

A Call to Covenant Community

Study Guide

for the use of congregations, sessions, and presbyteries

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1999

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Other Resources:

The Covenant Network website, www.covenantnetwork.org, contains

- All the papers from the 1998 Covenant Conference on *Living Faithfully in the Church When We Disagree*
- All the papers from the 1999 Covenant Conference on *Jesus Christ and the Church*
- All the papers from the 2000 Covenant Conference on *Biblical Authority and the Church*
- All the papers from the 2001 Covenant Conference on *Christ Transforming Culture*
- All the papers from the 2002 Covenant Conference on *Confessing Christ Today*.
- All the Covenant Network G.A. Luncheon addresses
- All previous *Covenant Connection* newsletters
- Various papers and sermons from Covenant Network board members

Audiotapes from the Covenant Conferences may be ordered from the Covenant Network Office.

Essays and sermons on theological issues facing the Presbyterian Church today, **from the perspective of *A Call to Covenant Community***, were collected under the editorial direction of McCormick Seminary President Cynthia Campbell. With contributions by twenty outstanding pastors and theologians, *Renewing the Vision: Reformed Faith and Life for the 21st Century* was published by Geneva Press in 2000.

The **plenary addresses** by Walter Brueggemann, William Placher, and Brian Blount from the 2000 Covenant Conference, **Biblical Authority and the Church**, were published as *Struggling with Scripture* (Geneva Press, 2001).

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A CALL TO COVENANT COMMUNITY

As disciples of Jesus Christ and members of the Presbyterian Church (USA), in reliance on the promise of God's grace, we make the following affirmations about our faith and our church:

We affirm faith in Jesus Christ who proclaimed the reign of God by preaching good news to the poor, binding up the broken-hearted and calling all to repent and believe the good news. It is Christ whose life and ministry form and discipline all we say and do.

The church we seek to strengthen is built upon the hospitality of Jesus, who said, "Whoever comes to me I will not cast out." The good news of the gospel is that all--those who are near and those who were far off--are invited; all are members of the household and citizens of the realm of God. No one has a claim on this invitation and none of us becomes worthy, even by sincere effort to live according to God's will. Grateful for our own inclusion, we carry out the mission of the church to extend God's hospitality to a broken and fearful and lonely world.

The people of God are called to be "light to the nations." As God's people, we have a commission rather than a privilege. We believe that the place of the church is in the world and for the world: living the good news, proclaiming grace, working with others for justice, freedom and peace. Thus Christian faith has an inevitable public and political dimension. Because we believe that God is at work in culture and community beyond the church, the church need not be afraid to look and listen for God's voice from outside its own sphere.

The words of scripture provide life and nourishment; as the psalmist says, they are desirable, delicious, sweet. The Bible is the evidence of God's long, patient and persistent relationship with communities and persons of faith. It is the one true, reliable witness to God's self-giving in Jesus Christ. The process of discerning God's Word in the words of scripture depends on the faithful reading of the Bible by those who seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We are committed to the ongoing task of finding in scripture God's call to live out the Christian life in our day and time. We embrace gifts of scholarship, research and dialogue as we seek to understand the Bible's relevance to the ever-changing needs of the world and to circumstances which scripture does not explicitly address.

We seek the gift of unity among all who confess the name of Jesus Christ as Lord. Unity is Christ's prayer for those who would follow him, "so that the world might believe." We hope to maintain communion fellowship with all whose lives are guided by the Christian creeds and by the confessions of Reformed faith. We pledge to strengthen our ties to those who are at risk of being excluded by recent legislative actions of our church. We also want to live in unity with those whose views are different from ours.

Because nothing in life or death can separate us from God's love, we pray that the issues before us will not separate us from one another.

COVENANT STATEMENT

Therefore we covenant together to:

1. **welcome, in the name of Christ**, all whom God calls into community and leadership in God's church;
2. **reach out in solidarity and compassion** to all who are wounded or excluded by recent legislative actions of our church;
3. **continue to be faithful** to the Presbyterian Church (USA), supporting its mission in Christ's name to God's world;
4. **reaffirm our denomination's historic understanding** that "God alone is Lord of the conscience" (G-1.0301) both for ourselves and for those with whom we disagree;
5. **trust sessions and presbyteries** to ordain those called by God, through the voice of the church, who are "persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord" and whose "manner of life demonstrates the Christian gospel in the church and the world" (G-6.0106a);
6. **seek pastoral and theological solutions** to division in the church;
7. **maintain dialogue, study, and prayer** in the spirit of Christ with those with whom we differ, seeking to understand the deeper roots of our disagreements;
8. **seek God's will for the Church** through the presence of Christ, the study of scripture, the guidance of our historic confessions, and the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit;
9. **encourage officers and governing bodies** of the church to join us in this covenant.

As we covenant together in Christ, we commit ourselves to encourage one another through prayer, counsel, and mutual support, through times of challenge, controversy, and hope.

We Invite your affirmation of the Call to Covenant Community!

Please indicate your affirmation by providing the information below. (Please print clearly.)

_____	_____	I want to help! <input type="checkbox"/> I'll urge my session to affirm the Call to Covenant Community <input type="checkbox"/> I'll suggest or lead an adult study series about the Call to Covenant Community and the issues it raises <input type="checkbox"/> I'll help organize a Covenant Network group in my Presbytery <input type="checkbox"/> I enclose a donation. (Please make tax-deductible checks payable to Covenant Network) <input type="checkbox"/> I'll alert you to any threatened or actual judicial cases in my Presbytery <input type="checkbox"/> I'll actively seek conversations with Presbyterians of different views <input type="checkbox"/> You may publish my name
Name _____	Presbytery _____	
_____	_____	
Mailing Address _____	Your Congregation or other ministry _____	
_____	_____	
City/State/Zip _____	City/State/Zip _____	
_____	_____	
Phone <input type="checkbox"/> office <input type="checkbox"/> home _____	If clergy, position _____	
_____	<input type="checkbox"/> Signing as an individual	<input type="checkbox"/> Signing for session of _____
Fax, e-mail _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Minister <input type="checkbox"/> Elder	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Deacon <input type="checkbox"/> Member	

Introduction and Suggestions for Use

Your session is considering signing *A Call to Covenant Community*, the statement of commitment from the Covenant Network of Presbyterians. Or perhaps, your congregation is already committed to that cause. This study guide is designed to help sessions and congregations explore the scripture and theology undergirding *A Call to Covenant Community*, and to examine the actions and results it may bring about in your congregation.

The study guide is divided into four study sessions following the four primary sections in the beginning of *A Call to Covenant Community*:

- Jesus' Radical Hospitality
- Church in Society
- Using the Bible
- Unity in Diversity

Each study session has background information, group activities, and time for action planning. The material is designed to engage participants in studying new material, sharing their ideas, and exploring possibilities. That takes time! Time suggestions are given for an hour long session. All of the sessions, though, have much more material than can usually be adequately covered in an hour. Leaders will need to be selective in the activities they choose, and they must keep a watch on the time to proceed through the material. You will need to cut off discussion to move on to other topics. When you must do that, we suggest that you keep a running tally of ideas for further discussion of topics that arise which cannot be fully explored in a brief session. Jot these ideas on a piece of newsprint which you keep posted throughout the study period. At the end, pass these ideas along to your adult education planning team or pastor. Each session should leave time for action planning and an adequate closing.

