

**REPORT OF THE  
WELCOMING TASK FORCE  
TO THE SESSION  
May 1, 2005**

**Executive Summary**

The mandate of the Welcoming Task force was to, in short, “study the specific issue of publicly welcoming gays and lesbians to become fully participating members of the Bradley Hills Church family.” This report details the journey of the Task Force and our ultimate agreement on a set of recommendations for the Session to consider based on our in-depth exploration and prayerful consideration of the issues at hand.

The report provides the comprehensive information necessary to understand how and why the recommendations were formulated. The first four sections provide an overview of our task and our implementation of the Session’s charge to us over the past several months. In the **Session’s Charge to the Task Force** section, the initial charge and the process of selecting the Task Force is reviewed. Following that is a discussion of **The Biblical/Theological Aspects of the Task Force’s Undertaking** laying out the underpinnings of the Task Force’s work in the context of our Christian call to be the resurrected Body of Christ. The report then outlines how that call has been interpreted and acted upon at Bradley Hills throughout our 50 years as a community. The **Educational Process** section of the report outlines the three Adult Education sessions the Task Force sponsored to explore the salient medical, psychological, political and theological issues. In the **Characterization of Comments by the Congregation**, a summary the comments and the feedback we received from the congregation throughout our period of study is detailed.

The next four sections of the report concentrate on the topics found to be essential in our understanding of the issues and that eventually led us to our recommendations. In the **Polity and Practice** section, the history of the issue in the Presbyterian Church and the eventual insertion of G-6-.0106b into the Book of Order and its impact on Bradley Hills is addressed. That section is followed by the **Biblical References Said to be Related to Homosexuality** in which a discussion of the six references related to same-sex relationships and the opposing interpretation of those references can be found. As part of our research, conversations were held with the leadership of 8 churches similar to Bradley Hills about their experiences relating to the issue of welcoming gays and lesbians in each congregation. The **Experiences of Other Churches** section summarizes those conversations and our observations on their experiences. An exploration of our own history then follows in **The Bradley Hills History with the Issue of Homosexuality** section. At the end of the journey, our recommendations are arrived at based on the aforementioned research, study, and our numerous considerations and conversations over the past seven months. The **Convictions of the Task Force** section provides the framework of our thinking and our agreed upon convictions on the issue of publicly welcoming gays and lesbians into our congregation. We outline a set of **Recommendations** to the Session based on those convictions, and the report end with a set of **Frequently Asked Questions** designed to respond to questions that people may have about our recommendations.

## **The Session's Charge to the Task Force**

In May of 2004, the Evangelism and Membership Lay Ministry and the Church and Society Lay Ministry, jointly proposed to the Session for its consideration the following overture:

We recommend that a task force be formed to study the specific issue of publicly welcoming gays and lesbians to become fully participating members of the Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church family. If the outcome is such that the task force is in favor of becoming welcoming to gays and lesbians, the task force shall include an implementation plan along with its final report to the Session. This task force would consist of 11 members to be selected by the Nominating Committee. The process of study should be designed in such a way as to allow all of the following steps to be included:

- 1) The task force shall begin its work no later than May of 2004 with the intention of making its final report to the Session no later than April of 2005.
- 2) All of this task force's meetings shall be announced in the church bulletin and be open to all who wish to attend. It will be made clear that only the 11 designated members will be allowed to vote. Those who wish to observe the meetings may do so. They will be considered active participants having requested and been granted voice for a specific meeting.
- 3) The minutes of these meetings will be kept in a specific location so that all who are interested in the process of study may keep abreast of the work and the discussion that is taking place.
- 4) The task force will plan an Adult Education series on related topics at a time that it deems appropriate.
- 5) Beginning in September of 2004, the task force will provide monthly reports to Session.
- 6) The task force, with the concurrence of Session, will set a date for a meeting of the congregation for the purpose of discussing this issue in an open and honest way.
- 7) If the task force determines that an outside unbiased professional is needed for the purpose of facilitating a congregational dialogue, the financial support for this must be provided for in the church's budgeting process.
- 8) The task force will select its own leadership. It is suggested that this leadership be in the form of two persons serving as co-chairs, but that decision will be left to the task force.

The Session adopted the proposal at its May, 2004 meeting. It should be noted that the terms "publicly welcoming" and "fully participating members" were not defined by the Lay Ministries or the Session. As a result of its adoption, Richard Tufaro resigned from the Session by a simple letter without explanation. The reasons for his resignation were provided to the Clerk of Session but were not available to the Task Force. By letter of November 28, 2004 (copy attached), long-time member, Phyllis Rumbarger, resigned from the congregation stating, in part, "I don't understand the need for a Task Force on 'if we should welcome;' rather the conversation should be 'how can we reach out?'"

By the end of September, 2004, the Nominating Committee found the following nine persons who agreed to serve on the Task Force: Melissa Busch, Kim Godwin, John Gschwend, Ed

Hummers, Cathrina Jacob, Wayne Miller, Andrew Milne, Paul Rick and Jennifer Snow. Susan Andrews would serve as Staff Liaison. Because the Nominating Committee was unable to find a full complement of volunteers, it was agreed by the Session that the Task Force would proceed with only nine members. The first meeting of the Task Force was held on October 7, 2004 at which Ed Hummers was elected Chair and Kim Godwin was elected Scribe. Subsequent meetings were held on November 17, December 9, January 5, January 27, February 16, March 8 and April 18. The Task Force also engaged in numerous dialogs and exchanges of documents and drafts using e-mail.

The dates of the open meetings were announced in the BHX and Church Bulletin and the January 5 meeting was attended by Elizabeth St. John and Lannell Drasbek. Minutes of each meeting were posted at the marquee outside Scott's office. Periodic reports were published in the BHX and in the church's 2004 Annual Report.

### **The Biblical/Theological Aspects of the Task Force's Undertaking**

The Church of Jesus Christ is called to be the resurrected Body of Christ on earth – to incarnate in our life together the radical grace and truth of Jesus Christ. The Book of Order emphasizes this vocation of incarnation by calling us to be “the provisional demonstration of what God intends for humanity.” See Section G-3.0200.

