

# The *LAYMAN* online

## The PCUSA 2012: How we got 'here'

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Depending upon your personal spheres of influence and your exposure to Presbyterian news, for the past 18 months you have been hearing rumblings about the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s passage of a new Form of Government and the accompanying Amendment 10A which has had the effect of removing from the constitution the explicit language of "fidelity in marriage [or] chastity in singleness" as the Biblical standard for ordained officers of the PCUSA.

In response to this, at least two presbyteries have ordained and installed self-avowed, unrepentant practicing gay men to the office of teaching elder and several churches have done the same in respect to elders and deacons. Sessions across the denomination have responded by entering into seasons of discernment wherein they are considering all options for their churches going forward, including an examination of their denominational affiliation.[1]

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

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

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

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

In 1910, the General Assembly adopted a set of five "essential and necessary" doctrines for Presbyterian ministers. These became known as the Five Points. The Five Points included: 1. the

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

This marks the last time that our branch of mainline Presbyterianism in the United States proved itself willing to enumerate a list of essential tenets. The backlash was intense and has proven unrelenting for 100 years.

Case in point: The Auburn Affirmation (1924) and the New Auburn Affirmation (2001)

The 1924 version asserted that Presbyterians must:

- "safeguard liberty of thought and teaching of its ministers";
- prohibit the restricting of church teaching to rigid interpretations of Scripture and doctrine; and
- refuse to rank ecclesiastical authority or the authority of the Bible above that of the individual Spirit-led conscience.

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

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

The varieties of standards used by presbyteries across the country and the varieties of Biblical interpretation and theology held and taught by Presbyterian ministers led to the genuine diversity of faith within the Presbyterian Church today. It is a house divided in no small measure by the undermining of its foundations for 100 years.[\[3\]](#)

By 1950 Presbyterianism in the US had changed significantly. One manifestation of that change was structural. The denomination adopted a corporate paradigm, a leadership structure modeled after the prevailing business culture. In this model, the historical Presbyterian sense of a bottom-up denomination was inverted and congregations began to be perceived as serving the denomination instead of the other way around. Upper levels of leadership within the denomination gained increasing power.

As the cultural revolution of the 1960s swept the nation, rebellion and rejection of authority were celebrated not only in the culture, but also within the Presbyterian church. Seminaries and seminarians embraced avant-garde theologies that a generation later would pervade the clergy ranks. A growing number of faculty began to espouse a naturalistic worldview, rejecting the existence of God, the divinity of Christ, the bodily resurrection and the atonement. Mirroring the

culture, there was increasing focus on social justice that, within the Presbyterian church, developed theologies of progressive human improvement that are simply not Biblical. To the good, the causes of women's and civil rights were advanced within the church community but often at the expense of historical orthodoxy.

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

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

Interestingly, 1967 was the last year our denomination grew in church membership totals. Since then, membership has declined from 4.5 million to 2 million. Source: <http://archive.pcusa.org/research/compstats/cs2008.htm>

As Biblical interpretations and variant theologies were no longer explicitly bound to a list of essential tenets but were open to the Spirit led conscience of each individual and the variant standards of presbyteries, "reformed" theology became less defined by a historical Reformation and more often defined by an "always reforming" imagination.

In the 1970's the proliferation of feminist and liberation theologies led the United Presbyterian Church UPCUSA to a theological shift from "salvation" to "liberation." Historic evangelism began to be perceived as imperialistic and therefore an embarrassment to those for whom pluralism was taking hold. Although the shift is not easily documented by looking at official actions of the General Assembly, the theology in practice among the staff of the UPCUSA functionally redefined salvation to mean liberation. Thus, what had been a theological term representing our redeemed relationship with God became a political term, representing our freedom from oppressive external structures, e.g., race, gender, economics, political regimes, etc. This shift from "being a sinner, saved by grace from above" to "being an essentially good person, saved by being liberated from external oppression," paved the way for the denomination's foray into politics.

Many of the stands taken by the denominations staffer were out of accord with Presbyterians in the pews. One infamous example was the decision to provide money for the defense fund of Angela Davis, a Communist activist accused of conspiracy in the kidnap and murder of a judge in the early 1970s.

This was the beginning of 40 years of leftward political involvement such as:

- Support of Marxist rebels in Latin America;

- Support for Castro in [Cuba](#);
- Calls for various boycotts against corporations such as Nestle, [Taco Bell](#), and divestment from corporations like [Caterpillar](#);
- Uncritical support of [Palestinian](#) causes and unilateral [opposition to Israel](#);
- An unwavering [pro-choice position](#) including support for late term [abortions](#) (thankfully overturned through the valiant work of Presbyterians Pro Life).