In each session, the leader's guide is supplemented by handout sheets to be used by participants. In planning ahead, the leader should decide which handouts he or she will use and make copies for all the participants. The Bible is used in all the sessions, and participants should be encouraged to bring their own Bibles to the sessions; however, leaders should provide enough copies for those who do not bring one. Also, all participants should have a copy of *A Call to Covenant Community*, because we will refer to it frequently in all the sessions.

At the end of each session, you will find "Ideas for Further Study." Along with the ideas you have jotted down from discussion, use these for further discussion which you might take up later in adult education, small group study, or sermons.

Suggestions for expanding beyond four sessions

The study guide can very easily be expanded into six or eight sessions. Session one could be expanded by studying some of the further Bible passages suggested at the end using the same process in the lesson. Sessions two and three can easily be split into two sessions by using all of the alternative activities provided. Session four could be divided into a study session and an action planning session.

Introduction

Suggestions for a retreat setting

A retreat might be an ideal way to explore *A Call to Covenant Community*. The four sessions could be used over a day or weekend period with break time between each session. It might be very helpful to expand the sessions to an hour and a half if time permits. In a retreat setting, it would probably be useful to save all the action planning ideas for a final session so that the retreat ends with a clear action plan.

Session One: Jesus' Radical Hospitality

Jesus said "Anyone who comes to me, I will never drive away" (John 6:37). Jesus lived out that radical hospitality by welcoming an amazing array of his society's most outcast and despised folks and showing them the amazing love and grace of God. *A Call to Covenant Community* pledges our congregation to "welcome, in the name of Christ, all whom God calls into community and leadership in God's church." If we really do that, we must include some who are usually considered outcast.

Purpose of session: This study session will examine the radical hospitality of Jesus and help us explore how we might practice that hospitality in our congregation.

Materials needed: Bibles for all participants, copies of *A Call to Covenant Community*, pencils, Bible study sheet handouts, newsprint and markers (or blackboard)

Activities

50 minutes

1. Greet everyone and let them introduce themselves if they don't already know each other. Pass out copies of *A Call to Covenant Community* and explain that the purpose of this study is to examine this covenant and explore what our session's adopting it might mean for our congregation. Have the group read aloud the first two sections of the affirmations at the top: "We affirm faith in Jesus Christ . . ." and "The church we seek to strengthen is built upon the hospitality of Jesus . . ." Explain that we will examine those two sections today. (5 minutes)
2. Make copies of the Bible study sheet handouts and give one to each participant. Assign half the group to the Luke 7 passage and the other half to Luke 15. Let individuals work on completing their section of the sheet for approximately 15 minutes. (15 minutes)
3. Discuss with the whole group the answers to the questions for both passages. You may find some disagreement about some of the answers. That is to be expected, the Bible stories are not precise. Let the group debate the answers, but leave the final answer undecided. (10 minutes)
4. After discussing the specific answers to the questions on the study sheet, discuss as many of the following questions as you can in the time remaining, leaving five minutes for closing. (20 minutes)
 - Who in *our* community might be an outcast like those in these Bible stories? Make a list on newsprint. Make sure it includes prostitutes and homeless people since they were in the stories we read. It should also probably include sexual outcasts since that seems to play into these stories. Would the outcasts of our congregation include gay or lesbian people?
 - If we were to be like Jesus, how should we respond to the people listed on our newsprint? How does our congregation respond to them now?
 - Those whom the Bible calls "sinner," we might call "outcast"—someone rejected by the culture around them. In Biblical times, for the most part, outcasts and sinners were the same people. Do you see a difference between "outcasts" and "sinners"? Which people on our list of outcasts might also be called sinners?
 - Most readers of these Bible stories assume that the sinners straightened up their acts and quit their sinning when they come to Jesus or returned home. Does the story say that? (Luke 15:17 implies it when it says "he came to himself.")

Session One — Jesus' Radical Hospitality

- Isn't it absolutely amazing that Jesus and the father in these stories have no criticism of the sinners, none at all? Don't you think a little chastising of sinners is appropriate in the church? What do we do about sinful people? What did Jesus do?
- Even more surprising, is the rather harsh criticism that Jesus has for the Pharisee and the father has for the elder son. If Jesus were to criticize *us* like that, what might he be criticizing in us? Would it include our exclusivity, judgmentalism, and lack of hospitality to those who are different? Have you ever been the outcast and been shut out by an exclusive group?
- What do we do with sin, then? In these passages, Jesus did not seem to be concerned with chastising sinners, but shouldn't we speak out against sin? Should we allow sinners to be ordained? A foundational part of our Presbyterian theology acknowledges that we are all sinners and all need God's undeserved grace. How does that theology relate to sin in these discussions of ordination?
- Have you ever seen an example of God's calling an unlikely servant into service in the church? Have you ever felt like that unlikely person?
- The new addition to the Book of Order (G-6.0106b) says 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." How does this fit in with Jesus' idea of radical hospitality, or does it?

Action plan

5 minutes

A Call to Covenant Community pledges our congregation to

1. welcome *all* whom God calls into community and leadership
 2. reach out to those wounded or excluded by our church's legislative action.
- Make a list of specific individuals (not groups, individual people) to whom you will reach out.
 - Decide on at least three ways to begin welcoming and offering solidarity and compassion to these individuals. (*5 minutes*)

Ideas for Further Discussion

- The nature of sin
- Other scripture passages showing Christ's radical hospitality, such as
 - Matthew 9:9-14 - Jesus calls and eats with "sinners"
 - Matthew 19:13-15 and Luke 18:15-17 - children brought to Jesus
 - Luke 14:15-24 - the great banquet of the outcasts
 - Luke 18:9-14 - the Pharisee and the sinner at prayer
 - Luke 19:1-10 - Zacchaeus
- God's use of imperfect servants
 - Genesis 27:1-45 - Jacob lies to his father and cheats his brother
 - Genesis 45:1-15 - God uses all the horrors that happened to Joseph
 - 2 Samuel 12:1-14 - David, Israel's greatest king recognizes his sin
 - Luke 19:1-10 - God uses a cheating tax collector named Zacchaeus

Closing

5 minutes

Acknowledge how difficult is this radical hospitality. We can never really accomplish it because we are sinful human beings, too much like the Pharisee and older brother. However, the grace of God is for all of us, and the reign of God brings it about.

To close the session, ask each participant to silently think of at least one person they would have trouble loving and accepting as Jesus did. It might be the homeless person on the street in front of the church, or the politician with whom you violently disagree, or gay person who offends you. After a few moments of silence, contemplating this person, pray this prayer:

Radically loving Christ, we sometimes find it difficult to really welcome those whom you call into our community. Something in us recoils from offering the open-armed hug of the prodigal's father to these people. Help me, O Christ, to show just a little of your love to the person I am remembering. Help me find a way to really show your hospitality to them and to all people like them. Loving Christ, be alive and welcoming in our church so that all may know through us, your amazing love and acceptance.

