

# The PCUSA 2014: How we got 'here'

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In 2012, the Presbyterian Church (USA) was considering passage of Amendment 10A that would allow for the ordination of non-celibate lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people throughout the denomination and a new Form of Government. These two proposals signaled

seismic changes in the character, policies, practices and public witness of the denomination, leading many Presbyterians in the pews to ask, "What happened to the church I once knew?" That is the historical question I sought to answer in the 2012 version of "How We Got Here." In the subsequent two years much has changed and many critiques have been written. In this 2014 version of "How We Got Here" I will seek to catch folks up and offer a framework for the conversation going forward.

## **Recent history: Significant actions of the 2010, 2012 and 2014 General Assemblies**

In 2010 the 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) sent a *Book of Order* amendment to the presbyteries for ratification that stripped the "fidelity and chastity" language from the denomination's ordination standards. Once the amendment was approved by a majority vote, several presbyteries ordained and installed self-avowed, practicing LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer) people to the office of pastor (teaching elder). A challenge was filed to the first of those ordinations and the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) ruled that the new language did indeed allow for the ordination of people whose sexual practices were not confined to marriage between a man and a woman.

Sessions across the country entered into seasons of discernment, considering all options for their congregations going forward. Many of them left the PCUSA to realign their denominational affiliation to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church or participated in the formation of a new denomination, the ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians.<sup>1</sup>

With those departures, historically conservative presbyteries shifted to now become majority liberal presbyteries. That theological shift to the left was easy to see at the 2014 General Assembly where commissioners overwhelmingly approved an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) of the Constitution

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<sup>1</sup> For a sampling of congregations discerning their denominational [affiliation click here](#).

allowing Presbyterian pastors to perform "any marriage deemed legal by the state," which includes but is not necessarily limited to same-sex marriages. The AI also allows church sessions to authorize the use of Presbyterian churches for such events.

Some of you might think that this is a sudden and drastic response to a recent event. Actually, Presbyterians have been dealing with these issues for decades. It is a long story, and this is my attempt to bring you up to speed on "how we got here."<sup>2</sup>

As Presbyterians in the United States of America, we have a proud history and a Godly heritage. Devout Scottish immigrants were among the earliest settlers of the New Land, and the first presbytery was established in 1706 in Philadelphia. John Witherspoon, the only active clergyman who signed the Declaration of Independence, was a Presbyterian.

For 250 years, Presbyterianism was a dominant force in American culture. In addition to planting thousands of churches, Presbyterians established scores of colleges and seminaries and hundreds of hospitals. For the 100 years between 1850 and 1950, Presbyterians were the greatest mission-sending denomination the world had ever seen.

But by the very early 1900's the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (Northern) was deeply split between conservative traditionalists who are remembered as "fundamentalists" and a liberal progressive group that became known as the "modernists." The modernists believed it was time for a re-examination of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), which was still the foundation of Presbyterian doctrines. Conservatives opposed the re-examination and sought to have the body reaffirm its commitment to the basic tenets of the Reformed faith.

In 1910, the General Assembly adopted a set of five "essential and necessary" doctrines for Presbyterian ministers. These became known as the Five Points. The Five Points included:

1. the inerrancy of the Bible,
2. the virgin birth of Christ,
3. Christ's substitutionary atonement,
4. Jesus' bodily resurrection, and
5. the authenticity of miracles.

This marks the last time that our branch of mainline Presbyterianism in the United States proved itself willing to enumerate a list of essential tenets. The backlash was intense and has proven unrelenting for 100 years. One case in point was *The Auburn Affirmation (1924)* and *the New Auburn Affirmation (2001)*.

The 1924 Auburn Affirmation asserted that Presbyterians must:

- "safeguard liberty of thought and teaching of its ministers";
- prohibit the restricting of church teaching to rigid interpretations of Scripture and doctrine; and

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<sup>2</sup> For a thorough exploration of the subject matter contained herein, read [Broken Covenant: Signs of a Shattered Communion](#).

- refuse to rank ecclesiastical authority or the authority of the Bible above that of the individual Spirit-led conscience.

