



The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, same-sex relationships and church membership: six problems

Patrick M, a Presbyterian elder, writes - I don't know about you but I've never really believed the adage that 'All publicity is good publicity'. Allegedly it comes from Oscar Wilde who said 'The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about.'

Well, speaking of Oscar Wilde, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has sure been talked about over the last couple of weeks. Twitter storms, widespread media coverage inside Ireland and beyond, public resignations, and many and varied responses online all followed its debate on same-sex couples and membership at the 2018 General Assembly in Belfast.

People have asked me what I think; friends in other PCI churches have emailed telling of friends they have who have been exploring faith and coming to church now

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thinking of leaving; we've had animated family discussions around the dinner table and, as usual, I've learnt most from those. So here are some thoughts.

An online war of 'gospel inclusivity' versus 'gospel purity'

I'm an elder in a local Presbyterian Church outside Dublin. For most people in it, Belfast and what goes on there during General Assembly is pretty much 'out of sight out of mind.' They are Presbyterian with a small 'p': people from all sorts of backgrounds, few with any family, cultural or theological ties to Presbyterianism who gather together to worship and try to follow Jesus.

But it's hard to ignore the fall-out of GA 2018. It has long-term implications both in the official policy of the Church (that all Kirk Sessions are supposed to be trained in) and for the mission of local churches like ours (I can only speak of the context I am in)

Much social media I've looked at just dismisses 'the other' for being homophobic or a liberal depending on where you are coming from. It's like an online war of 'gospel inclusivity' versus 'gospel purity' with both sides feeling virtue is on their side. So I'll try (and probably fail) not to caricature and will quote from the Report and the PCI directly in aiming to be fair to its thinking and motives.

A point of clarification: this post is not discussing the rights and wrongs of same-sex relationships, 'active' or not. It's responding to the process and new policy of the PCI.

The PCI statement [can be seen here \(pdf\)](#)

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The actual report of the Doctrine Committee [can be read here – go down to Appendix 2](#) (pdf)

‘Same-sex couples’ and a ‘credible profession of faith’

In case you have missed it, the furore has been about a Report from the Doctrine Committee of the PCI responding to a *a request from the General Council to prepare guidelines for Kirk Sessions to address the issue of same-sex couples who may seek communicant membership ... or who may request the baptism of a child.*

And the Doctrine Committee Report therefore focused on *the specific theological question of what constitutes a credible profession of faith and how it is to be understood and applied in these particular pastoral situations.*

The ‘credible profession of faith’ is the key phrase: as the Report says *within the Reformed tradition the notion of a ‘credible profession’ is effectively a shorthand for not only a credible profession of Christ as Saviour but also a credible walk in obedience to him as Lord.*

And the key conclusion of the Doctrine Committee was *In light of our understanding of Scripture and the Church’s understanding of a credible profession of faith it is clear that same sex couples are not eligible for communicant membership nor are they qualified to receive baptism for their children. We believe that their outward conduct and lifestyle is at variance with a life of obedience to Christ.*

For non-Presby readers, the logic here is the covenant theology around infant baptism. The child obviously cannot make a profession of faith. The parents promise to bring up the child in the faith within the community of the church. To do so they should have a ‘credible profession of faith’ themselves. Since ‘same-sex’ couples have, in effect, an ‘incredible’ profession of faith, they cannot have their children baptised.

The Report was debated at the GA 2018. Rev Cheryl Meban proposed that the relevant parts of the Report (Appendix 2) not be received, but in the debate that motion did not succeed and the Report was adopted as the official position of the Church.

So, if that’s the story, how to interpret it? Here are some perspectives. These, of course, are my personal opinions. Always open to correction, learning from push-back, apology for misrepresentation. There are few more emotive and sensitive subjects than this one. Comments welcome.

Logically Consistent – what’s all the fuss?

Looking ‘logically’ at things, the vote is perfectly comprehensible. The PCI has produced several reports on Homosexuality over the years.