Bible Study Sheet

Instructions: Carefully read the assigned passage completely. Then, read it again looking for the answers to these questions:

Question	Luke 7:36-50	Luke 15:11-31
1. Which character could be considered outcast?		
2. What had the outcast character done to make them sinful and outcast? <i>(see notes below)</i>		
3. Which character could be considered the respectable, upright person?		
4. Why was this upright character considered to be so respectable?		
5. Which character(s) did Jesus/the father criticize? <i>(look carefully at both major characters)</i>		
6. What standards did Jesus/the father insist that the outcast character uphold before accepting him/her?		
7. Which character is in the position of honor at the end of the story?		

Notes: The "sinfulness" of these characters is much debated. The stories don't give us much information. What kind of sins did a "woman of the city" do? Several hints in the story suggest she was a prostitute. A woman in ancient Palestine letting her hair down to flow loosely as this woman did would be considered very sexually provocative. What kind of "dissolute living" did the prodigal do? It probably included sexual impurity since he ended up among the pigs.

Session Two: Church in Society

The Apostle Paul said, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Since the days of the early church, we have been trying to determine how Christians should relate to the society around them. As culture changes, the church changes both to meet the new challenges and to adapt itself to new situations. Christians have different views of how much the church can and should change to meet modern society. *A Call to Covenant Community* says that the church should be "in the world and for the world." If we are to live in and for the world, we must examine that society and how we relate to it as Christian people.

Purpose of session: Participants will explore how the church should be involved in the society around us and examine how modern culture should influence the church and how the church should influence our society.

Materials needed: copies of *A Call to Covenant Community*, pencils, copies of "Christ and Culture" and "Society's Influence on the Church" study sheet handouts, masking tape, AGREE and DISAGREE signs, newsprint and markers (or blackboard)

Activities

70 minutes

1. Greet everyone and let them introduce themselves if they don't already know each other. Pass out copies of *A Call to Covenant Community* and explain that the purpose of this study is to examine this covenant and explore what our Session's adopting it might mean for our congregation. Briefly review the discussion from the last session on radical hospitality. Have the group read aloud the section of the *Call* that begins, "The people of God are called to be a 'light to the nations.'" Explain that we will examine this section today. (5 minutes)
2. On opposite ends of a piece of newsprint or a blackboard, write the word CHURCH and the word SOCIETY. Explain that today we will be exploring the question of how much these two should be related to each other. Draw a large arrow from CHURCH to SOCIETY. Ask the group if they think the church is called upon to have an influence on society. Why or why not? Does your congregation have much effect on your community? How? After discussing that for a few minutes, then draw an arrow the opposite direction from SOCIETY to CHURCH. Ask if they think the society should have an influence on the church? Why or why not? Does American society have much effect on your congregation? How? (5 minutes)
3. To help the group grapple with these issues, do one of the following activities. The first is more active, the second more intellectual.

OPTION A: Explain that one of the major difficulties with this kind of discussion is one of definitions. What is the "church," and what is "society"? Tell the group that we will play a game to help us better understand the terms. Before class begins, use masking tape to make a line across the floor in the center of the room. On one end of the line, place a large sign that says AGREE, place one that says DISAGREE on the other end, and put a mark to indicate the middle of the line, like this:

AGREE -----/-----DISAGREE

Explain to the group that you will read several statements of values, and they must agree or disagree with each statement, NOT as they themselves believe, but as they think the church and their local community believes. For each statement, you will ask

Session Two — Church in Society

them to stand on the line somewhere between AGREE and DISAGREE based first on how they think most people in their community think, and then you will ask them to move to the position they think the people of their congregation believe. Obviously, there are no right and wrong answers and group members will disagree, but they should look around each time and see what others think. Read each of these statements, giving the participants time to move to position and to look around before moving to the next statement.

1. Robbing banks is wrong.
 2. Domestic violence is wrong.
 3. Force, even violent force, is often the only way to solve problems.
 4. Most poor people in this country are just too lazy to get ahead.
 5. Gambling is wrong
 6. Sex outside of marriage is wrong.
 7. Homosexual acts are wrong.
 8. Gay and lesbian people should have equal civil rights.
 9. America should be a Christian nation.
 10. The pursuit of money is one of society's greatest evils.
- Have the group sit back down and briefly discuss these questions:
 - Which statements had the most disagreement between church and society? Why? What evidence suggests this disagreement?
 - On which statements did church and society seem to agree? Why? What evidence suggests this agreement? (*15 minutes*)

----- **OR** -----

OPTION B: Pass out copies of the handout sheet "Christ and Culture." Explain that this is a widely respected theologian's method of coming to terms with the issues of how we Christians relate to our society. Review the five categories briefly, emphasizing that all are good ways of relating; none are more right than the others. In "Christ against culture," the church's role is to oppose the culture completely. In the second, "Christ of culture," the church's role is to support and encourage progress in society because Christ is working through that progress. In the last three, however, Christ and culture are mixed together in different ways. These three require Christians to relate both to their faith and to their culture in various degrees. Discuss these questions:

- In which category do you usually find yourself?
 - How does your congregation usually operate?
 - When *A Call to Covenant Community* says, "We believe that the place of the church is in the world and for the world: living the good news, proclaiming grace, working with others for justice, freedom and peace," which ways of looking at Christ and culture does it support? (*15 minutes*)
4. Church and society have dramatic differences on their views toward money. On your CHURCH and SOCIETY newsprint from activity 2, write "money is good" under SOCIETY, and write "money can be bad" under CHURCH. Ask the group if those statements seem like fair representations of the positions of church and society on the issue of money. If not, revise them until the group is happy. If necessary, you might

look up some of Jesus' statements on money to help the group understand the church's position. (Matthew 6:21, Mark 10:17-22, Luke 16:13, Luke 18:24-25) Discuss these questions:

- How does the church try to influence people in society on this issue?
 - What does the church say to its own members regarding money?
 - Should the church try to get society to change its views toward wealth and poverty?
 - How does society influence the church on the issues of money and wealth?
 - By looking at our congregation, would people in society see a difference in our views toward money?
 - How could our church influence society more on this issue? *(10 minutes)*
5. Pass out copies of the handout sheet "Society's Influence on the Church." Have participants complete part one. When almost all are finished, discuss these questions:
- In which of the "spheres" do you think God most often speaks?
 - Do any of these "spheres" often speak against God?
 - How do we determine when a secular voice is echoing God's voice? *(15 minutes)*
6. *A Declaration of Faith* (the 1977 PCUS confession) speaks directly to this issue.

Read this to the group and discuss it:

We serve humankind
by discerning what God is doing in the world
and by joining him in his work.

We risk disagreement and error
when we try to say what God is doing here and now.

But we find guidance in God's deeds in the past
and in his promises for the future,
as they are witnessed to in Scripture.

We affirm that the Lord is at work,
especially in events and movements
that free people by the gospel
and that advance justice, compassion, and peace. (Chapter 8, lines 11-22) *(10 minutes)*

7. In part two of the handout sheet "Society's Influence on the Church" are several statements from society on the issue of homosexuality. How does the group hear God's voice speaking in each of these? *(10 minutes)*

Action Plan

5 minutes

A Call to Covenant Community asks our congregation to be faithful to the mission of the church and to "seek God's will for the church through the presence of Christ . . . and the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit"

- What specific groups in our society will our congregation seek out for advice and background information as we study the issues of sexual orientation, diversity in our church, and other difficult issues?
- Should our congregation make public statements designed to influence our society toward a more just, loving, and peaceful society? In what areas?