The Auburn Affirmation greatly influenced commissioners to the 1927 General Assembly, which declared that individual presbyteries, not the national church body, would have authority over ordination. Over time, a wide diversity of belief over the five fundamentals of the faith developed, as did a wide variety of standards related to ordination.

The 2001 version of the Auburn Affirmation was developed by supporters of More Light Presbyterians who sought to eliminate the explicit requirement that officers of the church live in fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness, a feat accomplished in 2010/2011 with the passage of Amendment 10A. The connection is made to the 1927 action of the General Assembly to liberalize ordination standards to demonstrate that the groundwork for 10A was laid nearly a century ago.

The varieties of standards used by presbyteries across the country and the varieties of Biblical interpretation and theology held and taught by Presbyterian ministers led to the genuine diversity of faith within the Presbyterian church today. It is a house divided in no small measure by the undermining of its foundations for 100 years.<sup>3</sup>

As the cultural revolution of the 1960s swept the nation, rebellion and rejection of authority were celebrated not only in the culture, but also within the Presbyterian church. The authority of God, the authority of the Bible and the authority of the Church as a disciplined Order were each and all undermined.

And so we arrive at a pivotal year in our history: 1967. Before 1967 there was a constitutional basis to call the church to reform. Until that year we still had ordination vows that required officers to subscribe to the Bible as the Word of God and to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in Scripture. But in 1967 a *Book of Confessions* was adopted, and a clear, shared confessional standard gave way to a catalogue of confessions including a new one, The Confession of 1967 (C67).

YEAR	TOTALS	CHANGE	pct change
2006	2,267,118	-46,544	-2.05%
2007	2,209,546	-57,572	-2.61%
2008	2,140,165	-69,381	-3.24%
2009	2,077,138	-63,027	-3.03%
2010	2,016,091	-61,047	-3.03%
2011	1,952,287	-63,804	-3.29%
2012	1,849,496	-102,791	-5.26%
2013	1,760,200	-89,296	-4.83%

C67 undermines the Biblical confessions that preceded it, and with it carries a new set of ordination vows in which the person ordained acknowledges that the Bible may contain the Word of God but is "nevertheless the words of men" and promises only to be "guided" by the confessions of the church.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Read *Can Two Faiths Embrace One Future?* available for complimentary download at <http://www.layman.org/Files/can%20two%20faiths%20embrace-%20rev-5-10-11.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Many excellent resources exist on the matter of C67. The PCA, the OPC and the EPC all have articles posted on their various denominational web sites. These Presbyterian denominations all continue to use The Westminster standards as their sole confessional authority. The Presbyterian Lay Committee was formed in 1965 by Presbyterians who were concerned about the corruption of the faith presented in C67.

Interestingly, 1965 was the last year our denomination grew in church membership totals. Since then, membership has declined from 4.25 million to 1.76 million. And sadly, the PCUSA lost 10percent of its members in the last two years alone.

As Biblical interpretations and individual theologies were no longer explicitly bound to a list of essential tenets but were open to the Spirit-led conscience of each individual and the variant standards of presbyteries, "Reformed" theology became less defined by a historical Reformation and more often defined by an "always reforming" imagination. This was most recently affirmed by the GAPJC ruling in the "*Bush*" decision ([Remedial case 218-10](#)).

A notable shift has also taken place over the past 50 years in terms of the denomination's social witness policies and advocacy in Washington, at the United Nations and through its Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP). You can read a compilation of the denomination's Social Witness Policies at:

[http://index.pcusa.org/NXT/gateway.dll/socialpolicy/1?fn=default.htm\\$f=templates\\$vid=pcdocs:10.1048/Enu](http://index.pcusa.org/NXT/gateway.dll/socialpolicy/1?fn=default.htm$f=templates$vid=pcdocs:10.1048/Enu)

The current work of ACSWP is updated here:

<http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/acswp/current-work/>

The agenda of ACSWP at the 221th GA was outlined in their Salt & Light newsletter which read:

Here are brief summaries of eight reports coming to the Assembly from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP)—eight invitations to moral imagination and moral responsibility:

**[Risking Peace in a Violent World](#)**: This is a set of 5 affirmations for debate and voting in presbyteries, the second stage of a six year discernment process initiated by the General Assembly in 2010. ...