In short, the denomination became heavily involved in social and political issues in a way that usually represented only the liberal end of the church's broad political spectrum.

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

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

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

In 1981, our highest church court, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission, upheld the ordination of Mansfield Kaseman. When Kaseman was asked, "Was Jesus God?" he responded, "No, God is God." Later he explained, "Saying Jesus is one with God is a better way of saying it ... but I, too, am one with God."

In 1993, a conference entitled 'Reimagining God' was held, largely funded and planned by PCUSA personnel at denominational expense. Conference leaders denied the existence of a transcendent God (i.e., who exists outside of our material world) and ridiculed the crucifixion of Jesus: "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff." Worship leaders offered prayers to the goddess Sophia and replaced communion with a honey and milk ceremony.

The 2001 General Assembly in Louisville, Kentucky, spent a great deal of time considering controversial proposals regarding interfaith relations and worship. Finally, one commissioner offered a motion that the assembly declare "the singular, saving lordship of Jesus Christ." It was [defeated](#), being characterized by its opponents as "disrespectful to other religions." One speaker said: "Religions are like a basket of fruit. Apples and oranges are different, but they are all fruit. Religions are different varieties of the same thing, so they're all equal."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The 1993 GA reaffirmed this position.

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

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

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

In 2001 the GA also formed a Peace, Unity and Purity (PUP) task force to examine the causes of discord in the denomination and recommend solutions. In 2006, the PUP task force returned its findings to the GA. One of its recommendations was that G-6 be retained in the constitution but that the GA could issue an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) that would give presbyteries the liberty to allow individual candidates to declare a scruple. The functional result was something informally referred to as local option. Some viewed this as a return to the way things worked

prior to the 1910 subscriptionist debate or at least a return to the way things worked prior to the adoption of G-6. [Others](#) viewed it as a terminal blow to our basic Presbyterian connectionalism.

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

In July 2010, the opponents of G-6 prevailed in convincing the commissioners of the GA to replace G-6 with new language. What became known as Amendment 10A was ratified by a majority of presbyteries in May 2011 and the new “standards” took effect in July of 2012. The “fidelity-chastity” language was removed from the constitution and presbyteries began ordaining and installing teaching elders whose lives do not conform to the denomination's own espoused confessional standards.[\[6\]](#)

In the meantime, the Bible is sidelined. The current vice moderator of the General Assembly, [Landon Whitslett](#) describes the Bible as one reference point to the Word of God but not in and of itself the Word of God.

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

In the meantime, individual [churches vote to leave the denomination](#).

In the meantime, [half of the denomination's remaining churches now have less than 100 members](#).

In the meantime, we close far more churches than we plant.

In the meantime, the Presbyterian public witness becomes indistinguishable from a hard left progressive political agenda.

And in the meantime, the Lordship of Jesus was questioned. In 2001 the General Assembly [was unable to affirm](#) the sole saving nature of Jesus without equivocation. That resulted in what you may recall as [The Confessing Church Movement](#). Thousands of PCUSA sessions aligned themselves with three foundational truths:

The Bible alone is the Word of God and our sole authority for faith and life;

Jesus Christ alone is the Way of salvation, the Truth of God's Word and the Life of the Church;  
and

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

Many churches that were aligned with the CCM also embraced a missional calling. That confluence resulted in the vision the New Wineskins Initiative (2002-2005) which became the The New Wineskins Association of Churches (2005-2011). If you read the current proposals of The Fellowship of Presbyterians, you will hear strong echoes of The New Wineskins effort. Ultimately, the NWAC formed a partnership with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church which was also seeking to live into a more missional identity. More than 100 churches have realigned from the PCUSA to the EPC over the past several years. Many others are actively in that process now. Still others will likely follow. Which brings us to the realities facing Presbyterian churches today.

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

Thousands of concerned Presbyterians gathered in Minneapolis in August 2011 and again in Orlando in February 2012. They organized themselves as The Fellowship of Presbyterians and some of them launched a new denomination known as The Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians. The PCUSA is receiving reports with recommendations for radical restructuring from its own task forces and special committees. A season of change is upon us.