Jesus was the Word become flesh - the very real presence of God living and ministering in our midst. He showed us what it means to be fully human, what it means to be the image of God in the world. And the Holy Spirit continues to keep alive the joy and the justice of Jesus in our life as community. Biblical theologians lift up the “radical alternative,” the “great reversal” of cultural norms, that Jesus demonstrated in his life and ministry. He welcomed everyone – and went out of his way to include and touch and heal the outcasts – the lepers, the children, the women, the foreigners, the sexually suspect citizens of first century Palestine. In most instances, Jesus took the initiative to reach out with healing words and hospitable welcome – to intentionally draw in those who were ostracized by the cultural and religious norms. These seekers did not have to change in order to be welcome. Instead the welcome changed them into joyful and generous disciples.

Marcus Borg has suggested that table fellowship is the common thread running through the gospels – Jesus' constant gathering of God's diverse people so that they might be fed with Word and Sacrament. And all these stories provide a foretaste of the messianic banquet imagined by the great Hebrew prophets – that future vision when all the world will sit at table with a generous God – when God's temple will be a house of prayer for all people. To eat together is a metaphor for intimacy and family. And for Jesus, the more diverse and hungry the guests, the more complete is the kingdom of God on earth. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood the church at its best to be “the beloved community” – a place where all God's children are cherished and precious because God has created them.

Over the years Bradley Hills has been led by the Spirit to be a visible sign of God's invisible grace – to be “a beloved community” – to be intentional in welcoming those who may feel excluded by other expressions of Christianity:

In the early 60's, the founding pastor Lloyd Brown explicitly spoke to the issue of

segregation, and made it clear that all people, black and white, were welcome at the Lord's table. Though two families left in anger, thirty more joined the church because of this prophetic stance.

Early on, Bradley Hills created the Special Class, to reach out to the differently-abled. And we continue to stretch ourselves to embody this commitment through building changes and spiritual awareness.

In the 1970's and 1980's, Bradley Hills led the way in empowering the gifts of women – and sealed this commitment by calling a woman as Head of Staff in 1989 – one of the few larger churches to do so.

For forty years, this congregation has modeled interfaith cooperation by sharing sacred space with our spiritual siblings, the Bethesda Jewish Congregation. And by so doing, we have been pioneers in exploring the theological issue of salvation in a pluralistic world.

In the late 90's, when Associate Pastor Scott Winnette shared with the congregation his newfound identity as a homosexual, the immediate response was one of almost universal welcome and acceptance.

Through our fifty years of life together, Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church has been called and shaped by the Holy Spirit to embody the radical hospitality of Jesus Christ in provocative and barrier breaking ways.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) (hereinafter “PCUSA”) continues to struggle with what it means to be the embodiment of the radical grace and radical truth of Jesus Christ in a contemporary world. Throughout the decades, the PCUSA has affirmed that ALL who trust in Jesus Christ as Lord are welcome at the table and the font. And over the last 100 years, our larger Presbyterian family has worked through the issues of race, divorce, women, and disabilities – finally opening up the offices of the church to those previously excluded by cultural prejudices and norms. In 2005, the issue of gay and lesbian Presbyterians continues to divide our denominational family, as we struggle with welcoming and ordination standards. Is it possible that the Holy Spirit is once more calling Bradley Hills to lead the way in modeling the gracious welcome of Jesus Christ?

The Bradley Hills mission and values statement provides the foundation for this report. These vivid words were crafted by the Spirit working through a broad-based participatory process in the year 2000. We have been called by our own congregational heart to embody the gracious welcome of Jesus Christ:

### ***BRADLEY HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH***

*A joyful community of spiritual friends*

*proclaiming the Living Christ in our everyday lives*

*Curious to learn*

*Inspired to worship*

*Energized to serve*

*All to the Glory of God*

***As followers of Jesus Christ, led by the Holy Spirit, we share these core values...***

***Hospitality*** - we welcome others and embrace our differences

***Community*** - we seek to be a loving and caring Christian family

***Joy*** - we celebrate the abundance of God's grace in our lives

***Beauty*** - we discover God with our eyes, our ears, and our hearts

***Honesty*** - we seek and share truth

***Integrity*** - we strive to live in accordance with our Christian faith

***Open-mindedness*** - we explore a diversity of ideas on our journey of faith

***Quality*** - we strive for excellence, but we realize that only God is perfect

It must be realized by the congregation that the Task Force recommendations to the Session and the action ultimately adopted by the Session can only address the issue of welcoming in a corporate or congregational sense. Whatever official position is adopted, true welcoming can only be accomplished if it comes from the heart and mind of each member.

### **The Educational Process**

As part of its deliberations and the educational process, the Task Force read a variety of material expressing various points of view on the issue of homosexuality; received comments from the congregation; had conversations with Pastor Winnette and another gay member of the congregation; held three Adult Education programs; held an "Open Mike Forum" with the congregation; had conversations with pastors of Presbyterian churches that are generally similar to Bradley Hills; reviewed relevant websites; shared thoughts and thoroughly discussed relevant issues.

To further educate the Task Force and those in the congregation interested in the issue, three Adult Education programs were held. The first seminar, *Current Trends in Medical and Psychological Views on Homosexuality*, featured Melissa Fries, MD, Director of Medical Genetics, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences and Head, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Bethesda Naval Medical Center. The second seminar, *How Homosexuality Issues Fit in the Church: An Overview of Scripture, History and Polity*, featured Pastor Andrews and attorney and Elder Cindy Bolbach, Clerk of Session, First Presbyterian Church of Arlington. The third seminar, *Where Other Presbyterian Churches Stand: Understanding the Spectrum of Positions*, was presented by Task Force member, Andrew Milne.

The presentation also included short video, “A Mother’s Son,” from Turning Points produced by the Covenant Network of Presbyterians. The Task Force also identified and made available to the congregation relevant reading matter and bibliographies both at the seminars and in the Library.

Throughout the educational process, the congregation was encouraged to participate and to supply the Task Force with comments and questions. Numerous members of the congregation took advantage of this opportunity. To provide an opportunity for dialogue, an Open Mike Forum was held on January 30, 2005. The Forum was attended by approximately 120 persons, of whom 31 presented comments or expressed viewpoints. A summary of the many comments submitted to the Task Force are summarized below. The Task Force feels that the Adult Education programs and the Open Mike Forum, in and of themselves, were a healthy opportunity for the congregation to better understand homosexuality as it relates to Presbyterianism and Bradley Hills.

### **Characterization of Comments by the Congregation**

There have been numerous opportunities for congregants to offer individual thoughts regarding the issue “whether BHPC should make specific efforts to be publicly welcoming to gays and lesbians as fully participating members of the church.” Only nine written comments have been submitted to date to the Task Force. After reviewing these comments, in conjunction with the roughly thirty statements made during the Open Forum held on January 30, the following characterizations can be made.