**[Tax Justice: A Christian Response to a Second Gilded Age](#)**: This is a theologically-based, straight-on proposal to make our tax system more progressive so that government can do what it is supposed to do. The US has more poverty (more than 20% of our children) and more inequality than most developed nations, and our tax system mirrors and reinforces that inequality. Earned income is taxed far higher than capital gains, “carried interest” rates let hedge fund managers pay at lower rates than most income taxes, and international corporation “transfer pricing” lets them use tax havens to reduce their payment, shifting more to the individual taxpayer. Taxes are part of a social covenant that has been broken; our Reformed faith puts a just social order ahead of anti-tax ideologies.

**[The Gospel from Detroit: Renewing the Church’s Urban Vision](#)**: ... This resolution, written primarily by two Detroit residents, does not sugarcoat. Yet it has hope and it presents strategic and practical actions for the church that would help their city and many others. And it explores the roles of community organizing, intentional communities, and other strategies for renewing Presbyterian presence in our cities. The online justice journal, Unbound, is currently doing a series of articles on urban ministry—see [www.justiceUnbound.org](http://www.justiceUnbound.org)

**Drones, War, and Surveillance:** Already partly tested as a study in *The Thoughtful Christian*, this resolution looks at the new face of war and the inextricable link between the drones and the larger surveillance state. ... This resolution advances some principles and calls for much greater oversight and judicial review for the use of drone and other forms of surveillance. ...

**Sexual Violence in the U.S. Military: A Human Rights Update:** This is not a pleasant topic, but one that persists despite initial efforts to address it. In a joint resolution with the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns, the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy looks at the changes in military justice and regulation so far and calls for further measures, and not simply the removal of prosecution from the chain of command. ...

**Fairness in Ministerial Compensation: Solidarity and Incentives:**

This report is a response to two referrals from the 2012 Special Committee on the Church for the 21st Century. How can we raise the salaries of ministers in churches barely able to pay Board of Pensions' dues, including disproportionate numbers of women and racial ethnic pastors, and what relevance is our theology of compensation to our modified market system, both in the parishes and in our national agencies? Fact is, we are in the world and too much of it, with great inequality among us; ...

**Western Sahara: Occupied, Non-Self-Governing Territory and Test Case for International**

**Law:** Another response to the request of the 2012 General Assembly, the concern was whether the territory of Western Sahara, South of Morocco and largely controlled by that larger nation, could be given more attention by the church. There was also the question of whether it was an occupied territory similar in some respects to Palestine, and if so, whether it should be a focus of similar witness and advocacy. Short answers: yes, and not exactly. With analysis from the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations and the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI), this resolution proposes certain actions that recognize the roles of the United Nations and primarily Muslim Arab states in the region. This territory remains a test case for international law in which all religious bodies have a basic justice interest.

**Resolution on Equal Rights for All Inhabitants of Israel and Palestine, and for**

**Conversations with Prophetic Voices:** Whatever happens to the current "peace process" sponsored by the Obama Administration, most of the Palestinians living under the control of Israel will not have equal rights, including the right to vote. This resolution proposes a basic benchmark of equality to support the human rights of all inhabitants, many of whom do not have citizenship rights in the absence of a Palestinian state or a bi-national state. ...

The Advisory Committee is supported by and supports the work of The Office of Public Witness (formerly known as the Washington office). You can read their [blog](#) and follow them on [Facebook](#) to see your mission dollars at work lobbying in Washington for a litany of things that may or may not reflect your sense of faithful politics. Their 2014 Advocacy Priorities brochure says that one of their 2014 initiatives is "coordinating boycott of Israeli settlement products," which only fuels the claims of those who want to co-opt the PCUSA's recent divestment action as part of the larger BDS (Boycott-Divest-Sanction) movement against Israel.

Many of the stands taken by the denomination's staffers are out of accord with Presbyterians in the pews.

Over the past 50 years the denomination has become heavily involved in social and political issues in a way that usually represents only the liberal end of the church's broad political spectrum.

1978 was another notable year. The GA (PCUS) adopted the report of its Mission Consultation. The PCUSA later incorporated it, also. This document effectively redefined "Missions" as "Mission."

