

Wrestling Long into the Night: Sources on the Mainline Protestant Denominations' Debate about Homosexuality

by Paul D. Burnam

INTRODUCTION

For nearly forty years several mainline Protestant denominations confronted and attempted to resolve the issue of accepting gay or homosexual persons within their fellowships. For some denominations, such as the Church of Christ—Disciples of Christ (CCDC), Episcopal Church in the United States of America (ECUSA), the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and the United Church of Christ (UCC), a collective dialogue and process proceeded, and decisions were reached about whether homosexuality “was consistent with Christian teaching” (the language most often used to describe the issue in denominational official statements), or if openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual persons (LGB) were eligible for ordination into the clergy of a denomination. These decisions did not come and go without repercussions. In the case of the ECUSA and the ELCA, several congregations broke with the main body because of disagreement with the denomination’s decision and set off down the road to forming an association with other like-minded congregations that believe that homosexuality is not affirmed by scripture. And dissent is not absent from the fellowships of the PCUSA or the UCC on the regional or congregational levels. As this essay is composed, the PCUSA will come to grips with the issue of same-sex marriage and the celibacy of gay clergy at the denomination’s biennial General Assembly.¹ The American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) and the United Methodist Church (UMC) continue to debate the inclusion of homosexuals into their fellowship at the regular biennial or general conferences as indicated above. The faction that upholds the position that “homosexuality is not consistent with Christian teaching” still holds sway within these denominations.

Because the issue of homosexuality has exerted and continues to exert such a profound impact on the political life of seven Protestant denominations, this essay will focus on the source material germane to the debate within these denominations. These seven denominations subscribe to at least a nominal democratic polity which is the main reason the debate is ongoing. The purpose of this essay is to identify and discuss sources published either by the official arm of these denominations or authored by recognized leaders within each one — no matter which side these leaders take concerning the acceptance of LGB people within the life of the church. The sources discussed will represent a selection of official documentation on the subject along with works of prominent clergy and/or theological education leaders who were moved to articulate their positions on arguably the most sensitive subject for contemporary mainline Protestant churches. The essay does not pretend to be comprehensive on the subject because the debate is ongoing and access to some sources is difficult. The discussion will begin with a consideration of two broad bibliographic works, a collection of essays representing mostly moderate views on homosexuality, and a reference book on the subject. It will then move into discussing sources by denominational leaders or relating to the polity of each of the seven denominations mentioned above.

¹ Greg Brekke, “Presbyterians to Tackle Gay Marriage, Divestment,” Religious News Service, <http://www.religionnews.com/faith/leaders-and-institutions/Presbyterians-to-tackle-gay-marriage-divestment>.

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GENERAL RESOURCES

Tom Horner's *Homosexuality and the Judeo-Christian Tradition: An Annotated Bibliography* identifies a multitude of sources on both sides of the issue of religious bodies coping with persons in same-sex relationships.² Horner's work is the fifth entry in the ATLA Bibliography Series. He offers a simple but yet efficient organization. The vast majority of entries are annotated. The annotations run two to five sentences in most cases. He summarizes the content, comments on the physical or organizational features of the entries, and even adds personal comments about the authors in many cases. The organizational structure consists of chapters about books, articles, and essays; pamphlets and papers; and bibliographies. The chapter on bibliographies is general in nature and does not limit itself to those with a religious or theological connection. The work offers two appendices: Biblical References to Homosexuality and Periodicals of Gay Religious Organizations. The former discusses scripture passages generally regarded as relating to homosexuality or understood to connect to the subject in some quarters.

A more recent source, but one that approaches Horner's work in thoroughness, is *GLBT Religion & Spirituality: A Selective Bibliography* published on the website of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Round Table of the American Library Association.³ This resource exceeds Horner's in scope because it lists sources associated with homosexuality and world religions as well as other belief systems. Please note: it does not offer annotations. It includes sources of historical scholarship, a title index for books, religious organizations of lesbians and gay men, religious organizations' websites, other organizations' selected websites, and other publications and websites, and concludes with a list of sources consulted. The bibliography has been broken down into separate chronological segments: 1950-2000, 2001-2005, 2006-2010, and 2011-present.