[They are gathered together in this document](#) (pdf) which has a summary article by Prof Stephen Williams (2013), an original report (1979) and pastoral guidelines (2007). I’d recommend you read them if interested in hearing what the

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PCI is saying in its own words in officially agreed documents.

In the 2013 summary, it says

The position that has been clearly and consistently adopted in PCI is that homosexual activity is not consistent with Christian discipleship, since it does not accord with the will of God expressed in his moral law.

So, if 'homosexual activity' is inconsistent with Christian discipleship, and if 'credible' Christian discipleship is required to be a communicant member and have children baptised, therefore, when asked the question, the answer of the Doctrine Committee Report is hardly that surprising.

Fair enough? Not really. For what it's worth, here's why I think it is a deeply misguided decision.

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1. Pastorally deaf

The Doctrine Committee Report saw its job as answering one narrow question. In their own words:

The Committee approached this issue in the understanding that the General Assembly has already agreed pastoral guidelines on homosexuality and has offered substantial pastoral advice for Kirk Sessions.

So, after mentioning pastoral guidelines, they are then set aside, effectively irrelevant to the task. Doctrinal implications are then worked out to their logical end.

But when you actually read the pastoral guidelines of 2006, the tone and content is light years away from the abstract, logical and pastorally deaf conclusions of the 2018 proposals.

The 2007 Report was written specifically in request of a resolution of the 2006 General Assembly that accepted that there were homophobic attitudes within the PCI:

“That the General Assembly recognising homophobic attitudes within our Church and society request the Social Issues Panel to prepare guidelines to help our Church to develop more sensitive and effective pastoral care.”

Remember, this is also ‘official’ PCI policy. The 2007 Report says things like this:

many people in churches who have same sex attraction are afraid to be open about it for fear of how they will be treated by those in their church, amongst others. There is no reason to assume Presbyterians are any different. Representatives of the Gay Helpline state that they have regular calls from people belonging to PCI who are unwilling to disclose their same sex attractions.

It is clear that people of all ages who have same sex attractions are very reluctant to tell others because of fear, prejudice etc. Keeping their feelings hidden out of fear has a significant impact on mental health.

The Report tells several stories – here is one worth recounting in full:

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Bob's story. I was brought up in a strong, loving, Christian home and was very actively involved in a lively, evangelical Presbyterian church. I became a Christian when I was young and was well taught and have a real love for the Bible. I was very committed to the youth work in my church and tried to live for Christ and witness for Him inside and outside the Church. During my teens I began to realise that I was different. I found myself attracted to boys rather than girls. I didn't choose it to be so, it just was. I resisted it, prayed against it. I understood well the Bibles' teaching on homosexuality and wrestled to overcome my feelings and pretended to be like 'the lads'. Eventually in my late teens I confided in a Christian friend. He continued to talk to and pray for me over a number of years. Knowing and respecting the churches teaching I practiced celibacy but felt alone, fearful and overwhelmed. The pressure of keeping it to myself, the feelings of shame, the guilt of feeling that I was living a lie and the fear of how the news would affect my parents and my church life eventually took its toll on my mental health. I had to take various medicines for depression and on one occasion came very close to committing suicide.

People in the church would crack jokes about 'Gays' and I just wanted to crawl into a hole. How could I open up to them when my struggles were joked about? I respect my minister and his teaching, but when homosexuality was mentioned in church the Biblical position of calling practising homosexuality sin was outlined without ever a word of compassion or understanding for people like me who were struggling so hard and hadn't chosen to feel the way I did.

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One of my greatest struggles was that I had always been brought up to respect and to tell the truth. Yet here I was living and telling lies to protect my family and myself. Eventually I felt I had no other option but to tell my parents about my struggles. They were devastated and so were my friends at church. It is devastating when all who made you and shaped and directed your life turn on you. I am not bitter, I still love my family and respect my church but when I really needed someone to listen to me without judgement, there was no one. I would love to be straight. It would cause so much less pain but for the sake of my own sanity I have eventually had to accept that I am gay. I am both a Christian who loves God and His word but I am also gay.

How I wonder does 'Bob' feel now in light of 2018?