Up until this time, "missions" was the word commonly used by the church to describe its response to the Great Commission, sending evangelistic missionaries throughout the world to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and make disciples. The replacement "mission" was defined as "everything the institutional church does." This, of course, included politics and social activism. By changing the definition, GA leaders were now free to spend "missions" money (that had formerly been designated for sending missionaries) for political causes.

And the theological shift continued. Here are a few examples:

- In 1981, our highest church court, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission, upheld the ordination of Mansfield Kaseman. When Kaseman was asked, "Was Jesus God?" he responded, "No, God is God." Later he explained, "Saying Jesus is one with God is a better way of saying it ... but I, too, am one with God."
- In 1993, a conference entitled **Reimagining God** was held, largely funded and planned by PCUSA personnel at denominational expense. Conference leaders denied the existence of a transcendent God (i.e., who exists outside of our material world) and ridiculed the crucifixion of Jesus: "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff." Worship leaders offered prayers to the goddess Sophia and replaced communion with a honey and milk ceremony.
- The 2001 General Assembly in Louisville, Kentucky, spent a great deal of time considering controversial proposals regarding interfaith relations and worship. Finally, one commissioner offered a motion that the assembly declare "**the singular, saving lordship of Jesus Christ.**" It was [defeated](#), being characterized by its opponents as "disrespectful to other religions." One speaker said: "Religions are like a basket of fruit. Apples and oranges are different, but they are all fruit. Religions are different varieties of the same thing, so they're all equal."

These examples bear witness to a significant and persistent shift in views on Christology, soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), Scriptural authority and a growth of universalism<sup>5</sup> (the belief that all people are or will be saved) and syncretism (the melding of many faiths into one).

As a case study of these theological shifts, let's look at the evolution of ordination vows.

PCUSA officers take one vow regarding the Bible: "Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?" Note the last four words of the vow: "God's Word *to* you?" This reflects an unwillingness to declare that the Bible is, without reservation, God's Word. The way the vow is phrased allows for the ordination of an individual who can espouse that the Bible might be God's Word *to me*, but it is not God's Word, *per se*.

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<sup>5</sup> For a thorough exploration of the subject matter contained herein, read [Can Two Faiths Embrace One Future?](#)

Or consider this vow: “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith?” The problem is that the “essential tenets” of the Reformed faith have never been enumerated. The denomination has never been willing to declare that ANY theological tenet, not the veracity of the Bible nor the divinity or resurrection of Jesus, for example, is non-negotiable and that those who cannot affirm such a tenet are thereby excluded from ordination to the offices of our church.

But the most publically prominent and recurrent example of the drift away from Scriptural authority has been in the area of sexual ethics and ordination standards.

In 1978 the GA declared that “unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with requirements for ordination.”

The 1993 GA reaffirmed this position.

In 1996, explicit language was added to section G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order* to clarify this matter. *“Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament. (G-6.0106b).”*

G-6, as it came to be called, was ratified by the presbyteries. (This is the way we make changes in the *Book of Order*. A General Assembly proposes changes, but those amendments must then be ratified by a majority of the presbyteries in the subsequent year in order to become church law. The GA and the GAPJC also issue what are called "Authoritative Interpretations," or AI's. This is like an executive order issued by fiat and immediately effective.)

Almost immediately, G-6 came under attack. The General Assemblies in 1997 and 2001 both sent amendments to the presbyteries to either change or delete G-6. Both times the effort failed.

In 2001 the GA also formed a Peace, Unity and Purity (PUP) task force to examine the causes of discord in the denomination and recommend solutions. In 2006, the PUP task force returned its findings to the GA. One of its recommendations was that G-6 be retained in the constitution but that the GA could issue an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) that would give presbyteries the liberty to allow individual candidates to declare a scruple. The functional result was something informally referred to as local option. Some viewed this as a return to the way things worked prior to the 1910 subscriptionist debate or at least a return to the way things worked prior to the adoption of G-6. [Others](#) viewed it as a terminal blow to our basic Presbyterian connectionalism.