Comments by most individuals fell within two groups; namely, (1) those asking for a clear statement to be made that Bradley Hills is indeed a welcoming community; and (2) those, while not opposed to welcoming gays and lesbians, opposed to the singling out of any particular group within our community thereby inferring that other groups are less welcome.<sup>1</sup>

Summarizing the first point of view are the following comments:

- “Our church should be one in which all members are eligible for leadership roles.”
- “We do need to focus on [hospitality, community, honesty, integrity and open-mindedness] and our ways of expressing them, since sometimes education, vocation, race, language, disability, religion, sexual preference and other differences can be a mote in our eye and block our vision of God’s love in each of us.”
- “BHPC should embrace public welcoming of anyone on this earth as a fully participating member of the church, regardless of race, gender, age, marital/family status, disability and the entirely personal matter of sexuality. I believe any alternate response represents bigotry, discrimination, judgment and selfish fear that is driven by ignorance.”
- “I think Bradley Hills should explicitly declare that it favors the deletion of G-6.0106(b).”

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<sup>1</sup> The specific reasons why gays and lesbians are singled out are addressed within other sections of this report.

Summarizing the second point of view are the following comments:

- “I fear that by publicly welcoming only this group we are setting ourselves up to be a church for gays and lesbians but not necessarily for others.”
- “We shouldn’t actively welcome someone because of their sexual orientation. We should welcome them because they are members of our community who feel unwelcome.”
- “Christ welcomed all and His church should do likewise.”
- “If we want diversity, let’s be diverse; not oriented toward one particular group.”
- “Can we have an effective plan which avoids the finger pointing at one or another group as though they have a particular need to be singled out? Can we be inclusive without slipping into the trap of expressing, “hey, folks, some of my best friends are . . . .”
- “The idea of a ‘special welcome’ for any class of people is basically distasteful to me. Indeed, to me it is un-Christian. I have always been taught that Christ welcomed all and that His church should do likewise. No one is more welcome than another. Any ‘special welcome’ by its very nature makes other welcomes less welcoming.”

Other significant comments that were received that do not reasonably fit into the above points of view include: becoming “more light” and a “gay church” might result in a loss of membership; the matter of sexual orientation is a private matter; and an aggressive welcoming plan of implementation might result in a loss of membership and financial support.

It is worthy to note regarding the comments received, even when opinions were expressed strongly one way or another, rarely were any concrete examples of how Bradley Hills could be more welcoming to gays and lesbians proposed.

### **Polity and Practice**

The issue of sexual preference relates, in the PCUSA, only to ordination and the applicability of Section G-6.0106b (discussed below) to all persons who do not “live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness,” including both homosexual and heterosexual persons. It is important to note that all those who trust in Jesus Christ as Lord are welcomed to the baptismal font and the communion table.

The Presbyterian Church has been dealing with the issue of ordination of openly gay candidates for the ministry since 1976 when the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (hereinafter “UPCUSA”) appointed a Task Force to Study Homosexuality. After meeting for two years, a task force majority (14 members) recommended that the UPCUSA General Assembly declare that homosexuality is not a sin and does not constitute a bar to ordination. Five members recommended that the General Assembly declare homosexuality to be a sin. Thereafter, the UPCUSA General Assembly agreed with the minority and issued a “Policy Statement” stating that the “present understanding” is that “unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination.” In 1979, the Presbyterian Church in the

United States (the southern branch before unification) issued a similar policy statement. In 1993, the General Assembly of the PCUSA formalized the “policy statements” as “authoritative interpretations” of the ordination standards. In the same year, two decisions of the PCUSA General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission upheld the authoritative interpretation and rule that self-affirming, practicing gays and lesbians cannot be ordained and/or installed. Overtures came before the PCUSA General Assembly each year from 1990 through 1996 regarding the issue of ordaining gays and lesbians.

In 1996, the amendment popularly known as “Amendment B” was adopted by the General Assembly of the PCUSA and it was sent to the presbyteries for vote. It stated:

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 (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

In 1997, Amendment B was ratified by a 57%-43% vote of the presbyteries and became part of the Book of Order as Section G-6.0106b. By April, 1997, when it became known that a majority of the presbyteries had approved Amendment B, the Bradley Hills Session adopted the following guideline regarding ordination for the Bradley Hills Nominating Committee:

We covenant together to elect, ordain and install as officers those members with suitable gifts who are called to the ministry, who are persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and the love of Jesus Christ, and whose manner of life is a demonstration of the Christian Gospel in the Church of the world, without additional requirements or restrictions.

The Nominating Committee continues to this date to follow this guideline.

In the spring of 1997, a national group of pastors, led by former Moderators John Buchanan of Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago and Robert Bohl of First Presbyterian in Houston, formed the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, an advocacy group committed to removal of G-6.0106b from the Book of Order without dividing the Church. Susan Andrews was a member of the Board from its inception in 1997 until 2003, when she was elected Moderator of the 215<sup>th</sup> General Assembly. The Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church Session voted to become a member of the Covenant Network in 1998 and has continued as a member and to support the organization financially.

Also in 1998, the amendment popularly known as “Amendment A” was adopted by the General Assembly and it was sent to the presbyteries for their vote. Amendment A states:

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Jesus Christ under the authority of Scripture and instructed by the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to demonstrate fidelity and integrity in marriage or singleness and in all relationships of life. Candidates for ordained office shall acknowledge their own sinfulness, their need for repentance, and their reliance on the grace and mercy of God to fulfill the duties of their office.

The amendment did not receive a majority vote of presbyteries and thereby failed.

In 1998, the General Assembly approved the following “authoritative interpretation” of G-6.0106b and G-4.0403 of the Book of Order:

Standing in the tradition of breaking down the barriers erected to exclude people based upon their condition, such as age, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, the Presbyterian Church (USA) commits itself not to exclude anyone categorically in considering those called to ordained service in the church, but to consider the lives and behaviors of candidates as individuals.

Following this liberal interpretation of G-6.0106b, in 2001, the General Assembly approved proposed Amendment 1-A which would delete G-6.0106b from the Book of Order and would amend G-6.0106a to specify that church officers’ “suitability to hold office is determined by the governing body where the examination for ordination or installation takes place, guided by scriptural and constitutional standards under the authority and Lordship of Jesus Christ,” and would state that the 1978/1993 authoritative interpretation was “of no further force and effect.” That is, the determination of whether to ordain gays and lesbians would be left to each individual church. The local option amendment failed to receive a majority vote of the presbyteries and was not adopted.