It seems to me that the message he, and everyone like him has received, is that the Church has gone backwards, not forwards in its attitudes since 2007. It is not a safe space to share struggles with sexuality. It's better to keep quiet, whatever the cost. You are not welcome here.

Missionally disastrous

I also wonder about the internal politics of the Church that led the General Council to ask the Doctrine Committee to give an answer to this one specific hypothetical scenario. It seems to me to be an intentional 'marker' of orthodoxy setting the Church against a rapidly liberalising culture, particularly around sexuality and gender.

Now I have no concerns about the Church of Jesus Christ, who was crucified by the state let's not forget, being counter-cultural. That is its job. I agree that a Christian

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sexual ethic is, and will seem increasingly, bizarre within Western late-modern culture. So be it.

But why proceed in such an oppositional, defensive and exclusionary way? It feels a bit like those under siege, retreating to the Keep, drawing up the ramparts and taking up arms, fearful of the surrounding hoards.

It feels like a retreat from conversation and engagement. Whereas the 2007 Report made serious efforts to dialogue, this is theology done in a vacuum, abstracted from real people.

Such an approach is, in post-Christendom, missionally disastrous. It speaks of a Church Community speaking only to itself. I would have thought that after the 2007 Report, there would have been a sense of humility at homophobia within the Church (that the Church itself acknowledged) and a sensitivity to the relational impact of such a Report.

There is a flood of good theological thinking and practice out there on learning from the multitudes of people exiting institutional Christianity. It is exactly this type of bureaucratic, abstract and un-relational process that puts post-Christendom people off denominations.

A theme that keeps coming up around gender and sexuality is the need to listen, to learn and to apologise for how attitudes and actions in the Church have hurt people like Bob. This isn't 'selling out' beliefs on what the Bible teaches, it is being relational as well as doctrinal.

I'm afraid that this PCI process and Report lacks humility, of learning from the Other and of generous hospitality to those

different from 'Us'. Its tone is that 'We have nothing to learn' and we are putting up boundary fences instead.

I'm writing something related to 1 Corinthians at the moment. There is perhaps no more relevant letter in the NT for contemporary Western culture. Yes, Paul puts boundaries around Corinthian sexual behaviour (among other things) but he does so passionately, compassionately, persuasively and lovingly as a father who cares for his children.

This is how theology works – in relationship, inspiring, exhorting, encouraging Christians to live a life worthy of the Gospel. Passing a hypothetical rule about a specific sin that rules hypothetical people out of membership and being able to baptise their children does not seem very biblical to me.

1. Hierarchy of sin

Choosing to focus on 'same-sex sin' as a bar to membership also gives the impression that the PCI has a hierarchy of sin, with same-sex relationships at the top. There are innumerable other sins that Presbyterians commit but are not (as far as I know) specifically singled out to be examined when it comes to membership and baptismal promises.

The irony is, when it comes to infant baptism, it has been the church's *failure* to practice it consistently which has all but destroyed the integrity of baptism within Christendom Reformed churches. (See David F Wright's book, [*What has infant baptism done to baptism: An Enquiry at the end of Christendom?*](#)). The notion of a 'credible profession of faith' has been given lip-service for generations. To start

tightening up sacramental discipline with same-sex couples speaks of double standards. I know many cases of couples who hardly, if ever, appear in church or show 'visible' signs of a living faith, suddenly appearing for a baptism of their baby. Or of couples living together being welcomed as members with no questions asked.

Paul's 'sin-lists' in the NT are pretty catholic in their scope – greed, gluttony, envy, pride, hetero-sexual sin and others all appear and more. If the Church is serious about stricter sacramental discipline, then how is this going to happen? Are other sins going to be specified as that which exclude people from communicant membership?

Now the Doctrine Committee report is aware of this:
The Doctrine Committee recognises the danger of giving the impression that there is the only area where sacramental discipline might apply. However, the current request to the Doctrine Committee asks for guidance in one particular area.

So, the Committee was aware of the problem but, in effect, seem simply to have pressed ahead with their remit anyway. The danger foreseen is now fulfilled: same-sex relationships DO seem to be treated in a distinct way to every other sin when it comes to sacramental discipline.