In 2008, yet another GA voted to delete G-6. Again, it was defeated by the presbyteries. That same GA took another action that rendered all preceding judicial rulings on the matter null and void and without any force or effect. That included the 1978 Definitive Guidance and all subsequent GAPJC rulings on the matter. In other words, the action of one General Assembly undid 30 years of church judicial process and rulings. For those who have faith in the Presbyterian process and for those who believe that Presbyterians do things decently and in order, the action of the 2008 Assembly was the proverbial straw. Energy among

Renewalists to seek continued reform through a system that proved willing to subvert itself for the benefit of a favored minority waned notably.

In July 2010, the opponents of G-6 prevailed in convincing the commissioners of the GA to replace G-6 with new language. What became known as Amendment 10A was ratified by a majority of presbyteries in May 2011 and the new “standards” took effect in July of 2011. The “fidelity-chastity” language was removed from the constitution and presbyteries began ordaining and installing teaching elders whose lives do not conform to the denomination's own espoused confessional standards.<sup>6</sup>

In the meantime, [individual church members leave](#) ... by the millions.

In the meantime, hundreds of individual churches leave the denomination. You can access a continually updated list of these churches by [clicking here](#).

Granted, the PCUSA remains the largest (in terms of both membership and congregations) Presbyterian denomination in the country. But national recognizable Presbyterians like Tim Keller and R.C. Sproul are not in the PCUSA. Neither are flagship churches like First Orlando, First Greenville, First Colorado Springs, Menlo Park, Danville Community, Highland Park Dallas, Signal Mountain, Bethany Collegiate, Memorial Park, Grace Houston, First Honolulu, First Edmond, Third Richmond, Covenant Lafayette, Colonial Kansas City, First Baton Rouge, Kirk of the Hills Tulsa and Eastminster Wichita. Many others are in the process of leaving, including some of the largest churches: First Houston, St. Andrews Newport Beach, Christ Edina, Minn., First Winston-Salem.

As many larger membership churches leave the PCUSA, more than [half of the denomination's remaining churches have less than 100 members](#). Its own comparative statistics reveal that the PCUSA buries more people annually than it baptizes, the PCUSA closes more churches than it plants, and the Presbyterian public witness has become indistinguishable from a hard left progressive political agenda.

All of this leads people to ask, "If our church were not in the PCUSA today, would we join it? If so, why?" Many good answers to this question may be found and a thorough mission study of your church and the denomination should be undertaken to see what alignments exist. I recommend that your church leadership read [Mission Drift](#) by Greer and Horst as a starting point.

### **Where are we "now?"**

More than a decade ago, at the 2001 General Assembly, a watershed moment was reached. The commissioners at that assembly were [unable to affirm](#) the sole saving nature of Jesus without equivocation. That resulted in [The Confessing Church Movement](#) (CCM). Thousands of PCUSA sessions aligned themselves with three foundational truths:

1. The Bible alone is the Word of God and our sole authority for faith and life;
  2. Jesus Christ alone is the Way of salvation, the Truth of God's Word and the Life of the Church;
- and

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<sup>6</sup> For a study of what the Confessions say about the appropriate place of sexual relations in the context of marriage between one man and one woman, read: [The Mystery of Marriage](#), and/or visit [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com) and search subjects.



3. The Holy Spirit continues to work to bring people into conformity with the will of God, toward holiness, including living within fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.

Many churches that were aligned with the CCM also embraced a missional calling. That confluence resulted in the New Wineskins Initiative (2002-2005) which became the The New Wineskins Association of Churches (2005-2011). If you read the current proposals of The Fellowship of Presbyterians, you will hear strong echoes of The New Wineskins effort.

Ultimately, the NWAC formed a partnership with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church which was also seeking to live into a more missional identity. Notably, the 221th General Assembly of the PCUSA approved a denomination-wide emphasis for "A Call to Missional Living." This is a step in the right direction but it is not likely to alter the course of the PCUSA far enough nor fast enough for those facing an hour of decision in churches today.

Hundreds of churches have realigned from the PCUSA to the EPC over the past several years. More than 100 other congregations have left since 2012 to form a new denomination called the ECO. Many others are actively in that process now. Still others will likely follow. That brings us to the realities facing Presbyterian churches today.

We are past the point where the issues can be ignored.

