

Guidance from the Stated Clerk

1. What is the EPC's position on ordination for same sex attracted persons?
2. What is the process for receiving pastors and congregations who have a missional outreach to the LGBTQI+ community while maintaining the EPC's position (#1) on this matter.

**The following is not the opinion of the Stated Clerk, but guidance on what the General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church has already said and approved on a subject. A "Provisional Opinion" of the Stated Clerk must first be requested by a lower judicatory and then sustained by the GA PJC. A Provisional Opinion typically interprets a matter that may not be explicitly delineated in our Constitution. Once sustained, it operates with constitutional authority until such a time as when the General Assembly itself either sustains, rejects, or modifies the opinion. Guidance, on the other hand, is simply counsel that has been solicited of the Stated Clerk based on what our Constitution says, and what the General Assembly has approved. This particular counsel includes input from various leaders within the EPC who are experts in polity, governance, theology, and church history.*

In a time when our culture glorifies that which God forbids, we are reminded of the very words of the Scripture warning, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20)

Central to this cultural upheaval is the advancement and normalization of a sexual ethic outside of the biblically revealed norms of the one-flesh, man/woman relationship within the covenant of marriage, and celibacy in singleness regardless of sexual orientation or attraction. As followers of Christ, we are called to these standards of holiness that we might glorify God and not ourselves, and so that by God's design we might flourish.

Even so, Christ calls his people to take his offer of redemption and restoration to all people who walk in places of spiritual darkness. The EPC approved a Position Paper on Human Sexuality at its 36th General Assembly in June of 2016 (ratified by the 37th GA in 2017) as well as a Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality at the 38th General Assembly in 2018. This guidance will reference these documents which, along with the Scriptures and our Constitution (Book of Order and The Westminster Confession of Faith, including the Larger and Shorter Catechisms), direct us to apply the ordinances and compassion of Christ to those under the bondage of sin.

Polity:

- BoG 9-1 "Officers of the Church" calls for evidence of the fruits of the Spirit in every part of life
- BoG 11 "Preparation for Office" and BoG 12 "Examination" require the ordained leader to give a good testimony of Jesus Christ (11-1) with specific reference to "progress in spiritual growth" (12-2.B).
- BoD 1 "Discipline" lists "immorality" as grounds for discipline (1-2) Sexual relations outside of the one-man/one-woman covenant of marriage; and unrepentant sinful sexual desires are expressions of "immorality."

Westminster Standards:

- WCF 6.4 and 6.5 draws a distinction between corruption itself and the active fruit of that corruption. More than just an original sin v. actual sin comparison. Desires corrupted by the Fall are sinful in and of themselves even before the will consciously assented or consented.
- WCF 9.4, 9.5 as well as 13.1 and 13.2 demonstrates from Scripture that change is both real and imperfect. Sanctification works in the whole person, but not completely or perfectly in this life.

- WLC 138 reminds the follower of Christ that the 7th Commandment requires us to be sexually pure in body, mind inclinations, words, and actions. Because we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) we have all transgressed the 7th Commandment (Mt 5:27) It is by the grace of God only that we can be justified and live in obedience to Holy Scripture.

Position Paper on Human Sexuality:

“Human sexuality is a gift from God...At the fall of humankind, recorded in Genesis 3, we began to distort and misuse the gifts of God to our own demise, but through His gracious redemptive work in Jesus Christ, God is leading us from brokenness and rebellion to a full and beautiful restoration of our relationship with Him and of our human dignity and purpose.” (John 10:10; Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-8) “We are also committed to not condemn others for their brokenness- their sexual attractions, sexual dysfunctions or sexual addictions.”

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

When considering the ordination of someone who acknowledges a same-sex attraction, it is noted in our EPC approved documents that it is of the utmost importance to distinguish between the attraction and any sexual practice growing out of the attraction. Moreover, it is paramount that we be consistent in the application of sexual ethics delineated in Scripture, recognizing that heterosexual attraction also is a strong temptation and may manifest itself in sinful sexual conduct outside of marriage (James 1:14-15).