To help resolve the continuing controversy, the General Assembly established the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, directed to “lead the Presbyterian Church (USA) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity, in and for the 21<sup>st</sup> century . . . . This discernment shall include but not be limited to issues of Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination standards, and power.” The Theological Task Force’s report is due for presentation to the 2006 General Assembly.

The matter is not at rest awaiting the report, however. In 2002, a decision of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission held that any self-acknowledgment of a disqualification pursuant to G-6.0106b must be “plain, palpable, and obvious.” It stated that, though homosexual practice is proscribed presently by the General Assembly, “all persons, being sinners, are equally likely and prone to violate the standards set forth in G-6.0106b.” It further stated that “if a governing body deciding whether to ordain and/or install a candidate has reasonable cause for inquiry based on its knowledge of the life and character of the candidate, it has the positive obligation to make due inquiry and uphold all of the standards for ordination and installation.”

Twice in the last five years, judicial disciplinary actions have been brought against the pastors of Bradley Hills. In 2001, Paul Rolf Jensen, an elder in Newport Beach, California, accused Scott Winnette of heresy because of his public statements about his homosexual orientation. In 2004, Mr. Jensen filed an action against Susan Andrews, on the last day of her moderatorial year, accusing her of knowingly participating in the ordination of a practicing homosexual. Both cases were unanimously dismissed by Investigating Committees set up by National Capital Presbytery. In both cases, allegations were misstated and Mr. Jensen’s motives of public humiliation and harassment were uncovered.

Another “overture” (*i.e.* a proposed amendment to the Book of Order) was brought to the 2004 General Assembly seeking a declaration that the authoritative interpretation that homosexuality is a sin is no longer binding. The General Assembly Committee on Church Orders and Ministry

approved the overture, with a minority report that stated that removing the authoritative interpretation “will divert time and energy from discernment” and will foster “the production of overtures devoted to restoring language of the authoritative interpretation to the Constitution.” On the floor of the General Assembly, the minority report was substituted for the Committee’s recommendation by a vote of 259-255, and the minority report was then approved 297-218.

The issue will be before the 2006 biennial General Assembly meeting when it considers the report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church.

### **Biblical References Said to be Related to Homosexuality**

The debate whether gay or lesbian Christians should be ordained to the offices of deacon, elder and minister of the Word and Sacrament revolves around six passages of the Bible generally thought to refer to same-sex relationships. The interpretations of these references differ depending upon whether the passages are considered literally (by the “Literalists”) or in their historical and cultural context (by the “Interpretists”).

This distinction is readily apparent from an analysis of verse 18:22 of Leviticus, as set forth below. Literalists take that verse as condemning homosexuality, and accept it as truth for all times. Interpretists take the same verse and look at its location in the whole of scripture, and its truth at the time in which it was written. The two verses in Leviticus 18 and 20 are part of a much larger Holiness Code that condemns many forms of behavior, including eating pork, usury, working on the Sabbath, and touching a menstruating woman. Interpretists would say that we need to be consistent in our reading of scripture. Thus condemning just one of hundreds of rules in the Holiness Code is not warranted. Other Christian Interpretists would say that all of scripture is best read through the lens of Christ's wise and gracious teachings; therefore because Jesus said nothing about homosexuality, perhaps we shouldn't either. The current teaching and preaching at Bradley Hills have grown out of an Interpretist perspective of scripture.

The Old Testament passages that pertain to homosexuality are found in: Genesis 19:4-11 and Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. The New Testament passages are found in Paul’s writing in: Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10. The language of those provisions as set forth in the New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible are as follows:

#### Genesis 19:4-11

<sup>4</sup> But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; <sup>5</sup> and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.” <sup>6</sup> Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, <sup>7</sup> and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. <sup>8</sup> Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof. <sup>9</sup> But they replied, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. <sup>10</sup> But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. <sup>11</sup> And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door.

Leviticus 18:22

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.

Leviticus 20:13

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.

Romans 1:24-27

<sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. <sup>26</sup> For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, <sup>27</sup> and in the same way also the men giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

<sup>9</sup> Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, <sup>10</sup> thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

1 Timothy 1:8-11

<sup>8</sup> Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. <sup>9</sup> This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murders, <sup>10</sup> fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching <sup>11</sup> that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

The Literalists contend that the Biblical references provide that homosexuality is a sin and, as such, homosexuals, in order to qualify for ordination, must repent and terminate their sinful conduct. Dr. Robert A. J. Gagnon, one of the most active Literalists, states in “Some Talking Points About *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*”:

The Bible’s opposition to homosexual practice [is] pervasive, absolute and severe . . . [n]o culture in the ancient Near East or in the Greco-Roman milieu adopted such a strong and absolute stance against all forms of homosexual behavior as did Judaism and Christianity. Israelite religion, early Judaism, and early Christianity did not just blindly follow trends in their cultural environment; their absolute and emphatic rejection of same-sex intercourse was, in many ways, profoundly counter-cultural.

Dr. Gagnon is Assistant Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

In June of 2001, a majority of the biblical faculty of the Presbyterian seminaries speaking on the issue of ordination took an Interpretist position of reviewing the Biblical references to homosexuality in “The Whole Bible for the Whole Human Family” stated:

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.

Second, 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.

Third, 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 person in the human community. As the 1985 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 two fold 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.

See: <http://www.tamfs.org/new/info/WholeBible.pdf>.

The most active force of Interpretists is the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, of which Bradley Hill is a member. In its "A Call to Covenant Community," the Network states, in part:

**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 call 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.

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**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.

*See:* <http://www.covenantnetwork.org/call2cc.html>, Emphasis in original.

It is with the concepts described above that Presbyterians of honesty and goodwill struggle.