In 1994 Jeffrey S. Siker edited *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, a collection of essays by parish pastors, theologians, academics, and denominational leaders about how homosexuality was approached in the Christian church up to that time.⁴ In the Introduction he states that his goal is to offer moderate statements on the issue. Although Siker claims that he intentionally does not include more extreme views about homosexuality, the contributors clearly indicate where they stand. Siker organizes the essays in six parts: the role of scripture, the role of tradition, the importance of moral reasoning, scientific reasoning, personal experience, and the debate over ordination. The latter compares the issue of homosexual ordination to the first-century struggle concerning the inclusion of Gentiles. This book is also important because of its appendix that includes denominational statements on homosexuality. It contains statements from five of the denominations emphasized in this essay (ECUSA, ELCA, PCUSA, UCC, and UMC).

REFERENCE RESOURCES

The most recent encyclopedia on the subject is *Homosexuality and Religion: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Jeffrey S. Siker. The value of this resource is that it is fairly recent, and it includes articles that briefly describe the debate

² Tom Horner, *Homosexuality and the Judeo-Christian Tradition: An Annotated Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981).

³ American Library Association Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table, "GLBT Religion & Spirituality - A Selective Bibliography: 2011-present," <http://www.ala.org/glbtrt/popularresources/religion4>.

⁴ Jeffrey S. Siker, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), xvi.

about gay issues in all seven of the denominations.⁵ The text is divided into three sections: essays on homosexuality, religion, and such topics as law, social sciences, and spirituality; articles about homosexuality and different religious groups and gay organizations; and additional resources.

Although diminished in value because of the passage of time, Dr. John J. Carey's *The Sexuality Debate in North American Churches, 1988-1995: Controversies, Unresolved Issues, Future Prospects*, an edited collection of essays, addresses the mainline denominations and the homosexuality debate in a broader context.⁶ Carey's anthology focuses on four of the denominations that are emphasized in this essay. It includes essays by leaders and/or theological educators from the ECUSA, ECLA, PCUSA, and the UMC. When we consider their current positions, these essays provide a valuable perspective on how far groups like the ECUSA, ELCA, and PCUSA have journeyed since this collection's publication.

DENOMINATIONAL RESOURCES

AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCH USA

Two works concerning the American Baptist response to the homosexuality debate offer starkly contrasting approaches. Howard R. Stewart, a retired ABCUSA pastor, wrote a short treatise, *American Baptists and the Church*. It is interesting that in the Preface and Introduction, he speaks to the tension within the ABCUSA over churches declaring themselves as "welcoming and affirming."⁷ He acknowledges that the denomination may be at the brink of schism due to local associations disfellowshipping congregations making such declarations. His prescription for avoiding such a convulsion is to review the church's history and polity to help American Baptists to understand the theological roots of their faith. After the Introduction, he does not return to the tensions created by the homosexuality debate. He seems satisfied to hope that the book's readership will come to believe that reflection on such theological problems as respect for soul freedom and for each person's and congregation's right to discern God's will on their own will lead to respect for the decisions by congregations to embrace a welcoming and affirming ministry. However, his work has had little impact on ABCUSA. The latest position statement on homosexuality on the ABCUSA's website is as follows:

The General Board voted "To amend the document entitled *We Are American Baptists* by adding the following statement to the section *A Biblical People*: Who submit to the teaching of Scripture that God's design for sexual intimacy places it within the context of marriage between one man and one woman, and acknowledge that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Biblical teaching."⁸

LeDayne Polaski and Millard Eiland's *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Resource for Congregations in Dialogue on Sexual Orientation* offers a thorough counterargument to ABCUSA's official position on homosexuality.⁹ To be clear, the organizations responsible for publishing this document, the Alliance of Baptists and the Baptist Peace

⁵ Jeffrey S. Siker, *Homosexuality and Religion: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), x.

⁶ John J. Carey, *The Sexuality Debate in North American Churches, 1988-1995: Controversies, Unresolved Issues, Future Prospects* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 111-115.

⁷ Howard R. Stewart, *American Baptists and the Church* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), 4-5.

⁸ American Baptist Churches USA, "Responses Pertaining to Homosexuality," <http://www.abc-usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/homosexuality1.pdf>.

⁹ LeDayne Polaski and Millard Eiland, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Resource for Congregations in Dialogue on Sexual Orientation* (Washington, DC: The Alliance of Baptists; Charlotte, NC: Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, 2000).