Likewise, when considering the ordination of someone who acknowledges a same-sex attraction it is important to acknowledge that all desires that are disordered apart from God’s revealed will, are to be understood as sin. As with opposite-sex attracted persons, sexual desires that are sin should be repented of, with a full reliance on God’s grace to live the high calling of celibacy in singleness and sexual fidelity in the covenant of marriage. *“Those who are unmarried, regardless of sexual attraction, must seek to honor God through diligently avoiding temptation, restraining ungodly sexual impulses, focusing their energies on serving Christ and neighbor, and eagerly anticipating the new heavens and the new earth, when all things will be restored and every godly human longing beautifully fulfilled.”*

Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality:

*“We believe that an individual should not condemn himself or herself because of his or her sexual attractions or orientations; rather he or she should concern himself or herself with one’s affections, beliefs, attitudes, and deeds. Without exception, we all must continually repent of our lusts and sinful desires and turn in faith and obedience to the Lord. It is important that we all find our **identity** as human beings solely in our relationship with God; therefore, we are not ultimately gay or straight, but rather sons and daughters of God. Those who make same sex attraction tendencies their primary identity are not comprehending and embracing their full identity as image bearers of God.”* Any label that conflates a sinful practice with identity is contrary to our identity being in Christ alone.

“SSA persons should exercise great care and wisdom when it comes to disclosing their sexual identity publicly...it could be helpful for some Christians to make known publicly their ongoing, largely fruitful struggle with same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria.”

As followers of Christ, we are called to a community of both vulnerability and safety. With our identity in Christ, and Christ-alone, we ought to “share one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2).

Conclusion:

Ordination of Ruling Elders and Deacons by a Session, or the ordination of Teaching Elders by a Presbytery, must always include an examination of the doctrine and life of the candidate and would therefore exclude any who are living in unrepentant sin, (thought, word, or deed). In the case of a candidate who acknowledges same-sex attraction the ordaining court must be satisfied that the candidate's primary identity is in Christ and that they are committed to celibacy, and to living by faith rather than desire. Great care should be given to all persons, especially officers of the church, by providing pastoral support and encouragement to those who struggle with SSA and other disordered sexual desires.

- 1) It is the guidance of the Stated Clerk that same-sex attraction by itself does not disqualify a candidate from consideration for ordination, provided that the ordaining court is convinced that the individual is not engaged in any sexual practice the Bible calls sin; repents of any disordered sexual desires and does not advocate an identity or lifestyle apart from Christ.**

Some pastors and congregations may sense a particular calling to minister to the LGBTQI+ community and to individuals struggling with same-sex attraction. This compassionate outreach is completely compatible with Scripture, the Westminster Confession, the EPC Position Paper and Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality.

“Those in and out of the Church struggling with various forms of sexual disorientation or gender dysphoria should experience from God’s people a deep desire to identify with them in their struggles, to walk lovingly with them, and to invite them to join us in following the Lord” (EPC Position Paper on Human Sexuality).

Presbyteries considering reception of such pastors and/or congregations must be intentional in ensuring that such missional outreach is aimed at *“reconciliation with our Creator through His powerful transforming grace”* (EPC Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality). All pastors and congregations considered for examination should *“resolve to teach the biblical truths of godly sexuality to our members and to all who will listen, with compassion and with courage, regardless of the cost to ourselves”* (EPC Position Paper on Human Sexuality).

- 2) It is the guidance of the Stated Clerk that pastors and congregations who have a missional outreach to the LGBTQI+ community may be received into EPC Presbyteries as long as they are examined concerning their mission and purpose to ensure that they labor compassionately toward repentance, reconciliation, and restoration without implying endorsement of anything the Bible calls sin.**

“In the name of Jesus, our compassionate Savior, we tenderly welcome all—regardless of their beliefs or lifestyles—to attend our churches. Further, we invite into the membership of our churches all those who—bruised and broken by the fall—seek now, through sincere faith and genuine repentance, to live in obedience to the Scriptures and empowered by the Holy Spirit.” (EPC Position Paper on Human Sexuality).

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This guidance from the Stated Clerk of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church’s General Assembly is based on Holy Scripture, the Westminster Standards, Book of Order and GA approved Position Paper and Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality. It is not the place of the Stated Clerk to offer a personal opinion, but rather to guide presbyteries and congregations in light of the approved actions of the General Assembly.