Yes, some are still asking, "Why bother?" *What does any of this have to do with "us" – here in our happy little evangelical oasis?* Because, despite efforts of the PUP Task Force or Amendment 10A to sever the sinews of our connectionalism, as Presbyterians, we are connectional. You cannot functionally defect in place as the pastoral call process is now dependent upon participation and authorization by the presbytery at every turn. The nFOG confirms in multiple places that what any one council (session, presbytery, synod or General Assembly) does in relationship to ordination is an act of the whole church. The constitution also says that all PCUSA churches are expected to participate in the life of the larger body through per capita giving. And finally, all PCUSA churches pay dues to the Board of Pensions, whose plans are "community based." That means that the money you pay to the BOP goes into a big pot and the benefits of everyone in the plan are paid out of the pot - benefits that already include abortions of all kinds for any reason and benefits that as of January 2013 were extended to the same-sex partners of plan members.

Now, you may be blessed to be part of a Biblically grounded, missionally minded, supportive and gracious congregation. You may be doubly blessed to be in a like-minded presbytery. If so, in many ways, that has shielded you from much of what is happening in our larger denomination. But remaining blissfully ignorant is no longer an option. Untold numbers of PCUSA churches are now actively engaged at one level or another in the kind of discussion explored here.

*But after hearing all this, some here might say: **Why DIDN'T we leave before now?***

Many did. Some left to form the OPC in the 1930s; others left to form the PCA in the 1970s; still others left to form the EPC in the 1980s; and others are leaving now to form the ECO. They all left when the denomination failed to uphold some theological or ethical standard that they considered non-negotiable.

They all also felt a sense of call to bear a Presbyterian witness that was significantly distinguishable from the PCUSA.

Yet, in every case, the majority stayed. Here's why:

- Many good things were happening in spite of the drama. Many great churches, great ministries, lots of faithful mission work ... many wonderful relationships and a shared heritage;
- Part of that heritage is financial. Presbyterians have left inordinate riches to The Presbyterian Foundation. Their assets are invested in socially screened portfolios and generate great wealth for the furtherance of the mission of the PCUSA. The Foundation is distinct from the denomination but integrally and inseparably connected to it. If you leave the PCUSA you leave behind access to, and any say over, use of the Foundation funds.
- And since we're talking about assets, some churches have not left because the denomination asserts a trust over all church property (real and financial). Churches that determine to leave the PCUSA often have to fight their way out in civil court.
- Your presbytery is not hostile and your church functions fairly independently of the denomination. This is the *as long as they don't make us* do something, we don't care what *they* do argument. But we all acknowledge that benign co-existence is not joyful participation.
- Up until recently, although it was frustrating, reform seemed possible. Many considered that institutional renewal, through the combined efforts of evangelical pastors, elders and renewal organizations, was still worth working for. **That hope no longer exists.** Why? What is different now?

***The new Form of Government, the elimination of G-6, the redefinition of marriage, mass departures and what's coming next ...***

First, up until now, despite the "theology in practice" by many throughout the church's hierarchical structure, conservatives could still point to our constitution and say, "Look, our espoused theology holds. Our constitutional standards are Biblical. Look at G-6." But as of July 2011, we have an entirely new Form of Government. It espouses a universalist theology, guarantees participation and representation to all "groups," strips the congregation of many of its rights, and vests new powers in the presbytery. Furthermore, the fidelity-chastity language has been deleted and the LGBTQ ordination horse is fully out of the barn.

Two years ago (in the 2012 version of "How We Got Here") this paragraph read, "Second, decisions and the accompanying commentary by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC)<sup>7</sup> indicates that there is no will to enforce Constitutional standards." Today we are living with an Authoritative Interpretation issued by the 221th General Assembly that gives express permission to Presbyterian pastors and churches to perform same-sex weddings. The language actually goes further than that, allowing for pastors to perform "any marriages" that the state deems legal.

The amendment sent to the presbyteries that seeks to change the "one man and one woman" language to "two people," even if defeated, will not change the AI already in effect. The only way to change the AI is

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<sup>7</sup> See GAPJC rulings in Anderson 220-04, Larges 220-03, 220-10 and 219-11, Southard 220-02, Spahr 220-08 and 218-12, Bush 218-10, Capetz 219-08.

for a future assembly to reverse course and nullify the liberty granted by the 2014 GA. That reversal, of course, is very unlikely.