Ideas for Further Discussion

- Money and stewardship in the church
- Social witness policy statements of the Presbyterian Church on a variety of topics
- Peacemaking issues

Closing

5 minutes

In closing, invite the group to stand in a circle for prayer. Ask each person to think of one area of their community where they see God at work. It might be a charitable organization, a club, the schools, the government, the police, or other area. Ask them to name that group as a part of the prayer. Pray:

O God of all the universe, at work in our world, we ask your presence in all of our lives. Help us to hear you speak wherever you are at work. We ask to hear your voice from these places in our community: <allow responses> Help us discern your will among all the conflicting voices we hear, O God. Show us the ways of love, of justice, of peace, and of good news. We also ask, O God, that you remain active in all those places and in all parts of our lives. Help us to follow you and to know you as we work in our society for your kingdom to come! Amen.

Christ and Culture

H. Richard Niebuhr

In his classic book by this title, H. Richard Niebuhr outlines five different ways that Christians view their faith related to the modern culture in which they live. How we relate Christ to culture affects greatly how we live out our faith in the world.

Christ AGAINST culture

Whatever may be the customs of the society in which the Christian lives, and whatever the human achievements it conserves, Christ is seen as opposed to them, so that he confronts people with the challenge of an either-or decision.

Christ OF culture

Jesus often appears as a great hero of human culture history; his life and teachings are regarded as the greatest human achievement; in him, it is believed, the aspirations of people toward their values are brought to a point of culmination; he confirms what is best in the past, and guides the process of civilization to its proper goal. Christ is part of the social heritage that must be transmitted and conserved.

Christ ABOVE culture

Christ enters into life from above with gifts which human aspiration has not envisioned and which human effort cannot attain unless he relates people to a supernatural society and a new value-center.

Christ and culture in PARADOX

Obedience to God requires obedience to the institutions of society and loyalty to its members as well as obedience to a Christ who sits in judgment on that society. In the polarity and tension of Christ and culture life must be lived precariously and sinfully in the hope of a justification which lies beyond history.

Christ the TRANSFORMER of culture

Christ is the converter of people and their culture and society, not apart from these, for there is no nature without culture and no turning of people from self and idols to God save in society.

From: Niebuhr, H. Richard, *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951.

Society's Influence on the Church

A Call to Covenant Community says, "the church need not be afraid to look and listen for God's voice from outside its own sphere."

Each of these "spheres" of modern society has an influence on Christians and on the church. How often do you think God's voice speaks through each of these "spheres"? (circle your answer)

Public opinion polls	<i>rarely</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>often</i>	<i>almost always</i>
Theories of modern science	<i>rarely</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>often</i>	<i>almost always</i>
State and federal law	<i>rarely</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>often</i>	<i>almost always</i>
Modern psychology	<i>rarely</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>often</i>	<i>almost always</i>
Newspaper editorials	<i>rarely</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>often</i>	<i>almost always</i>
Popular television programs	<i>rarely</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>often</i>	<i>almost always</i>
Opinions of medical doctors	<i>rarely</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>often</i>	<i>almost always</i>
Superstitions and folk wisdom	<i>rarely</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>often</i>	<i>almost always</i>
United Nations pronouncements	<i>rarely</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>often</i>	<i>almost always</i>
Politician's speeches	<i>rarely</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>often</i>	<i>almost always</i>

Gay and Lesbian rights is a difficult and controversial issue for the church. Many Christian people say that modern social ideas can speak to the church's position on the issue. How do you think these cultural statements should influence the church on this issue? Why?

(Note: If another issue is more pressing in your congregation, you might consider using it as the focus here)

1. The American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association say that homosexuality is not a disease and that professionals should not try to change a person's sexual orientation.
2. Television shows such as *Ellen* often treat gay and lesbian characters as normal parts of society who do not need be ridiculed, criticized, or changed.
3. In a 1999 Gallup poll, 50% of Americans said they thought homosexuality was an acceptable lifestyle. 46% thought it was unacceptable.
4. Although modern research cannot determine the causes of homosexuality, almost all of the psychological and medical community agree that homosexuality is not chosen, but is a deep-seated and intractable, if not inherited trait.
5. In 1998, full-page newspaper advertisements told of the successful "ex-gay movement" inviting homosexuals to change and live a more acceptable heterosexual lifestyle.
6. Hundreds of cases are documented annually of people being beaten and killed because of their sexual orientation. Perpetrators often use the "homosexual panic" defense saying that they reacted in justifiable, irrational panic when propositioned by the victims.
7. In the United States, a majority of AIDS cases are among homosexual men.

Session Three: Using the Bible

In 1982, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church cautioned that when we use scripture, we must "let all interpretations be in accord with the rule of love, the twofold commandment to love God and to love our neighbor." (*Guidelines for the Interpretation of Scripture in Times of Controversy*) Yet too often in our contentious debates, we use the Holy Scripture as a weapon against our neighbors, not as a shared resource for the church's faith and life. *A Call to Covenant Community* pledges our congregation to "seek God's will for the Church through the presence of Christ, the study of scripture, the guidance of our historic confessions, and the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit." How we do that Biblical study and use that guidance is critical in our lives as Christians.

Purpose of session: This study session will look at ways of studying and interpreting scripture and suggest ways to use the Bible to help us better understand God's will and to discuss controversial issues.

Materials needed: Bibles for all participants, copies of *A Call to Covenant Community*, "Some Traditional Guidelines," and "The Whole Bible for the Whole Human Family," newsprint and markers (or blackboard)

Activities

50 minutes

1. Greet everyone and let them introduce themselves if they don't already know each other. Pass out copies of *A Call to Covenant Community* and explain that the purpose of this study is to examine this covenant and explore what our session's adopting it might mean for our congregation. Briefly review the discussion from the last session on church and society. Have the group read aloud the section of *A Call to Covenant Community* that begins, "The words of scripture provide life and nourishment." Explain that we will examine this section today. (5 minutes)
2. Pass out copies of "Some Traditional Guidelines for How to Understand and Use Holy Scripture." Briefly review the nine guidelines. Don't read each one completely. After the brief review, read the following scenarios and ask the group which guideline is being primarily used in each. These should help the group get an idea of how the guidelines should be used.
 - Beth invites a friend to go to worship in her Presbyterian church one Sunday. After worship the friend tells Beth that she was greatly disturbed by the woman preacher. "The Bible says that women should not speak in church," she says. Beth says that she thinks Galatians has a more important passage which says women and men are equal in God's eyes. (*interpreting scripture with scripture*)
 - Tommy comes home from school one day very upset because his teacher told him that the earth was created over millions of years. He thought the Bible said it was created in seven days. He wants to know if the Bible is wrong. His parents calm him and explain that scientific teaching has a lot to teach us about how things work, but that the Bible teaches us that God was involved in all of those natural processes. (*knowledge from observation, research, and experience is important*)
 - Many people argue for the death penalty citing cases in the Bible with death as a punishment for crime. One protestor at an anti-death penalty rally held a sign, though, that quoted Jesus, "You can't kill a person you must love as you love yourself!" (*rule of love*)
 - Fifteen-year-old Susan went to her youth pastor to explain that she had received a revelation from God. She said that the Holy Spirit had led her to understand that it