### **Experiences of Other Churches**

The Task Force consulted with the pastors of other Presbyterian churches to learn of their experiences with participation of homosexual persons in their individual churches. The other Presbyterian churches consulted generally were similar in size to Bradley Hills. The churches and pastors with whom the task force spoke were:

- Fairfax Presbyterian Church (Fairfax, VA), Pastor – Henry Brinton
- New York Avenue Presbyterian Church (Washington, DC), Pastor – Roger Gench
- First Presbyterian Church (Arlington, VA), Pastor – Kim Rodrigue
- St. Mark Presbyterian Church (Rockville, MD), Pastor – Roy Howard
- Providence Presbyterian Church (Fairfax, VA), Pastor – Al Butzer
- Rockville Presbyterian Church (Rockville, MD), Interim Pastor – Chris Looker
- Lewinsville Presbyterian Church (McLean, VA), Pastor – Gary Pinder
- Old Presbyterian Meeting House (Alexandria, VA), Associate Pastor – Ann Herlin

Each of the churches consulted had a different perspective and experience to share with the Task Force. However, certain themes recurred in the Task Force's interviews. Several churches reported that discussing the issue of homosexuality was controversial and had produced the expression of divergent and conflicting opinions within their congregations. Churches that had conducted adult education programs on homosexuality found that the programs eased the sense of controversy and were an important, if not essential, element in being welcoming, specifically,

to homosexual members and visitors. Only two of the churches interviewed reported taking actions specifically related to Section G-6.0106b of the Book of Order. Most of the churches interviewed had addressed the participation of homosexual persons in the church on an *ad hoc* basis only.

Fairfax Presbyterian Church and Saint Mark Presbyterian Church both reported that they considered their churches to be “welcoming” in the broadest sense of the term. Neither of these two churches had taken any specific actions to address the question of installing homosexual persons to ordained offices. Neither church had a specific program for outreach to homosexual persons.

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church also reported that it had no specific outreach program for homosexual members or visitors. However, Lewinsville’s pastor, Gary Pinder, also reported that Lewinsville Presbyterian included several openly gay and lesbian members in its congregation, and that positions of leadership had been held by three homosexual members. Lewinsville Presbyterian was one of the five churches interviewed whose congregations had conducted discussions or adult education programs concerning sexual orientation.

Providence Presbyterian Church was one of the few churches that had developed a position specifically addressing Section G-6.0106b of the Book of Order. Providence Presbyterian was one of the churches that found discussion of this provision of the Book of Order to be controversial. Pastor Al Butzer reported that the church had adopted a “middle of the road” position concerning the issue. Following adoption of its position on Section G-6.0106b, three members of Providence Presbyterian left the church (two members found Providence’s position too favorable to homosexuals and one member found the position insufficiently favorable).

The experience of Rockville Presbyterian Church illustrated most sharply the controversy surrounding Section G-6.0106b and the ordination of homosexual persons. The Pastor Nominating Committee of Rockville Presbyterian presented to the congregation an openly lesbian pastor to serve as Minister of Word and Sacrament for the church. At the congregational meeting to discuss the matter, approximately sixty percent of the congregation favored calling the candidate to service. The Committee on Ministries of the National Capital Presbytery ruled that a 90% vote is necessary in order for a pastoral call to be approved. Concern over the possibility of complaints before the Presbyterian Judicial Commission(s) was also a factor in the church’s decision.

Old Presbyterian Meeting House related its experience following the request of an openly homosexual member for blessing of a union with her life partner. The request was received by the Meeting House’s then-Pastor, Gary Charles, who concluded that the blessing was within his authority as Minister of Word and Sacrament and consistent with Presbyterian polity. However, he recognized that Meeting House’s Session had authority to decide whether the sanctuary of Meeting House should be used for the blessing. Prior to the Session’s decision, Old Presbyterian Meeting House conducted an open forum in which the church members were invited to share their individual perspectives and views. The Meeting House Session ultimately approved the church’s sanctuary for the blessing. Several members left the church in response to the decision, but Associate Pastor Ann Herlin speculated that the departing members may have been disaffected with the church even before the Session’s decision in this matter.

One of the concerns that Meeting House’s members expressed was that their church would become the “gay wedding chapel of Alexandria.” It probably is significant that the Meeting House confronted this issue several years ago, when fewer Presbyterian churches had “welcomed” homosexual members with such open, demonstrative actions as publicly blessing the lifetime commitment of two same-sex partners to one another. However, the Meeting House did not attract a significant number of new homosexual members after the blessing of the same-sex union.

Old Presbyterian Meeting House was not the only church to report that accommodating openly homosexual persons did not result in a major change in the sexual orientation demographics of church membership. Within the last several years, New York Avenue Presbyterian Church became a More Light Presbyterian Church.<sup>2</sup> In the discussions that preceded this decision, some parishioners expressed concern that New York Avenue would become a “gay church.” Instead, the church found that a number of traditional families joined the church following its More Light affiliation. Although not formerly surveyed, Western Presbyterian Church reported that it has advertised in the *Washington Blade* but saw little increase in gay attendance.

Roger Gench, the pastor of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, has worked with two More Light churches. He advised our Task Force that education is critical to the success of adopting a More Light affiliation. Roy Howard (pastor of Saint Mark Presbyterian Church) advised that he believed that being a More Light congregation required a great degree of commitment.

A church’s commitment appears to be an important complement to outreach efforts. First Presbyterian Church of Arlington also reported first-hand experience with advertising directed to a homosexual audience. The congregation placed an advertisement in the *Washington Blade*. However, homosexual visitors who attended the church in response to the advertisement felt that the church delivered less than it had advertised. Arlington First also reported that it had invited homosexual members to serve in the leadership position of trustee (a non-ordained office), but had not specifically addressed the issue of service in the ordained offices of the church. Arlington First did not report that this distinction bore any relation to the response to its *Washington Blade* advertisement.

Several principles recurred consistently in the results of the Task Force’s interviews:

- Most of the churches that had addressed issues concerning the participation of homosexual persons in the life of the church did so on an *ad hoc* basis, rather than in connection with any policy of welcoming homosexual persons specifically.
- All of the churches that had considered the issue of outreach to homosexual persons or their participation in the life of the church reported that this led to the expression of divergent opinions among the members of their congregations.

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<sup>2</sup> The term “More Light” stems from the desire of its members to be open to God’s constant revelation through the Holy Spirit; *i.e.*, to be open to receiving a clearer understanding of God’s will in the same manner as one emerging from darkness sees more clearly (“more light”). The mission of the More Light Presbyterians is stated as follows ([www.mlp.org](http://www.mlp.org)): “Following the risen Christ, and seeking to make the Church a true community of hospitality, the mission of More Light Presbyterians is to work for the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith in the life, ministry and witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA).”