Fellowship of North America, represent left-leaning segments of the many groups that call themselves Baptist in North America. The Alliance of Baptists organized around churches in both the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and ABCUSA that wanted to offer support and hospitality to LGB people and support to women in ministry. The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America's fundamental purpose is to advocate for world peace and an end to war. *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* is a loose-leaf publication that provides a plethora of resources for churches looking to minister to the gay community. It includes statements about biblical theology that support the welcoming and affirming position, personal stories of individuals and congregations about journeys that led them to separate from an established church, sermons, and official policy statements from the ABCUSA that were current in the year 2000. It offers a substantial bibliography of print and audiovisual materials. Two significant contributions to this work are by Peggy Campolo and Letha D. Scanzoni. Campolo is the wife of Tony Campolo, a former sociology professor at Eastern University in Pennsylvania. The Campolos take opposing positions on the acceptance of LGB people into the fellowship of the church. However, each, respects the other's position on the issue, and both continue to speak out publicly on their beliefs. Scanzoni is the author of *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? Another Christian View*, a pioneering book about Christian outreach to gays which she co-authored with Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and which was, in 1978, a pioneering book about Christian outreach to gays.¹⁰

CHURCH OF CHRIST – DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

The CCDC first took up the issue of LGB people within its fellowship in the late 1970s.¹¹ It is one of the mainline denominations in which there is a real understanding to “agree to disagree” among its members. Its General Minister and President, the Rev. Dr. Sharon E. Watkins, acknowledges in a pastoral letter included on her blog that some CCDC members have come to accept that sexual orientation is part of God's creation whereas other members conclude that homosexuality is a sin. Nevertheless, Dr. Watkins goes on to declare that despite these differing viewpoints all CCDC members are welcome at the communion table.¹² Since the church began to listen to LGB voices over thirty years ago, careful but steady progress ensued in how to listen to the voices at both ends of the spectrum. At its General Assembly's biannual meetings a process to seek understanding on the issue has slowly evolved. It culminated with the former president of Lexington Theological Seminary, William Paulsell, editing *Listening to the Spirit: A Handbook for Discernment*.¹³ This short book presents a simple and effective sequence for the discernment process. It begins with chapters discussing “What Is Discernment,” “Preparation for Discernment,” and “How to Use This Process.” Then it launches into a seven-stage progression: “Introduction to the Process of Discernment,” “Spiritual Preparation for Discernment,” “Listening to Stories,” “Bible Study of Texts Addressing Homosexuality,” “What Happened to Me Personally and What Has God Called Me to Do,” “What Is the Next Step,” and “Sending Forth and Consecration.” The book concludes with hymn suggestions for the discernment meetings and bibliographies of print and Internet resources.

EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The ECUSA took a path that would ultimately result in a break between its liberal and conservative factions when it ordained its first female priest in the 1970s, a lesbian priest in 1997, and, the last straw for some, the selection

¹⁰ Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

¹¹ Glad Alliance, Inc., “About Us>History,” <http://www.gladalliance.org/about-us/history>.

¹² Sharon E. Watkins, “Setting a Grace-full Table,” <http://www.disciples.org/Portals/0/PDF/ogmp/June2012PastoralLetter.pdf>.

¹³ William Paulsell, *Listening to the Spirit: A Handbook for Discernment* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001).

of V. Eugene Robinson, an active gay man, as the Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003. Since Robinson's elevation to bishop, several congregations in the United States have withdrawn from the ECUSA to form the American Anglican Council. Churches joining the latter group affirm biblical authority and Christian orthodoxy within the Anglican Communion. This schism continues to grow as ECUSA recently voted to support the liturgical rites for blessing same-sex couples. Published works about the debate within the Episcopal/Anglican context run a close third behind those published concerning the debate within the ELCA and UMC, respectively. One of the strongest statements of the Anglican position was published the year following Bishop Robinson's selection. Bill Atwood's *Wild Vine/Fruitful Vine: Crisis in the Anglican Communion* delivers an uncompromising argument against the ECUSA following Robinson's elevation to bishop.¹⁴ Atwood is a bishop in the American Anglican Council. His book raises more questions than it answers. His first chapter focuses on how the ECUSA began to wander from the authority of scripture when it adopted its own constitution and based its decision-making on majority rule in 1789 following the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. He laments the deposition of the hierarchical structure of the Church of England. He goes on to criticize this action by asserting that a church must place the final authority in the decision-making process in discerning God's will rather than in which side secures the most votes. He makes the case that the General Convention of the ECUSA has turned its back on scriptural authority and argues that the time has come for those who share his orthodoxy to do what they must - including a full break with the ECUSA.