Session Three — Using the Bible

was good for her to have sex with her boyfriend because sex is God's will. The youth pastor calmly explained that, though it was ultimately her decision, her church community could not support her because the church had interpreted scripture for thousands of years saying that sex should be reserved for marriage, and this congregation was not about to change their minds. (*rule of faith; Holy Spirit's guidance*) (10 minutes)

3. Discuss as many of these questions as you can in the time:
 - Which of the nine guidelines do we consider to be the most important?
 - When we are faced with a difficult scriptural passage, how do we make sense of it?
 - Which guidelines are we more likely to ignore?
 - Do Biblical literalists have trouble with any of these?
 - Which ones give the most problems to people who want loose, liberal interpretations?
 - Note that these were adopted in 1983, by the southern stream of the church. Does that surprise you? Would we change anything these days? (5 minutes)
4. Break the group up into four smaller groups, and assign one of these difficult Biblical passages to each group. Have them read the passage and then discuss for about 10 minutes how they might make sense of it for contemporary life. They should use at least three of the guidelines in trying to understand their passages. Point out that there are many and various interpretations for these passages, and no clearly right answer.
 - 1 Timothy 2:11-12 - women in positions of authority
 - Leviticus 11:1-4 - Jewish food laws
 - 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 - a list of wrongdoers who will not inherit God's kingdom
 - Mark 10:2-9 - Jesus' rules for divorce (15 minutes)
5. The groups will not have time to have full discussion of these vast topics. After about 15 minutes, call time and tell them this was practice for how they might do this kind of difficult discussion. Bring the groups back together and have each group share which guidelines they found helpful in discussing their passages.(5 minutes)
6. Pass out copies of the statement of the Biblical faculty "The Whole Bible for the Whole Human Family." Have the group read the last paragraph which begins "We would encourage the church at this time to interpret particular passages . . ." Discuss these questions:
 - Which guidelines are these Biblical faculty emphasizing?
 - How might those who are not so accepting of gay and lesbian people read scripture differently?
 - Which guidelines would those who read scripture that way emphasize?
 - Do you think these faculty are interpreting scripture correctly? (10 minutes)

Action plan

5 minutes

The covenant pledges our congregation to seek God's will for the Church through

- 1) the presence of Christ,
- 2) the study of scripture,
- 3) the guidance of our historic confessions,
- 4) the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit.

- What specific things is our congregation doing now to help people better understand scripture and the confessions? Are we studying some of the difficult passages regarding

the church's recent legislation? How could we encourage more proper study and interpretation using these guidelines?

Ideas for Additional Discussion

- Full discussion of Biblical authority (use the resources below)
- The roles of women in the Bible
- Biblical view of sexuality
- Modern relevance of the Old Testament holiness code
- The confessions and creeds of the church

Closing

5 minutes

- Have the group stand in a circle as you read this statement from the Confession of 1967:

God's Word is spoken to God's church today where the Scriptures are faithfully preached and attentively read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit and with readiness to receive their truth and direction.

- Pray for the Spirit to come upon us and give us that guidance and illumination, and pray for our readiness to receive it.

*God of all wisdom and truth, we often do not understand your ways or your Word. □
Help us humbly to receive your guidance in understanding and interpreting scripture. □
Keep us from □inful self-interest and damaging proof-texting as we read the Word. □
And always show us the love through which we must read and understand. □ Guide us
and illumine us and make us ready to receive your Spirit. □ Amen*

Additional Resources

- â The Presbyterian Church published an excellent full study of guidelines for Biblical interpretation in 1993: *Using the Bible*, available from Presbyterian Distribution Services., DMS #277-92-101.
- â The guidelines for Biblical Interpretation used in this session were written by the PCUS. The complete text of this resource as well as guidelines adopted by the UPCUSA are published together as *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture/Biblical Authority and Interpretation*, available from Presbyterian Distribution Services, DMS# OGA-92-003.
- â Jack Rogers reviews ways the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, has changed in its understanding of various issues in *Reading the Bible and the Confessions: The Presbyterian Way* (1999, Geneva Press), available in bookstores or from Presbyterian Distribution Service. He previewed this material in the keynote address of the 1998 Covenant Conference.

Some Traditional Guidelines

How to Understand and Use Holy Scripture

(from *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture*, PCUS position paper, 1983)

Using the Bible as a critical norm for faith and life involves a process of ordering, evaluating, and relating what is said in the Bible to the questions at hand in our lives. These guidelines from the Presbyterian tradition offer assistance in that process.

1. Scripture has priority, but not exclusivity.

In matters within the purpose of scripture, it is authoritative over all other knowledge, opinions, and theories. However, Scripture is not authoritative for any and every question. It is not a textbook, a rule book, nor an encyclopedia of information.

2. Knowledge that comes from observation, research, and human experience is important.

We must not discount the information and wisdom gained from science, from human reason, and from the experiences of believers as we interpret Scripture and seek contemporary faithfulness.

3. The Living Christ is central.

The life and teachings of Jesus must be considered in understanding any part of scripture. The experience of salvation through the living Christ guides our understandings.

4. Scripture must be interpreted by scripture.

The Bible is a very diverse and multi-faceted document. We must search the whole of Scripture for texts relating to any question under consideration. For example the Old Testament must be seen in light of the love and grace of the New Testament, and the gospel must be interpreted with the Hebrew Scripture concern for Law.

5. Scripture must be interpreted by the rule of love.

Jesus said the fundamental expression of God's will is the two-fold commandment to love God and love neighbor. All interpretations of Scripture are to be judged by whether they support loving God and loving neighbor.

6. Scripture must be interpreted by the rule of faith.

The past and present Christian community's understandings of Scripture are important in our interpretation. The historic confessions and catechisms are an important element in this. And the Holy Spirit's guidance in contemporary Christian communities also can give insights. We must not ignore tradition or deny the possibility of new insights.

7. All interpretation of Scripture is fallible.

No doctrinal or ethical interpretation of Scripture, whether long established or new, is to be accepted as the final word, but is always subject to possible revision and correction.

8. God's Holy Spirit guides all Scripture interpretation.

After we have done the best we can with all the means at our disposal, we depend upon God's Spirit to enable us rightly to hear and believe and obey. This is not just a pious platitude, but it insists that we always remain radically open to the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

9. Interpretation of Scripture requires the use of all relevant guidelines.

No interpretation should be based on one or even several of these guidelines without testing it against all of them, or even against still further guidelines for interpretation.

The Whole Bible for the Whole Human Family

Members of the Biblical Faculty of the Presbyterian seminaries speak to the Issue of ordination

As members of the church universal and as professors of Scripture in our Presbyterian seminaries, we affirm that the Bible is an indispensable means of God's communication, especially in a time when the church is urgently seeking to clarify its message and mission in the world. The question of whether gay or lesbian Christians should be ordained to the offices of deacon, elder, and minister of the word and Sacrament arises at such a time.

We observe that this debate often revolves around six passages that refer to same sex relationships. We would first of all caution the church against wresting these passages out of context and pressing them into service in our debate. On careful reading, these passages seem to be advocating values such as hospitality to strangers, ritual purity, or the sinfulness of all human beings before God. Before we can hear their meaning for our time, we must first understand their meaning in their own time.

