

Please keep our denomination in your prayers as we move forward into this new understanding of our ambassadorship of God's mercy and grace. Do not hesitate to set up a conversation with our teaching elder, Brian Fraser, to explore further any questions or concerns that you might have about these changes.

Blessings,

The Session of Brentwood Presbyterian Church.