Robert L. McCan authored a book that represents a 180-degree turn from Atwood's. *Justice for Gays and Lesbians: Reclaiming Christian Fundamentals, Crisis and Challenge in the Episcopal Church* puts forth a very thorough and thoughtful defense that the ECUSA is correct in welcoming LGB people into its fold.¹⁵ It is interesting that McCan began his call to the ministry in the Southern Baptist Convention. When the advocates of Biblical inerrancy won the day in the SBC, McCan decided to move on to the ECUSA. He begins by describing what he calls the ECUSA's forty years of wandering in the wilderness in regards to the homosexuality debate. He does not hesitate to be open about contesting the American Anglican Council's adherence to doctrine and orthodoxy. He emphasizes following Jesus' great commandment to love God and neighbor as the foundation for looking at this argument. His argument, which culminates with a "letter to the Anglican Communion" in the penultimate chapter, proposes a four-step attempt for reconciliation: that the ECUSA acknowledge fault for failing to consult with the Anglican Communion prior to Bishop Robinson's appointment, that the global members of the Anglican Communion try to better understand each other's cultural differences, that the ECUSA provide a biblical and theological perspective as best as possible, and that all factions maintain a spirit of tolerance to reach some common ground between the Anglican Communion and ECUSA.¹⁶ However, there is no indication that McCan's effort is supported by the ECUSA.

Understanding the Windsor Report: Two Leaders in the American Church Speak across the Divide by Ian T. Douglas and Paul F. M. Zahl features a dialogue between liberal and conservative members of the Episcopalian clergy.¹⁷ It offers a fresh and intriguing approach to the debate within the ECUSA. Actually, the book is a reaction to the Windsor Report resulting from a special meeting of the primates and the Anglican Consultative Council of the

¹⁴ Bill Atwood, *Wild Vine/Fruitful Vine: Crisis in the Anglican Communion* (Carrollton, TX: The Ekklesia Society, 2004), 11.

¹⁵ Robert L. McCan, *Justice for Gays and Lesbians: Reclaiming Christian Fundamentals, Crisis and Challenge in the Episcopal Church* (Alexandria, VA: Booksurge, LLC, 2006), xii.

¹⁶ McCan, 235-236.

¹⁷ Ian T. Douglas and Paul F. M. Zahl, *Understanding the Windsor Report: Two Leaders in the American Church Speak Across the Divide* (New York: Church Publishing, 2005), 55.

global Anglican Communion called by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2004.¹⁸ It was a response to multiple issues: the appointment of Bishop Robinson by the ECUSA, the authorization of services to be conducted in accordance with same-sex unions by the Diocese of New Westminster, and concerns about reconciling the schism in the global Anglican Communion. Douglass and Zahl's conversation is a very meaningful theological discussion, all the more remarkable because of the good will these two churchmen have for each other. They go back a long time in their ecclesiastical careers and are very familiar with each other's differences on reaching out to LGB persons. Interestingly enough, both are critical of the Windsor Report because of its reluctance to confront the issue of homosexuality head on. Zahl at one point comes right out and declares that the Commission that wrote the report failed to include the most commonly referenced biblical passages about homosexuality. He goes on to ask how the church can meaningfully address the issue that precipitated the crisis if it does not address it directly.

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

Christian Scharen makes a careful case in support for accepting LGB people into the fellowship of the ELCA in *Married in the Sight of God: Theology, Ethics, and Church Debates over Homosexuality*. Scharen does respect the concept of full disclosure by quoting the one comment Luther made about same-sex relations in the massive extant collection of his writings.¹⁹ Luther is lecturing on the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis. He makes a sidebar comment about not caring to interpret the passage because Germans (from his experience) do not engage in such behavior. He lays the blame on "ungodly soldiers and lewd merchants." It is interesting too that he begins his comment by acknowledging Moses as the author of Genesis.²⁰ Scharen interprets this passage of Luther as analogous to Pauline references to same-sex relations which many scholars explain in the context of pederasty. Therefore, Luther is operating on the same premise in the sixteenth century as Paul in the first in that same-sex relations are abusive and exploitive, similar to heterosexual fornication. Luther has no knowledge or experience with committed and loving same-sex relationships. As a result, Scharen turns to Luther's comments about priests marrying to make the argument that the ELCA should be accepting of committed and monogamous LGB people. Luther declares that if a priest and a woman wish to unite in a loving marriage, then they should do so with a clear conscience. Luther maintains that if a priest and a woman so decide, then their decisions surpass the will of a pope and the dictates of law, both canon and civil.²¹ Scharen goes further by showing that Luther believes that change in human society is inevitable, and persons should not be weighted down by canon law and customs from times long passed. "The stupid canon lawyers want to apply laws that were framed in other times and for other reasons. They say, 'Thus it is written in the book,' and they do not see that the times have changed and that former circumstances and laws have passed away."²² With the authority of Luther's writing filling his sails, Scharen moves ahead meticulously to lay out how the ELCA can welcome LGB people into fellowship without concern over authority and respecting Lutheran polity.