In contrast, the 2007 Report on pastoral guidelines says this

When we condemn homosexual practice in isolation or single it out as somehow worse than other sexual practices outside of heterosexual marriage then we demonstrate homophobic attitudes.

I'll say no more.

1. No consideration of pastoral accommodation

The motive for this Report was to give guidelines to Kirk Sessions (elders) within the PCI. Apart from laying down a law, I am not clear what guidelines are being given.

Not only is there a lack of guidance to elders on how to approach the 'straight-forward' hypothetical situation of a same-sex couple seeking membership and / or baptism of their children, there is no discussion of other likely scenarios.

What, for example, of the following example? (I have no agenda in the one that follows. I am just trying to show that the PCI process has not addressed pastoral realities and passing a law is an inadequate approach. I am sure you can think of other scenarios.)

A legally married same-sex couple, with children, become Christians. They want to become members of the church. What should elders do?

To obey the recent decision of the GA 2018, such a couple cannot become members and baptise their children. Should they be advised to get divorced and split up the family? What if they stayed married, but celibate? Or can some form of pastoral accommodation be worked out on a case by case basis?

A useful book discussing alternative theologies of same-sex is Sprinkle, P. (ed) 2016. [*Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible and the Church*](#). Grand Rapids. Zondervan. I'm going churchnewsireland@gmail.org

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to zone in on one of the contributors, Baptist theologian Steve Holmes, because he, like the PCI, argues on the non-affirming side. His chapter carefully considers the arguments for Christian same-sex marriage, and for a new form of relationships to be accepted – like Robert Song’s ‘Covenantal Partnerships’. He is not persuaded by arguments for either of these two options (and the book itself gives space for other views which do).

But Holmes addresses a crucial question that the PCI does not – what then does the church do with a situation like the one above? Holmes opens up the question of pastoral accommodation.

“If the Christian theology of marriage is not extensible to same-sex couples, and if there is no space for a new discipline of ‘covenantal partnerships’ that includes sexual activity, what are we left with? The answer, it seems to me, is pastoral accommodation. Churches that believe same-sex partnerships to be wrong might nonetheless find space within the life for people living in such partnerships out of pastoral concern.” (191)

He refers to how Protestant churches have made space like this for divorced people out of pastoral concern. Most now allow remarriage. In Africa, some churches have done similar with regard to polygamy.

He says

“We must at least ask ourselves how we can refuse to give the same permission to gay people.”

The PCI Report makes no mention of pastoral accommodation. To begin to answer it, the PCI should, I think, be considering the sort of issues Holmes' raises. To leave things as they stand after the GA 2018 is deeply unsatisfactory:

- If addressing issues of sexual practice and discipleship, then there should be a renewed emphasis on sexual ethics for straight people. How can the Church do this before making judgements that exclude same-sex couples?
- Holmes says "general rules or guidelines are almost always unhappy". And "pastoral questions are properly answered at the level of individual lives, not at the level of generic themes". Sadly, the PCI did not take this view. Going forward, there needs to be more thinking about pastoral practice.
- How do we approach issues of discipleship around sexually active converts in non-marriage relationships (whether same-sex or opposite sex) if they have joined the church? Is it consistent? Will there be limitations on areas of service into which they are invited?
- How will the church relate to gay and lesbian church members who come out? What space will there be for them to open and honest about their sexuality? What if they are married and likely with children? How can the church support all the family in their discipleship in such a scenario?

5. Loose language

A not insignificant point in the loose language of the Doctrine Committee Report. Throughout it talks of 'same-sex couples'. Nowhere does it distinguish between a

couple who may, out of Christian conviction, be in a non-sexual same-sex relationship. What difference might that make to communicant membership?

1. Love

It is unfair to say that the Doctrine Committee Report does not mention love – it does here.