- The churches that addressed the issues of ordination of non-celibate homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex unions all lost a small number of members in connection with addressing those issues. Though difficult to quantify, some congregations attracted new members because of its practice of hospitality.
- While some church members individually feared that church actions affirming homosexuality would transform their churches into “gay churches,” these fears were contradicted by actual experience. This seems to bear out the comment of Lewinsville Presbyterian’s pastor, Gary Pinder, that church members are drawn together by faith, rather than sexuality.
- All of the churches that had addressed issues concerning participation of homosexual persons in the life of the church emphasized the importance of education as an essential element of addressing individual concerns and maintaining harmony and consensus within their churches.

### **The Bradley Hills History with the Issue of Homosexuality**

The Bradley Hills history with the issue of homosexuality goes back at least a decade and includes the following:

1994: Matt Rupcich, a member of the choir and Director of Music for Children and Youth at Bradley Hills, was falsely accused of sexual misconduct with a youth. The church retained legal counsel for the matter. An active police investigation was undertaken, and it was determined that the alleged conduct never happened and that Matt had been falsely accused. The Church, including congregants, were extremely supportive of Matt during and after this process. As a result of this experience, Matt revealed to the Session his homosexual preference, became a BHPC member and started worshipping regularly with his partner.

1994: In the fall, Bradley Hills neighborhood clusters gathered for a conversation with Susan Andrews about the strengths and needs of the church. One of the suggestions that emerged was that “it would be a positive development to proactively welcome gays and lesbian people into our community.”

1995: Bradley Hills held a series of adult education seminars to educate congregants on the issues surrounding homosexuality and the church.

1996: A task force was formed to explore the issue of homosexuality, ordination and policy. It recommended to the Session the following:

1. that all professing Christians should be welcomed into the life and work of this congregation;
2. that we at Bradley Hills respect the ordination of all individuals who meet the criteria for ordination as set forth in the Book of Order (constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA), irrespective of sexual orientation;
3. that the present ordination criteria in the Book of Order are sufficient for those who would be called to leadership positions in the Church as elders, deacons, ministers of Word and Sacrament, namely that candidates be ‘persons of strong faith, dedicated

discipleship and love of Jesus Christ as Lord, and whose manner of life is a demonstration of the gospel in the church in the world.’ Book of Order, G-6.0106);

4. that the Church is a community where we are all striving toward grace;
5. that sexual orientation should not be the issue but rather how one lives a life of faith;
6. that we recognize the authority of other churches and governing bodies in ordaining elders, deacons, and ministers irrespective of sexual orientation.

On May 14, 1996, the Session adopted the forgoing recommendations.

1997: In April, when it became known that a majority of the presbyteries had approved Amendment B to the Book of Order (presently existing provision G-6.0106b), the Session adopted the following interim guidance for ordination for the Bradley Hills:

We covenant together to elect, ordain and install as officers those members with suitable gifts who are called to the ministry, who are persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and the love of Jesus Christ, and whose manner of life is a demonstration of the Christian Gospel in the Church of the world, without additional requirements or restrictions.

The Nominating Committee continues, to this date, to follow this guideline.

1998: Bradley Hills signed on as a member of the Covenant Network, calling for churches to covenant together to welcome, in the name of Christ, all whom God calls into community and leadership in God’s church. Bradley Hills continues to support the organization financially.

2000: Associate Pastor Scott Winnette, two years after his ordination, shared with the congregation his personal discovery of his homosexuality. The immediate response from both the Bradley Hills leadership and congregation was one of almost universal welcome and acceptance and the Session reaffirmed its continued relationship with Scott.

2000: The Bradley Hills Session unanimously approved overtures to the National Capital Presbytery recommending that provision G-6.0106b be removed from the Book of Order and that ordination decisions be decided by the most local church governing body.

2001: When the Centerville Presbyterian Church adopted a position against the removal of G-6.0106b from the Book of Order, the Bradley Hills Session wrote a forceful letter disagreeing with the Centerville position.

2004-2005: The BHPC Welcoming Task Force was established and this report is the result of its work.

### **The Convictions of the Task Force**

When we were initially charged by the Session to investigate the issue of welcoming gays and lesbians to be fully participating members of the Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church family, many of us felt ill prepared for the task. The education sessions, Task Force meetings and the Open-Mike Forum provided a variety of views, fears and opinions which had the potential to both unite

and divide us. We have all had to neutralize our preconceived ideas about homosexuality. With open minds, we have studied the biblical references and opinions of theologians and the policies of PCUSA. We reviewed the biology of homosexuality. We evaluated this information within the concept of love of neighbor and faith in Jesus Christ.

The Task Force concluded that both homosexual and heterosexual orientations are compatible with the Christian concept of love of neighbor and faith in the teachings of Jesus. Sexual orientation is not a conscious choice. Epidemiologic data suggests that genetic and biologic influences exist. Our sexual behavior can be modified by our environment, but our sexual orientation is innate. Homosexuality is not, by itself, inherently evil. Heterosexuality does not, by itself, necessarily equal goodness and justice. There is no evidence that sexual orientation is a medical, psychological or moral disorder. Family values and Christian love can be practiced by all who believe in Jesus Christ.

The Task Force also recognizes that Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church should be welcoming to all seeking the love and community of Christ. We are concerned about gays and lesbians, particularly, because the policies of PCUSA restrict their full participation in leadership positions in our community of faith.

The Task Force has discussed potential recommendations and implications of becoming a more welcoming community to gay and lesbian members. The issues of same sex unions, baptisms of homosexual members and their dependents and challenging the PCUSA policy set forth in Section G-6.0106b of the Book of Order will need to be addressed by the Session, if we, as a congregation, are going to become more welcoming. The members of the Task Force recommend that the Session inspire and motivate the community of the Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church to become a more welcoming congregation to all persons, including gays and lesbians, seeking a relationship with Jesus Christ.