Secondly, we would caution the church against any hasty conclusion that these passages present instructions for us on what we know as homosexuality today. In important sections of the Bible - the Ten Commandments, the prophets, the teaching of Jesus - this issue does not arise. Indeed the concept of homosexuality as now understood may not appear at all in the Bible. It is likely that the biblical authors never contemplated the phenomenon that we have been able to name and describe for only a little over a hundred years, a sexual orientation which is integral to the identity of a small minority of the human family.

Thirdly, we caution the church against an interpretation of the Bible that leads the church into pronouncing judgment upon a specific behavior of a whole category of persons in the human community. As the 1982 General Assembly observed in its *Guidelines for the Interpretation of Scripture in Times of Controversy*, "Let all interpretations be in accord with the rule of love, the twofold commandment to love God and to love our neighbor."

We would encourage the church at this time to interpret particular passages of the Bible in the light of the whole Bible, and in the recognition that Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, is the living Word of God. It is the gospel of Jesus that invites gay and lesbian brothers and sisters to full communion in the church; it is the Spirit of Jesus that calls and equips Christians for ministry; and it is the justice of Jesus that calls us to insure that those who are invited, called, and equipped are free to fulfill their ministries among us with the full recognition and support of the church.

This statement was issued by a majority of all professors of Biblical studies at Presbyterian seminaries, in advance of the 208th General Assembly; it was also offered as a resource to commissioners to the 213th G.A. The professors' cover letter follows, next page.

Session Three — Using the Bible

June, 2001

Dear Commissioner:

We, the undersigned, earnestly request that you will read the attached statement and consider it carefully. We are all professors of either Old Testament or New Testament. We represent over half of the faculty in Bible in our Presbyterian seminaries at the present.

We hope that the attached statement “The Whole Bible for the Whole Human Family” will assist you as you wrestle with some of the issues of this Assembly. We are greatly concerned that the Bible be heard, interpreted appropriately, and continue to guide us all in our quest for understanding, reconciliation, and justice.

Brian K. Blount Princeton Seminary	Johanna W. H. Bos Louisville Seminary	James A. Brashler Union Seminary (VA)
Robert Brawley McCormick Seminary	Carson E. Brisson, Jr. Union Seminary (VA)	William P. Brown Union Seminary (VA)
Walter Brueggemann Columbia Seminary	John T. Carroll Union Seminary (VA)	Marvin Chaney San Francisco Seminary
Robert B. Coote San Francisco Seminary	Charles B. Cousar Columbia Seminary	Linda Day Pittsburgh Seminary
Lewis R. Donelson Austin Seminary	Susan R. Garrett Louisville Seminary	Beverly Roberts Gaventa Princeton Seminary
Frances Taylor Gench Union Seminary (VA)	Theodore Hiebert McCormick Seminary	Elizabeth Johnson Columbia Seminary
Jacqueline E. Lapsley Princeton Seminary	W. Eugene March Louisville Seminary	Patrick D. Miller Princeton Seminary
Cyris Hee-Suk Moon San Francisco Seminary	Kathleen M. O'Connor Columbia Seminary	Dennis T. Olson Princeton Seminary
Eung Chun Park San Francisco Seminary	Katharine Doob Sakenfeld Princeton Seminary	Stanley P. Saunders Columbia Seminary
Choon-Leong Seow Princeton Seminary	Sibley Towner Union Seminary (VA)	Patricia Kathleen Tull Louisville Seminary
Paul W. Walaskay Union Seminary (VA)	Antoinette Clark Wire San Francisco Seminary	Christine Roy Yoder Columbia Seminary

Session Four: Unity in Diversity

In the first years of the Christian Church, the apostles took the wonderful good news of Christ out into a very diverse world including Jews, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and even Ethiopians. As might be expected, that great variety of human experience caused great tensions in an otherwise homogenous group of Jewish Christians. Some of the most bitter fights in the Bible are found in the Book of Acts and in Paul's letters over this issue of diversity in the early church. In Acts 10, Peter baptized a group of heathen gentiles, and the proper, law-abiding leaders of the Jerusalem church criticized him severely. Peter responded, "The Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us . . . If then God gave them the same gift that God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:15-17)

Like the people of the early Christian Church, we, too, still face difficult issues of inclusion and diversity in the Church. Like them, we are having divisive fights over who can be fully included in Christ's church. The dispute often grows so bitter that we wonder whether we can remain in the same church. Perhaps like those first Christians, we can find a way to live together in our disagreements and to welcome all whom God calls saying, "Who are we to hinder God?"

Purpose of session: Participants will practice ways of dealing with disagreements in the church while still working for justice and examine ways to live with diversity within their congregation and denomination.

Materials needed: copies of *A Call to Covenant Community*, "A Presbytery's Debate," "Seeking to Be Faithful Together," "From the *Book of Order*," Bibles, pencils, newsprint and markers (or blackboard)

Activities

30 minutes

1. Greet everyone and let them introduce themselves if they don't already know each other. Pass out copies of *A Call to Covenant Community* and explain that the purpose of this study is to examine this covenant and explore what our Session's adopting it might mean for our congregation. Briefly review the discussion from the last session on Biblical interpretation. Have the group read aloud the section of *A Call to Covenant Community* at the top that begins, "We seek the gift of unity among all who confess the name of Jesus Christ as Lord." Explain that we will examine this section today. (5 minutes)
2. Have participants read Acts 10:44-11:18. On a piece of newsprint or a blackboard, write the words, "Early Christian Church." On one side of the sheet write "GENTILE" and on the other write "JEW." Explain to the group that the early church contained Gentile and Jewish Christians. Ask the group what was the difference between Gentile and Jewish Christians and write their responses on the newsprint. They might include some of the following:

Early Christian Church

Gentile	Jew
Greek, Roman, & other nationalities	Many from Judea
Did not follow Jewish law or customs	Followed Jewish Law
Spoke mostly Greek	Spoke Hebrew and Aramaic
Not circumcised	Circumcised

Session Four — Unity in Diversity

Ate all sorts of food

Ate only "kosher" foods

Considered Gentiles unclean, heathen

Considered themselves God's chosen

- Discuss these questions:
 - Why were the circumcised believers so surprised at the action of the Holy Spirit in Acts 10:44-45?
 - What evidence was there that the Holy Spirit had actually come to these Gentiles?
 - What criticism did the believers in Judea have of Peter? (11:2)
 - Does that criticism sound like any criticism being expressed in the ordination debates in our church today?
 - How does Peter's vision answer their criticisms?
 - What gift is Peter talking about in verse 11:17?
 - How might we so "hinder God" in the modern church?
 - Is it fair to compare uncircumcised Gentile Christians to modern homosexual Christians?
 - Many gay people say they know God is calling them to the ordained ministry. What evidence does this passage suggest we look for in determining the Spirit's true call?
 - What happened to Peter's critics at the end of the story? (10 minutes)
3. Pass out the three handout sheets: "A Presbytery's Debate," excerpts from the *Book of Order*, and "Seeking to be Faithful Together." Have participants follow the instructions on "A Presbytery's Debate," and complete that activity individually. When almost everyone has finished ask the group to share some of the statements they thought were inappropriate and why. Then, discuss some of the statements that were appropriate. Make sure they refer to statements from the *Book of Order* and the "Faithful Together" document. You might suggest some of these references:

