

Church History 101
Lesson 31
Full Inclusion Part 1

Key Concepts: The full inclusion of all persons regardless of gender, race, ability or sexual orientation is a concept which has only recently become a hallmark of the Presbyterian Church USA. Most denominations around the world do not accept this as an appropriate expression of Christian Faith. This article will examine the history of this movement within the Presbyterian Church.

The Story: It has been argued that the LGBTQ movement can trace its roots to the Stonewall Rebellion in June of 1969. On June 28 of that year the New York City Police raided the Stonewall Inn, a local gathering place for many of the poorest and most marginalized members of the LGBTQ community. The result was a series of riots followed by the creation of organizations which fought for full legal rights for persons of all sexual orientations.

The response of the Presbyterian Church was to urge states to decriminalize same sex relationships between consenting adults (1970). At the same time, the Lincoln Park Presbyterian Church in Chicago, began to rent space to a wide variety of Gay and Lesbian organizations. Two years later (1972) Lincoln Park calls the Rev. David Sindt, an openly gay minister, as an assistant pastor. Following ten months of deliberations, the Presbytery of Chicago blocks Sindt's call. The church still offered Sindt a position as a lay employee. In 1974 he created the Presbyterian Gay Caucus, which would become Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns.

The next step in the process came when the Presbytery of New York City asked the General Assembly for guidance as regards the ordination of LGBTQ members. The denomination spent two years studying the issue (1976-1978) and recommended full inclusion. The 1978 General Assembly rejected the proposal and issued definitive guidance that Gay and Lesbian members could not be ordained. A year later the General Assembly officially recognized Presbyterians for Gay and Lesbian Concerns as a group which would be given space to advocate at meetings of the Assembly.

Lincoln Park Presbyterian Church elected its first Gay elder in 1982 and successfully defended its election with the Presbytery of Chicago. Across the denomination more churches began to declare themselves to be "More Light" congregations as they welcomed in and advocated for the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons. In 1985 the General Assembly ruled that the definitive guidance against ordination had the force of law and must be followed. In 1991 the General Assembly allowed for same-sex commitment services as long as they were not considered weddings. Those opposed to full inclusion believed that their position was in danger because the definitive guidance could be overturned by any General Assembly. In response those opposed to full inclusion proposed and passed a change to the Book of Order (our constitution) specifically prohibiting the ordination of LGBTQ individuals.

A significant change could be sensed within the denomination when in 2006, while the General Assembly reaffirmed the Book of Order's prohibition of ordination, it also passed a motion allowing all churches and presbyteries to decide for themselves who ought to be ordained. Four years later the prohibition for fully inclusive ordination in the Book of Order was removed and the Assembly voted to allow ordination of persons regardless of sexual orientation. Finally in 2014, following the Supreme Court's legalization of Gay Marriage, the denomination voted to allow pastors to perform same sex marriages. While these changes caused many churches to leave the PCUSA, they also left us as one of only a handful of fully inclusive denominations.

Questions

1. What is your perception of the fully inclusive nature of the PCUSA?
2. How has your perception of full inclusion changed over the past decade? Why?

3. What difference does it make to you that we are fully inclusive church?