### **Recommendations**

Based on its readings, activities, and discussions as delineated in previous sections of this Report, the Task Force respectfully submits the following recommendations for consideration by the Session. In this regard, the Task Force wishes to note that these recommendations – and any ensuing decision(s) as may be taken by the Session – can only address the issue of “institutional” welcoming and inclusion. **Each member of the congregation must make a personal effort to welcome all those who choose to worship with us – “welcoming” can not be imposed on him or her.**

#### **A. Add inclusive language to our website, bulletin and newsletter.**

The Task Force recommends that Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church clearly and overtly state its embodiment of the gracious welcome of Jesus Christ by including within its mission and values statement the message that we would welcome and accept gay and lesbian members and visitors, as well as all others. In the case of race, women and divorce, we self-consciously adopted an approach of looking at Scripture through the lens of Jesus’ life and ministry. In that way, we recognized the full humanity of these people and our responsibility not to interfere with their right to worship with us and to have full privileges as members of the church. We should accord gays and lesbians the same graciousness. The following language is suggested:

**We welcome persons of every age, race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, class, ability and sexual orientation, who seek to grow more deeply in their relationship with God and serve others in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.**

**B. Submit and support an overture to the PCUSA General Assembly to remove Section G-6.0106(b) from the Book of Order.**

As stated above (Polity and Practice), the issue in the PCUSA relates only to ordination and the applicability of Section G-6.0106b to all persons who do not “live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness,” which implicitly includes all homosexuals and as a practical matter is only applied to homosexuals as a wall for ordination. This issue will again be before the 2006 biennial General Assembly meeting when it considers the report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church.

In keeping with BHPC’s core values with regard to hospitality, its history of being intentional in welcoming those who may feel excluded by other expressions in Christianity, its support of Scott Winnette, its membership and participation in the Covenant Network, its listing as “welcoming” on More Light’s website, and its past experience with gay and lesbian members holding ordained office, the Task Force recommends that BHPC should take a leadership role in the ongoing effort to bring to motion the removal of Section G-6.0106b and substitution of a local church option provision, beginning with the submission of a National Capital Presbytery overture to that effect. All those who reflect God’s love are worthy of consideration for leadership in Christ’s church.

**C. Encourage regular education and dialogue, particularly with the Youth Connection**

The Task Force believes that we need to commit ourselves as a congregation to ensuring honesty and consistency in the proclamations and practices of our church, including a consistent and gracious interpretation of Scripture and our polity, one that applies equally to gays and straights. Although we are blessed to have the spiritual leadership at BHPC that we do – one that makes it a priority to embrace all of God’s children with total hospitality and inclusion – it would benefit us all to have regular dialogues within the context of adult educational activities and Youth Connection meetings.

While some gay and lesbian BHPC members have expressed to the Task Force that they feel welcomed, one (non-gay) member stated at our January 30, 2005 Open Mike Forum that she did not believe that her gay friends and clients would feel comfortable and be welcomed at BHPC. Other members at the Open Mike Forum expressed concern, if not fear, that the character of BHPC might change if we explicitly become “welcoming” to gays and lesbians. As stated in the 1996 BHPC Session’s position relative to the ordination of homosexuals, “sexual orientation should not be the issue but rather how one lives a life in faith.” Many in the congregation have likely had little exposure to the issue of homosexuality, and discussions and educational activities on this subject would likely serve to reaffirm our values and build a common understanding and foundation so that, individually and collectively, we do not inadvertently judge some Christians as more worthy than others.

**D. Reaffirm our responsibility to our children and youth**

Coupled with recommendation C above, the Task Force suggests that we explicitly acknowledge our responsibility to teach our children and youth an interpretation of Scripture that ensures the inclusion of all people. At the Open Mike Forum, one member expressed concern for the children growing up in the church, one in ten of whom may be gay. How will we welcome them? Another member noted that, particularly as we are in an area and region with great diversity, we have an opportunity to teach our children that we live in a world of people who may be different from them. A third member stated that her daughter is concerned about a church that differentiates between people as officers based on sexual orientation.

BHPC, particularly through its Youth Connection, can purposefully teach its congregational children and youth the family values that we cherish and which are consistent with the hospitality and inclusion that are core, absolute and essential ingredients of our institutional foundation. Perhaps, it is best to keep in mind the vows each and every one of us solemnly takes when present at a child's baptism. We promise to help raise each child in a Christ-like manner, so it behooves us to ensure that these children will feel as loved and welcomed when they grow up as they do when they are young and innocent – for one day they will be assuming leadership roles within our church and the greater community.

#### **E. Covenant Commitment Ceremony for Homosexual Partners**

The concept of a covenant is central to our theology and biblical tradition. Membership in the church, baptism, confirmation, ordination and marriage are all covenants. Thus, they are solemn agreements or promises that ask for God's blessing and strength in being committed to a person or a community of faith. The joining of two individuals in ceremony of commitment is also a covenant that asks for God's blessing on the promise of two individuals of faith that they will live together in a strong and committed relationship.

The PCUSA does not prohibit a PCUSA pastor from performing a holy union using Presbyterian property if it is not considered a marriage; *i.e.*, the Presbyterian marriage liturgy is not used, and if the pastor believes the holy union is between two individuals in a strong and committed relationship.

We recommend that the Session affirm the hospitality of Jesus Christ by authorizing the use of the sanctuary for covenant commitment ceremonies between gay or lesbian partners. Each authorization for such use must be presented to the Session upon recommendation of the pastor and upon a finding that the relationship is a strong and committed one.

#### **F. Reaffirm what we are already doing**

On a highly positive note, the Task Force notes that there are many ongoing activities and measures that BHPC intentionally undertakes that are reflective of its being specifically publicly welcoming to gays and lesbians. Examples include its leadership role in the Covenant Network and being listed as "welcoming" on the More Light webpage. We recommend that reciprocal links between the BHPC webpage and the Covenant Network webpage be established. We also recommend that the Evangelism and Membership Lay Ministry develop effective ways to inform the gay community about the welcoming hospitality of BHPC. The Task Force is collectively and firmly convinced that BHPC is following its congregational heart and thus "doing the right thing" through such measures and respectfully challenges it to further lead the way as a model of the gracious welcome of Jesus Christ.

## **G. Revisiting the issue**

The Task Force recommends that, by December 31, 2007, the Session revisit BHPC practices with regard to publicly welcoming gays and lesbians to become fully participating members of the BHPC family, in light of potential shifts and changes within societal norms, PCUSA polity, and our own congregational behavior and experience, in order to determine if any recommendation(s) or other action(s) as the Session may implement is (or are) having the desired outcome and/or whether more or different steps should be taken in this regard.

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

The Welcoming Task Force has received many thoughtful written and verbal comments concerning the issue of publicly welcoming gays and lesbians as fully participating members of the Bradley Hills family. Based on these comments, the Task Force recognizes that its recommendations regarding this issue will prompt a number of sincere questions from members of the congregation. Accordingly, the Task Force has attempted to anticipate some of these questions and to provide its responses. They are as follows:

*Question:* Why should BHPC “single-out” gays and lesbians for public welcome? Why not “welcome everyone?”