"Presbytery Debate" statement	<i>Book of Order</i> references	"Faithful Together" references
1	1, 2, 3, 6	2, 8, 10
2	2, 5	2, 7
3	6	2, 4
4	3, 7	8, 10
5	7	5, 6
6	6	2, 6, 9
7	2	2, 7
8	1, 6	7
9	1, 2	7
10	1, 2	7
11	1, 2, 6	3
12	2, 4	8, 10

A Call to Covenant Community Study Guide

After discussing these statements, ask participants what they themselves might say in a presbytery discussion of *A Call to Covenant Community* or other controversial issues and how they might say it. (15 minutes)

Action Plan

25 minutes

1. *A Call to Covenant Community* has several action statements relating to diversity of opinions within the church:
 - Reaffirm our denomination's historic understanding that "God alone is Lord of the conscience" both for ourselves and for those with whom we disagree.
 - Seek pastoral and theological solutions to division in the church.
 - Maintain dialogue, study, and prayer in the spirit of Christ with those with whom we differ, seeking to understand the deeper roots of our disagreement.
 - Make a specific list of 1) persons in your congregation and 2) people or congregations within the presbytery who might disagree with *A Call to Covenant Community*. Perhaps there are some in the study group who disagree with portions of it. Write these names on newsprint.
 - Discuss ways that you could meet with these people to have dialogue, study and prayer. Could you invite them to an adult study or prayer meeting at your church? Would several members of your group be willing to go to breakfast with some of these people? Would people be willing to go to another congregation and meet with the pastor and session?
 - Once you have decided on a specific way of meeting, you should then discuss the way of dialogue. Remember that it is at least as important to listen as it is to express your opinion. Remember to follow all the guidelines discussed in our session today. (10 minutes)
 2. *A Call to Covenant Community* also says that we will “trust sessions and presbyteries to ordain those called by God, through the voice of the church, who are ‘persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord’ and whose ‘manner of life demonstrates the Christian gospel in the church and the world’ (G-6.0106a).”
 - Note that this is the first part of the paragraph on the qualifications for ordained office in the *Book of Order*. The second part, G-6.0106b, has been the source of so much disagreement in the church over the past few years. It reads:

Those called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of 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 Word and Sacrament.
- A Call to Covenant Community* does not require sessions and presbyteries to ignore G-6.0106b, but suggests that the first part (G-6.0106a) is more important.

Discuss the following questions with the group:

- How does G-6.0106b show a lack of trust of sessions and presbyteries?

Session Four — Unity in Diversity

- Slightly more than half of presbytery commissioners voted to include G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order*. About half did not want it included. With this much division within our denomination, should a slight majority impose its way on the whole denomination? Is it possible to live in our disagreement without settling the issue one way or the other? How can we do that?
- Do you think your session or presbytery might differ from other sessions or presbyteries in the way it assesses a person's "manner of life" and other qualifications for ordained office? Does that matter?
- Why do people object to G-6.0106b? What are the controversial issues? What do the "confessions call sin", anyway?
- Would your session or presbytery consider disregarding G-6.0106b when assessing candidates for ordained office? What might be the effect of that?
- Do you consider "fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness" the only possibilities for living a "manner of life" that "demonstrates the Christian gospel"?
- What might be the effect if some congregations and presbyteries ordained gay and lesbian people and others did not? Wouldn't we have chaos?(15 minutes)

Closing

5 minutes

Read again statement number 10 from "Seeking to be Faithful Together." Ask participants to think of one particular person in the church with whom they disagree on some issue and also to think of someone who has been wounded or excluded by G-6.0106b. Invite them to think of these people and to repeat their names, aloud or silently, as you pray this prayer:

Lord of love, we humans are so fallible and imperfect. Much too often we become so sure of ourselves that we think we are the only ones to know your will. Help us to speak clearly, expressing our thoughts and opinions and standing up for what is right, but always to do so with love and respect.

O God, we ask you to give us the ability to listen attentively and to remain open to what others are saying, especially hearing those long silenced by oppression. We ask that you help us show love and respect and openness toward these people we list: <Wait for people to speak names.>

We seek your vision for us all, O God. And we know that your vision includes those so often outcast and excluded from your church. Give us the courage and strength to never cease in our loving efforts to bring justice for all your people in the church and the world. We pray in the name of the loving, radically inclusive Christ. Amen

A Presbytery's Debate

In a debate over a controversial issue, participants made statements similar to these on the floor of a recent presbytery meeting. Read each statement and indicate whether you think each of the statements was appropriate. Be prepared to use the *Book of Order* and the *Seeking to Be Faithful Together* to justify your answers. Write "yes" or "no" beside each statement.

_____ 1. We don't want people who think like you to be part of our church. The Presbyterian Church would be much better off without people who hold those opinions.

_____ 2. If you disagree with me on this, it is clear that you are going against scripture and the confessions of our church and are therefore being sinful.

_____ 3. I understand that you think the scripture forbids this. I can see your point of view, but I respectfully disagree. I may be wrong, but my reading of scripture and my prayerful consideration leads me to a different interpretation.

_____ 4. Obviously, many of you agree with me, and disagree with the majority of this body. I therefore call on you to join me in leaving! We shall form our own theologically-correct church!

_____ 5. I cannot in good conscience agree with the decision you have made, so I am therefore giving up my ordination and membership in the Presbyterian Church. I hope that someday the church will see what is right; but in the meantime, I must leave.

_____ 6. I'm so tired of all this fighting. We are in fundamental disagreement, and neither side is willing to compromise. Let's quit wasting our energy on the fight, and just split into two agreeable churches who can carry on God's work in their own way.

_____ 7. The scripture says it, so it is so! I know many of you disagree with me on how to interpret this scripture, but my way is obviously God's way of understanding it, and you are wrong!

_____ 8. You are a dirty dog whose opinions are no better than an educated flea.

_____ 9. You only say that in order to lead your life of sin without a guilty conscience. Despite what you say, you could care less what the scripture says or about the will of God, you just want to go on sinning.

_____ 10. You trust more in modern scientific theory than in the Word of God.

_____ 11. You are a closed-minded bigot, so full of hatred you cannot show God's love!

_____ 12. I disagree with you, but I would like to learn more. Can you please give me some resources where I could read more about that point of view?

_____ 13. Since the founding of this nation, Presbyterian men have agreed on this. These inappropriate ideas are simply the inevitable result of allowing so many new and different kinds of people into leadership roles.