¹⁸ Anglican Communion Office, The Windsor Report 2004, <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/windsor2004/mandate.cfm>.

¹⁹ Christian Scharen, *Married in the Sight of God: Theology, Ethics, and Church Debates over Homosexuality* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000).

²⁰ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis 15-20*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 3:251-2.

²¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: The Christian in Society*, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 44: 177.

²² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Table Talk*, ed. and trans. Theodore E. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 54: 349.

While Scharen addresses the debate in light of Luther's writings about the Bible and the faith, in *Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality* James Childs offers a contemporary collection of essays about homosexuality and how dedicated Lutherans might approach it.²³ The anthology was commissioned by the conference of the eight presidents of the ELCA seminaries in the United States. The essays are authored by Lutheran seminary faculty and target the Lutheran fellowship of laypersons, clergy, and seminary faculty. Mark Allan Powell examines homosexuality in light of the Biblical texts. James Arne Nestingen covers much the same territory as Scharen in scrutinizing the issue in the context of the Reformation. Martha Ellen Stortz analyzes how one's faith can lead one in the consideration of one's sexuality. Richard J. Perry, Jr., and Jose David Rodriguez discuss the significance of one's culture in matters of faith and sexuality. Daniel L. Olson concludes the collection by studying the role of science in the debate. Each essay offers a list of discussion questions to guide readers in further consideration.

Scharen's *Married in the Sight of God* and Craig L. Nesson's *Many Members, Yet One Body: Committed Same-Gender Relationships and the Mission of the Church*²⁴ were published before the ELCA's historic decision at its 2009 Biennial Conference where by a vote of 559-451 the ELCA allowed noncelibate LGB clergy to lead congregations.²⁵ Both books try to present a framework to help Lutherans to work through a process to give light to the debate. The authors use both scripture and the concept of social justice in analyzing the issues. However, the issue is far from resolved in the aftermath of the 2009 vote. Some congregations withdrew from the ELCA to form the North American Lutheran Church in a way similar to the Anglican divisions from the ECUSA after 2004. An undergraduate honors thesis written at Macalester College in 2010 makes a case for the continuing relevance of Scharen and Nesson's books. Iain Johnson's "Beyond Theology: The Social Construction of Compliance within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America" discusses how three Minnesotan ELCA congregations responded to the 2009 vote.²⁶ One urban church that had called a lesbian pastor prior to the 2009 Biennial Conference experienced both relief and vindication from the vote because up to that point it faced possible discipline by the denomination. A second church located in rural Minnesota found its congregation conflicted by the vote. It included members who were both supportive of and opposed to reaching out to LGB Lutherans. However, the ELCA decision left that congregation frozen about what to do because it hoped it would not have to come to grips with the issue. A third congregation, a large and wealthy suburban one near the Twin Cities, was most definitely against the outcome of the 2009 vote. Johnson describes how that third congregation reacted with an intention to flex its resources to chastise the ELCA and consider withdrawal from its membership.

²³ James M. Childs, Jr., *Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

²⁴ Craig L. Nesson, *Many Members, Yet One Body: Committed Same-Gender Relationships and the Mission of the Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

²⁵ Jeff Strickler, "ELCA Votes to Allow Gay Pastors," *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (August 21, 2009): <http://www.startribune.com/local/minneapolis/53859967.html?page=1&c=y>.

²⁶ Iain Johnson, "Beyond Theology: The Social Construction of Compliance within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," *Honors Projects*, Paper 25 (St. Paul, MN: Macalester College, 2010), http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/soci_honors/25.