*Response:* BHPC wishes to publicly welcome all individuals into our congregation who seek to respond to the good news of the gospel of Jesus that invites all to full communion in the church regardless of their race, color, age, gender or sexual orientation. However, according to Section G-6.0106b of the Book of Order of the PCUSA, all persons who do not “live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness” are ineligible for ordination as deacons, elders or ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Thus, openly gay and lesbian individuals – even those of faith who are living in fidelity with a partner - are categorically precluded from becoming *fully* participating members of Presbyterian congregations. They, unlike any other group of individuals, have been specifically excluded from ordination by the legislative actions of our church. We believe that this stance is counter to welcoming, in the name of Christ, all whom God calls into community and leadership in God’s church. Therefore, it is important that we explicitly welcome gays and lesbians and extend to them an invitation to join the life and ministry of our congregation. We further believe that our congregation should actively support initiatives to amend the Book of Order so that individuals of faith, regardless of their sexual orientation, are not excluded from being considered for ordination. All those who reflect God’s love are worthy of consideration for leadership in Christ’s church.

*Question:* Why hasn’t BHPC chosen to become a “More Light” congregation?

*Response:* Although there are several Presbyterian groups that are active in promoting inclusivity for gays and lesbians within the denomination, the two major groups are the *Covenant Network of Presbyterians* and the *More Light Presbyterians*. The term “More Light” stems from the desire of its members to be open to God’s constant revelation through the Holy Spirit; *i.e.*, to be open to receiving a clearer understanding of God’s will in the same manner as one emerging from darkness sees more clearly (“more light”).

The mission of the More Light Presbyterians is stated as follows ([www.mlp.org](http://www.mlp.org)): “Following the risen Christ, and seeking to make the Church a true community of hospitality, the mission of More Light Presbyterians is to work for the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith in the life, ministry and witness of the PCUSA.” The Covenant Network of Presbyterians has defined itself ([www.covenantnetwork.org](http://www.covenantnetwork.org)) as “a broad-based, national group of clergy and lay leaders working for a church that is simultaneously faithful, just and whole. It seeks “to support the mission and unity of the PCUSA in a time of potentially divisive controversy,” and it is their intent “to articulate and act on the church’s historic, progressive vision and to work for a fully inclusive church.” The Covenant Network was founded in 1997 in an attempt to replace G-6.0106.b (Amendment B, discussed previously) in the Book of Order with an amendment (Amendment A) “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.”

Both the Covenant Network and the More Light Presbyterians are committed to effecting a change in the polity of the PCUSA that permits gays and lesbians to become fully participating members of congregations; *i.e.*, to be eligible for ordination as deacons, elders and ministers of the Word and Sacrament. What then is the difference between these two groups? Perhaps the most significant difference is that More Light Presbyterians are less compromising in the pursuit of this goal. They wish to attain full inclusivity even at the risk of causing a split within the denomination. In contrast, the Covenant Network of Presbyterians seeks to work “for the peace and unity of the PCUSA in a time of faithful disagreement and continuing discernment.” The member churches are “united in their determination to keep the church from either enshrining a narrow orthodoxy or splitting over non-essential matters.” Thus, as part of this mission, they are taking a leadership role in an effort to remove Section G-6.0106b from the Book of Order at the 2006 PCUSA General Assembly meeting. BHPC is a member of the Covenant Network, and as such, we are committed to attaining inclusivity through informing, networking and advocating in a manner that will avert divisiveness and help the church stay together in faithful ministry. We believe that BHPC should be a church where every one is welcome and his or her views are respected.

*Question:* How might BHPC be impacted by publicly welcoming gays and lesbians to our congregation?

*Response:* The Task Force-sponsored Adult Education Sessions, as well as the dialogue within the congregation that resulted from the Open-Mike Forum, have already had an impact on our congregation. These activities initiated a sincere and open exchange of ideas, opinions and concerns that have served to inform and build a common understanding among many members. It is also clear that honest differences in thought regarding this issue exist – and will continue to exist within the congregation. These differences must be respected. It is anticipated that implementation of the Task Force’s recommendations, together with continued prayerful, honest and open dialogue within the congregation, will result in experiences and insights that will minimize these differences and solidify those areas where we have a common objective; *e.g.*, to reach out to all of God’s children.

BHPC has been blessed – and continues to be blessed – with the incredible talents and steadfast Christian service of several gay and lesbian individuals. We would indeed be fortunate to become the beneficiaries of the Christian fellowship and service of additional gay and lesbian members as a result of the welcoming initiatives recommended by the Task Force. These initiatives are fully in keeping with the core values of BHPC, the leadership role of BHPC in the Covenant Network and the gracious welcome of Jesus Christ.

*Question:* Should BHPC place an advertisement in the *Washington Blade* in an attempt to publicly welcome gays and lesbians?

*Response:* The Task Force does not recommend placing an ad in the *Washington Blade* or a similar local “gay” periodical. The *Washington Blade* is an on-line and printed newspaper that serves as “the weekly news source for Washington’s large and visible gay community.” It is the opinion of some gay members of the congregation that it is unlikely that such an ad would be appealing to its readership since the readership is primarily comprised of individuals outside of the demographic population of those who might attend BHPC; e.g., urban young gay males.

*Question:* Should BHPC baptize the children of gay and lesbian parents?

*Response:* Yes. Our denomination celebrates only two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is the initiation into the covenant community of our Christian family, and it signifies God’s assurance that our sins will be forgiven. Baptism, whether of an adult or an infant, is a response to God’s grace at work in a person’s life. The baptism of an infant is the affirmation of the gift of God’s love and grace even before a person is able to respond in faith. Baptism is open to any church member – regardless of their sexual orientation – who professes faith in Jesus Christ. It is also open to the children of all active church members regardless of the sexual orientation of their parents. Moreover, it is the promise and responsibility of the parents of the child and the congregation to nurture the development of a Christian life in all children who are baptized.

### **Conclusion**

The Welcoming Task Force unanimously and prayerfully submits this report to the Session and the congregation of Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church. Through seven months of research, study and dialogue, we have all grown and changed in our exploration of welcoming as central to our live as disciples of Jesus Christ. We believe that our recommendations will build up the Body of Christ in Bethesda and enrich our community of faith. All to the glory of God!

Respectfully submitted this first day of May, 2005 by the Welcoming Task Force

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