In this context it is important to emphasise that the Church invites and welcomes all who wish to sit under the means of grace at public services and to have access to the pastoral care and counsel available within her fellowship. Like her Lord, she reaches out to all with love and compassion. This posture of grace and welcome should not in itself be confused with moral indifference or approval of any behaviour contrary to God's Word. It is rather the warmest of invitations to receive Christ Jesus as both Lord and Saviour in all of life.

The problem with this is, it is one thing to claim for yourself that you reach 'out to all with love and compassion' but it is of much more relevance to ask 'Do the people you are reaching out to feel loved?'

I'm afraid that there is very little likelihood that the process and the Report would make a gay person feel loved. It is also pretty unlikely that they would have any prospect of feeling 'moral indifference or approval'! It is hard to feel that it represents 'the warmest of invitations to receive Christ'.

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Overall this final paragraph feels hollow in light of the overall content, tone and pastoral insensitivity of the process.

First carried on the Faith In Ireland web site

<https://faithinireland.wordpress.com/2018/06/25/the-presbyterian-church-in-ireland-same-sex-relationships-and-church-membership-six-problems-long-read/>

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<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-44412860>

8 Jun 2018 - The *Presbyterian Church in Ireland* has adopted a new policy that means anyone in a *same-sex relationship* cannot be a full member of the ...

[Northern Ireland's largest Protestant church votes to deny same-sex ...](#)

<https://www.independent.co.uk> › News › UK › Home News

9 Jun 2018 - May refuses to intervene on *same-sex marriage* in Northern Ireland ... means for *same-sex* couples

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who want to become communicant *members* ... which is considered the mother organisation of the *Irish Presbyterian Church* ...

[Presbyterian Church says same-sex couples can no ... - The Irish Times](#)

<https://www.irishtimes.com/.../presbyterian-church-says-same-sex-couples-can-no-lon...>

8 Jun 2018 - *Presbyterian Church* says same-sex couples can no longer be full *members* ... can no longer be full *members* of the *Presbyterian Church in Ireland* nor ... of Scotland as the latter moves towards approving *same-sex marriage*.

[Presbyterian Church in Ireland votes against allowing gay couples to ...](#)

www.thejournal.ie/church-of-ireland-same-sex-4059517-Jun2018/

8 Jun 2018 - THE *PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH* in Ireland has adopted a policy that prevents anyone in a *same-sex relationship* from being a full *member* of ...

[Couple resign from Presbyterian Church as same-sex ruling row ...](#)

<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/...ireland/couple-resign-from-presbyterian-church-...>

11 Jun 2018 - Couple resign from *Presbyterian Church* as *same-sex* ruling row escalates ... it voted not to accept people in *same-sex relationships* as full *members*. ...

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"Arguably it is no longer the *Presbyterian Church in Ireland* because that ...

[Activist hits out at Church for 'penalising' the children of gay members ...](#)

<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/...ireland/activist-hits-out-at-church-for-penalising-...>

9 Jun 2018 - A leading gay rights activist has criticised the *Presbyterian Church* for ... in a *same-sex relationship* cannot be a full *member* of the *Church* - was ...

[Lord Alderdice resigns from Presbyterian Church following ban on ...](#)

<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/...ireland/lord-alderdice-resigns-from-presbyterian-...>

14 Jun 2018 - ... those in *same-sex relationships* to be full *members* of the *Church*. ... General Secretary of the *Presbyterian Church in Ireland* paid tribute to ...

[Presbyterian Church in Ireland votes to ban same-sex couples ...](#)

<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/.../presbyterian-church-in-ireland-votes-to-ban-same-sex-...>

8 Jun 2018 - "*Same sex couples* are not eligible for *membership*, nor are they qualified ... The *Presbyterian Church in Ireland* has voted to exclude *gay couples* ... *Church in Ireland* has a clear position on *marriage* and *human relationships* ...

[Presbyterian Church to debate proposal to refuse baptism ... - Irish News](#)

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<https://www.irishnews.com/.../northernirelandnews/.../presbyterian-church-to-debate-p...>

2 Jun 2018 - LGBT · *Presbyterian Church in Ireland* · *same sex marriage* ... that *same-sex* couples are not eligible for *communicant membership* nor are they ...