Third, [hundreds of evangelical churches](#) have left or are considering leaving. The conversation is being had by so many churches in so many places that the time is ripe for discussion and discernment.

Which churches have left your presbytery for other denominations? Call them up. They cannot initiate a conversation with you but you can initiate a conversation with them. What was their experience? What can you learn from them? Will they lend you their support through the discernment and potential realignment process?

Do you know anyone nationwide who has gone through this process? What contacts do you have in those congregations? Begin building a network of support as you forge ahead.

Discernment is a process. (Your presbytery may have a [policy](#) in place to consider.)

- Pray – before, during, throughout; individually, corporately, earnestly.
- The [Scriptures](#) should be thoroughly examined.
- Council must be sought – attorneys, other churches, presbyteries, etc.
- Study & education –([examples](#) of discernment processes by other congregations)
- Decision.
- Action.
- Consequences.

What are the issues?

You should start with what concerns YOU. If you're interested to know what concerns others and what has motivated others to have this conversation, there are countless lists. Most begin with the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible and ethical issues related to the sexual practice of ordained leaders and the redefinition of marriage.

For some, issues like abortion, Israel, or the denomination's specific position taken against companies like Caterpillar, HP, Motorola-Solutions and an array of fossil-fuel companies are causing particular congregations to evaluate their relationship with the PCUSA.

What are the available options for action?

1. Defect in place. Remain in the PCUSA but declare your church to be in "Remnant" status. Stop all monetary support of the denomination, send your presbytery and the General Assembly Stated Clerk letters of protest against specific actions, demand that your presbytery take similar action, refuse to be bullied, come alongside and support those who are.
2. Remain and engage the issues at every level, seeking to radically reform the PCUSA; restoring Biblical authority, restoring theological and ethical integrity, restoring constitutional standards through the sending of overtures to the General Assembly and the bringing of charges through the ecclesiastical judicial process.

3. Remain but essentially ignore the denomination, associating with a group like [The Fellowship of Presbyterians](#) through whom your congregation can align for effective witness, strengthen fellowship, deepen discipleship and learn from best practices.
4. Request to be dismissed by your presbytery to another Reformed body.
  - Does your presbytery have a [dismissal policy](#)? What does it say?
  - What is your property situation?  
Order/read: [The Guide to Church Property Law, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition](#)  
Consult a competent attorney experienced with Presbyterian church property and corporate law. They should be familiar with:
    - [The Louisville Papers](#) and the discussions of the OGA Church property law event (2/19-20, 2012).
    - [Arguments/strategies](#) employed by the denomination.
    - [Recent developments in church property law](#)
    - [The new Form of Government](#)
    - [Issues relevant to former southern PCUS churches](#)
    - Available [resources](#)
  - Where would we go?
    - the [EPC](#) (Evangelical Presbyterian Church)
    - the [ECO](#) (Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians)
    - the [NCAC](#) (National Association of Churches)
    - the [ECC](#) (Evangelical Covenant Church)
    - others?
5. Unilaterally disaffiliate from the PCUSA, become an independent or community church or join an association of churches of your choice.
  - If you are in a state where the secular courts follow neutral principles of law in the adjudication of church property cases, and/or
  - your presbytery has no dismissal policy, and/or
  - your presbytery's policy is not gracious, and/or
  - churches that have gone through the presbytery's dismissal process have been rent asunder by the presbytery's practice of fomenting schism in order to identify a "true church" that will be loyal to the PCUSA, and/or
  - churches in your presbytery that have gone through the dismissal process remain "trapped" in the PCUSA due to remedial cases filed against the presbytery for having dismissed those congregations, and/or
  - your chosen association of churches does not fit the PCUSA's parameters for dismissal and/or you want to be an independent church, disaffiliation should be considered.

No choice is easy and no choice is without costs. Those costs are relational, emotional, financial and in some cases physical (property). One thing is certain, whatever action you take ... or if you choose to do nothing ... there will be people who disagree.

Whatever you do going forward, you are encouraged to be governed by the principles of grace, truth and transparency. And may the entire process bring honor to Christ whose Church this is.

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