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The number of titles about the UMC and the homosexuality debate substantially exceed the titles pertaining to the other denominations in this essay. Two reasons for this difference are apparent. First, the UMC is the largest of the seven denominations discussed in this essay. It exceeds the next largest, the ELCA, by close to six million members within the United States. Second, there has been a vote on removing the language about homosexuality in *The Book of Discipline* (“...is consistent with Christian teaching”) at each quadrennial General Conference since 1992.²⁷ The debates leading up to the vote have been very emotional. Given the four years that pass between General Conferences, much time is afforded to think and write on this issue.

James Rutland Wood’s short book *Where the Spirit Leads: The Evolving Views of United Methodists on Homosexuality* shows that the UMC has also been confronting the issue since 1972. However, he shows in his text that United Methodists have made progress over those almost forty years. Woods points out that in 1972 the UMC did take a position that LGB people were worthy of ministry but that the UMC “did not condone the practice of homosexuality and considered it incompatible with Christian teaching.”²⁸ Twenty years later, the UMC stated at its General Conference that homosexuals should not be discriminated against in terms of employment benefits outside the church.²⁹ Wood describes how fifteen bishops at that 1992 General Conference went out on a limb by releasing a letter to the media in which they called for the UMC to find a new path for LGB people seeking God’s grace and fellowship within the UMC.³⁰ Starting with 1992, he proceeds to look at how the UMC has dealt with other controversial issues, its commitment to social justice, revisiting scripture, considering more outreach, and finding the courage to lead in such difficult circumstances. Wood offers much for United Methodists to ponder.

Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality, edited by Maxie D. Dunnam and H. Newton Malony, is a book that maintains that the UMC’s official position on homosexuality is consistent with Christian teaching.³¹ Dunnam is the president emeritus of Asbury Theological Seminary, and Malony teaches at the Fuller Theological Seminary as the senior professor of psychology and is an ordained UMC clergy person. The contributors begin by discussing the language in the UMC Book of Discipline and followed with discussion of scripture, homosexuality, the importance of defending marriage between a man and a woman, the repugnancy of homosexuality in the developing world, and how one can free his/herself from same-sex attraction. Dunnam authors the essay about marriage and asserts that it is the will of God that a man and a woman unite in a lifelong monogamous relationship. In his essay “Homosexuality in the Postmodern World,” Malony examines the psychological implications of same-sex attraction. He supports the position taken by the American Psychological Association in 1975 that homosexuality is not a form of mental illness. However, he asserts that homosexuals are not born with a predisposition to the same sex. He describes same-sex attraction as being a learned habit that often becomes addictive. He goes on to characterize it as being outside the social norm and physically unhealthy.

²⁷ United Methodist Church, “Homosexuality: Overview,” http://www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.4074843/k.6C9CHomosexuality_Overview.htm.

²⁸ James Rutland Wood, *Where the Spirit Leads: The Evolving Views of United Methodists on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 20.

²⁹ Wood, 20.

³⁰ Wood, 17.

³¹ Maxie D. Dunnam and H. Newton Malony (eds.), *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 114.

Maloney concludes by describing homosexuals as “sexually challenged” but states that they do not deserve to be discriminated against and should be treated justly.³² *Staying the Course* concludes with three chapters arguing that people can be cured of a predisposition toward the same sex. One is a personal account of a woman who states that she had left lesbianism behind. The second is by a psychological counselor who describes how she treats lesbians so they are able to return to heterosexuality. The third is by a Methodist pastor who shares testimonies from formerly gay persons.

The next three titles dispute the thesis of *Staying the Course*. First in chronological order, by Tex Sample and Amy DeLong, is *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality*, a collection of essays by Methodist clergy and theological educators who believe that the UMC is failing to act in accordance with Jesus’ second commandment, “to love one’s neighbor as one’s self.” Included are sermons and personal testimonies. Susan Laurie’s sermon is about her coming to grips with being a lesbian and a UMC pastor. Terry Norman offers an account of confronting his homosexuality after marrying a woman and fathering three children.³³ Especially illuminating is Joretta Marshall’s essay about taking a stand against heterosexism. Marshall defines heterosexism as “those structures that shape and mold persons at societal, communal, interpersonal, and internal levels to embrace and embody a heterosexual orientation and way of being in the world.”³⁴ She then proceeds to challenge UMC clergy to actively protest and disobey the heterosexism that she believes that the UMC maintains in its polity and policies. The book concludes with four appendices including a UMC Judicial Council ruling, relevant paragraphs from *The Book of Discipline*, a bishop’s response to a UMC proceeding against a pastor who disobeyed the ordinances of *The Book of Discipline*, and the affirmation of one Wisconsin UMC church on homosexuality and Christian faith.