**From *The Book of Order*
Presbyterian Church (USA)**

1. God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men [or women] which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. (G-1.0301)

2. We also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men [and women] of good conscience and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other. (G-1.0305)

3. The unity of the Church is a gift of its Lord and finds expression in its faithfulness to the mission to which Christ calls it. (G-4.0200) . . . Visible oneness [of the church], by which a diversity of persons, gifts, and understandings is brought together, is an important sign of the unity of God's people. (G-4.0203)

4. The Presbyterian Church (USA) shall give full expression to the rich diversity within its membership and shall provide means which will assure a greater inclusiveness leading to wholeness in its emerging life. Persons of all racial ethnic groups, different ages, both sexes, various disabilities, diverse geographical areas, different theological positions consistent with the Reformed tradition, as well as different marital conditions (married, single, widowed, or divorced) shall be guaranteed full participation and access to representation in the decision making of the church. (G-4.0403)

5. Those called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of 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 Word and Sacrament. (G-6.0106(b))

6. So far as may be possible without serious departure from these standards of the church [essentials of Reformed faith] without infringing on the rights and views of others, and without obstructing the constitutional governance of the church, freedom of conscience with respect to the interpretation of Scripture is to be maintained. (G-6.0108)

7. When any matter is determined by a major vote, every member shall either actively concur with or passively submit to such determination; or if his [or her] conscience permit him [or her] to do neither, he [or she] shall, after sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peaceably withdraw from our communion without attempting to make any schism." (footnote to G-6.0108)

Seeking to be Faithful Together

Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement

Give them a hearing . . . listen before we answer (John 7:51, Prov. 18:13)

1. Treat each other respectfully so as to build trust, believing that we all desire to be faithful to Jesus the Christ.
2. Learn about various positions on the topic of disagreement.
3. State what we think we heard and ask for clarification before responding, in an effort to be sure we understand each other.

Speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15)

4. Share our concerns directly with individuals or groups with whom we have disagreements, in a spirit of love and respect in keeping with Jesus' teaching.
5. Focus on ideas and suggestions instead of questioning people's motives, intelligence, or integrity.
6. Share our personal experiences about the subject of disagreement, so that others may more fully understand our concerns.

Maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3)

7. Indicate where we agree with those of other viewpoints, as well as where we disagree.
8. Seek to stay in community with each other, though the discussion may be vigorous and full of tension.
9. In decision-making, listen thoughtfully to all, be sensitive to the feelings and concerns of the minority, abide by the decision of the majority, and work for any desired change within the spirit of these Guidelines.
10. Include our disagreements in our prayers, not praying for the triumph of our viewpoints, but seeking God's grace to listen attentively, to speak clearly, and to remain open to the vision God holds for us all.

*Developed by the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program
and
Adopted by the 204th General Assembly (1992)*

Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement

Background Statement

As Presbyterians, we are called to work for the "peace, unity and purity of the Church" (Book of Order) as we seek to be faithful to God's work in the world. However, disagreements and conflicts are inevitable in the life of the Presbyterian Church (USA) as we try to be faithful. They exist within committees, congregations, presbyteries, synods, at General Assemblies and in the national life of the denomination.

Conflicts are inevitable in all of life and certainly in the church. The history of the church is filled with conflicts and disagreements. Several of Paul's letters address the conflicts which were common in the early church. There have been and are going to be disagreements as Christians attempt to discern God's work in the world and as we interpret scripture.

Conflicts can be harmful and even destructive. They can cause individuals a great deal of pain and the community of faith immeasurable damage. Congregations have been divided; denominations have experienced schisms.

At the same time, conflicts can be an opportunity for new insights, learning and individual and corporate growth. Disagreements can illuminate a topic in helpful ways and can present solutions to problems which previously had not been seen. The successful resolution of conflict can also bind people together in a powerful way.

The Bible contains many stories of conflict and disagreement and much advice about how they can be addressed. As those stories indicate, God is already present wherever there is brokenness, granting wholeness and peace. God promises to be with us in times of disagreement and calls us to reconciliation, trust, love and forgiveness.

We realize that our perspectives are limited, so to help us affirm each other, enhance our community, stay open to the viewpoints of others and be sensitive to cultural diversity, we commit ourselves to the Guidelines in a spirit of prayer, trust and love, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Adopted by the 204th General Assembly (1992) of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

For more information about the **Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement**, or to request materials or training for your presbytery, congregation or theological institution, contact the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, 100 Witherspoon Street, Room 1623, Louisville, KY 40202-1693.

About the Covenant Network of Presbyterians

Why Covenant Network?

The Covenant Network of Presbyterians works to uphold and act on the Presbyterian Church's historic, progressive vision. We support the mission and unity of the church in a time of faithful disagreement and potentially divisive controversy. We actively pursue conversation and fellowship across theological divides, even as we continue to press for constitutional change to permit us to welcome the leadership gifts of all whom God calls to ordained service.

With others in the church, we desire to live out the Reformed faith found in Scripture and our confessions, and in our life together to follow the principles laid out in the Call to Covenant Community. We strive to proclaim and embody the gospel as we have learned it from the life and ministry of Jesus; we affirm the centrality of the Bible in our church; and we value the dynamic tension between unity and diversity.

Covenant Network's Program Commitments

We are committed to helping the church stay together in faithful ministry, even as we continue to study the Scriptures and seek the mind of Christ on the question of ordination standards and other matters. In addressing a broad range of theological, biblical, pastoral, and ecclesiastical matters facing our church, Covenant Network will

- articulate a traditional, progressive, mainstream vision of the Presbyterian Church through publications, scholarship, and conferences;
- organize local Covenant Networks for study, prayer, mutual support, and attention to church polity;
- participate actively in our General Assemblies;
- track cases in the church courts, and provide moral, legal, and financial support to officers and sessions challenged under G-6.0106b of the Book of Order ("Amendment B"); and
- work for needed changes in the church, including the eventual removal of G-6.0106b.

Covenant Network's History

Covenant Network was formed in 1997 to support passage of Amendment A to the Book of Order, the "Fidelity and Integrity" amendment intended to give sessions and presbyteries more discretion in discerning God's call for ordained office on particular people, within clear Biblical and confessional standards.

Although the amendment failed to pass, 46% of the votes cast in presbytery meetings that year favored Amendment A. Recognizing that the issues raised by that debate are representative of wider challenges facing the church as it seeks to be faithful in a time of controversy and change, Covenant Network is continuing and growing.

Session Four — Unity in Diversity

Highlights of our first five years include:

- Issuing A Call to Covenant Community
- Gaining the affirmation of the Call by more than 2,500 ministers, 2,000 other officers, 19 former G.A. Moderators, 300 sessions, and several presbyteries
- The popular Covenant Network Luncheons at G.A., with speakers Jack Stotts, Peter Gomes, J. Barrie Shepherd, Joanna Adams, and Jon Walton
- The 1998 Covenant Conference in Denver on *Living Faithfully in the Church When We Disagree*, with Jack Rogers's keynote address on "Reading the Bible the Presbyterian Way"
- The 1999 Covenant Conference in Atlanta on *Jesus Christ and the Church*, with Douglas John Hall and Barbara Wheeler keynoting
- The 2000 Covenant Conference in Pittsburgh on Biblical Authority and the Church, keynoted by Walter Brueggemann and William Placher
- The 2001 Covenant Conference in Pasadena on *Christ Transforming Culture*, with keynotes by Peter Gomes and Jack Rogers
- The 2002 Covenant Conference in Minneapolis on *Confessing Christ Today*, keynoted by Shirley Guthrie
- Participating actively in local conferences on The Unity We Seek in Our Diversity
- Publication of *Renewing the Vision: Reformed Faith for the 21st Century*, edited by Cynthia Campbell (Geneva Press, 2000)
- Organizing to defeat proposed Amendment 00-O, the "Limits on Prayer" amendment
- Organizing two as-yet-unfulfilled campaigns to remove G-6.0106b from the Book of Order
- Beginning to organize local Covenant Networks in presbyteries and seminaries across the denomination

For more information, or to join this growing network, contact:

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