Yes, some are still asking, "Why bother?" What does any of this have to do with "us" – here in our happy little evangelical oasis? Because, despite efforts of the PUP Task Force or Amendment 10A to sever the sinews of our connectionalism, as Presbyterians, we are connectional. The nFOG confirms in multiple places that what any one council (session, presbytery, synod or General Assembly) does in relationship to ordination is an act of the whole church. The constitution also says that all PCUSA churches are expected to participate in the life of the larger body through per capita giving. And finally, all PCUSA churches pay dues to the Board of Pensions whose plans are "community based." That means that the money you pay to the BOP goes into a big pot and the benefits of everyone in the plan are paid out of the pot. Benefits that already include abortions of all kinds for any reason and benefits that are likely to be extended to the same sex partners of plan members beginning in January 2013 (The Board of Pensions meets March 1-3, 2012).

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

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

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

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

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

Many good things were happening in spite of the drama. Many great churches, great ministries, lots of faithful mission work ... many wonderful relationships and a shared heritage;

Part of that heritage is financial. Presbyterians have left inordinate riches to The Presbyterian Foundation. Their assets are invested in socially screened portfolios and generate great wealth for the furtherance of the mission of the PCUSA. The Foundation is distinct from the denomination but integrally and inseparably connected to it. If you leave the PCUSA you leave behind access to, and any say over, the use of the Foundation funds.

And since we're talking about assets, some churches have not left because the denomination asserts a trust over all church property (real and financial). Churches that determine to leave the PCUSA often have to fight their way out in civil court.

Your presbytery is not hostile and your church functions fairly independently of the denomination. This is the "as long as they don't make us" do something, we don't care what "they" do argument. But we all acknowledge that benign co-existence is not joyful participation.

Up until recently, although it was frustrating, reform seemed possible. Many considered that institutional renewal through the combined efforts of evangelical pastors, elders and renewal organizations was still worth working for. That hope no longer exists. Why? What is different now?

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

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

Second, decisions and the accompanying commentary by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) indicates that there is no will to enforce Constitutional standards.

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

- Discernment is a process. (Your presbytery may have a [policy](#) in place to consider.)
- Pray – before, during, throughout; individually, corporately, earnestly.
- The [Scriptures](#) should be thoroughly examined.
- Counsel must be sought – attorneys, other churches, presbytery, etc.
- Study & education –([examples](#) of discernment processes by other congregations)
- Decision.
- Action.
- Consequences.

What are the available options for action?

Defect in place. Remain in the PCUSA but ignore the issues and politics; becoming functional Congregationalists.

Remain and engage the issues at every level, seeking to radically reform the PCUSA; restoring Biblical authority, restoring theological and ethical integrity, restoring constitutional standards through the sending of overtures to the General Assembly and the bringing of charges through the ecclesiastical judicial process.

Remain and associate with a group like [The Fellowship of Presbyterians](#) through whom your congregation can align for effective witness, strengthen fellowship, deepen discipleship and learn from best practices.

Remain but realign by requesting transfer to another presbytery, either an existing geographic presbytery or a proposed non-geographic presbytery. (This proposal will be considered by the 2012 GA through the report of the Mid Council Commission and through overtures coming from Stockton and Santa Barbara presbyteries. )

Some combination of #2, 3, and/or 4.

Request to be dismissed by your presbytery to another Reformed body.

Does your presbytery have a [dismissal policy](#)? What does it say?

read: <http://www.layman.org/news.aspx?article=29156>

What is your? property situation?

Order/read: [The Guide to Church Property Law, 2nd Edition](#)

Consult a competent attorney experienced with Presbyterian church property and corporate law. They should be familiar with:

[The Louisville Papers](#) and the discussions of the OGA Church property law event (2/19-20, 2012).

[Arguments/strategies](#) employed by the denomination.

[Recent developments in church property law](#)

[The new Form of Government](#)

[Issues relevant to former southern PCUS churches](#)

Available [resources](#)

Where would we go?

- the [EPC](#) (Evangelical Presbyterian Church)
- the [ECO](#) (Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians)
- the [NCAC](#) (National Association of Churches)
- the [ECC](#) (Evangelical Covenant Church)
- others?
- unilaterally disaffiliate from the PCUSA, become an independent or community church or join an association of churches of your choice. If you are in a state where the secular courts follow neutral principles of law in the adjudication of church property cases and/or your presbytery has no dismissal policy and/or your presbytery's policy is not gracious and/or your chosen association of churches does not fit the PCUSA's parameters for dismissal and/or you want to be an independent church, disaffiliation should be considered.

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

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

Visit [www.layman.org](http://www.layman.org) for news, analysis and commentary posted every week day for your edification.

Corrections and comments should be directed to Carmen Fowler LaBerge at [cfowler@layman.org](mailto:cfowler@layman.org)

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[1] For a sampling of congregations discerning their denominational affiliation see: <http://www.layman.org/Files/churches%20leaving%20chart-1.pdf>

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

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

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

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

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