The next book disputing the thesis of *Stay the Course* is *People of a Compassionate God: Creating Welcoming Congregations*, edited by Janet F. Fishburn.³⁵ This book describes the observations of Fishburn and her colleagues as they consider the experiences of five UMC churches in disparate parts of the United States undergoing the process of discerning whether to become involved in the Reconciling Congregation Program (RCP). The RCP is the means within the UMC for individual churches to decide if they want publically to declare a ministry to LGB people. The most significant fact about the RCP is that it has now come to be recognized by the leadership of the UMC as long as it operates within the boundaries specified by *The Book of Discipline*. This book describes the awakenings of this movement among the five highlighted churches in the late 1990s and early 2000s. After viewing the group’s website, one can only be impressed by its progress. A total of 500 UMC congregations have decided to participate in this movement.³⁶ The book’s descriptions of the early days of this movement are illuminating. The five featured congregations are located in upstate New York, Atlanta, Chicago, Tulsa, and Los Angeles. Each chapter describes the progress and ups and downs of the members of these congregations as they confront the homosexuality debate within Christian communities. These churches certainly did not choose an easy path. Most lost many members.

³² Dunnam and Malony, 133.

³³ Tex Sample and Amy DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 137-150.

³⁴ Sample and DeLong, 162.

³⁵ Janet F. Fishburn, ed., *People of a Compassionate God: Creating Welcoming Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

³⁶ Reconciling Ministries Network, “Reconciling Process,” <http://www.rmnetwork.org/learn-more/rc-process/>.

One church changed buildings, a painful decision for many members. Another had to cope with a movement to get rid of the associate pastor who was a proponent of the RCP. The Tulsa congregation finally decided to leave the UMC and join the UCC so that the pastor would not be tried for violating *The Book of Discipline*.

Amanda Udis-Kessler's *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church* marks a radical departure from *The Loyal Opposition* and *People of a Compassionate God*.³⁷ The previous two books represent the focus of pastors involved in the issue. Udis-Kessler looks at it through the eyes of a sociologist, and her book is a sociological study based on ethnographic methodology. Her thesis focuses on how the UMC is coping with homosexuality and heterosexism, and she gathers her data from interviews conducted during the UMC General Conference of 2000 held in Cleveland, Ohio. She includes a lengthy chapter consisting of her selected field notes from the General Conference. She describes the LGB supporters as "inclusionists," and those supporters of *The Book of Discipline's* clause that homosexuality is inconsistent with Christian teaching as "conservatives," "evangelicals," and "moderates." If one finds it odd to include "moderates" with the faction most opposed to LGB persons, it is because moderates put loyalty to *The Book of Discipline* above any sense of social justice that might include the ordination of non-celibate gays or lesbians and the blessing of same-sex relationships within the church.³⁸ Efforts to drop the language about being "inconsistent with Christian teaching" from *The Book of Discipline* failed due to the numbers of its defenders. Those numbers have stayed with the majority through three General Conferences in 2004, 2008, and 2012. Part of the reason for the continuing impasse is the growing numbers of delegates from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Even as the numbers of American inclusionists grow, so do the numbers from the developing world that adhere strictly doctrine. One cannot help but to be moved by reading how Methodists engage in such emotional confrontations every four years without resolution or progress. Udis-Kessler provides much information to explain this phenomenon where loyalty to the denomination on both sides seems so strong as to keep them in the fold despite their differences. *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church* is most definitely one of the most insightful books about the homosexuality debate within the mainline Protestant churches.

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH USA

Like the ECUSA, the PCUSA swallowed hard and voted in 2011 by a count of ninety-seven presbyteries (well over the eighty-seven needed) to allow LGB persons to be ordained as clergy or become officers in the PCUSA. Just like the ECUSA and ELCA, the PCUSA suffered modest loss in congregations from churches leaving to join the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians. However, the tension over this denominational decision does not appear to be as problematic as with the ECUSA. An enlightening source about the Presbyterian experience can be found in the Rev. Jack Rogers' *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*. It chronicles Rogers' own journey with the issue of homosexuality while growing up in Nebraska in the 1940s within the old, evangelical United Presbyterian Church of North America.³⁹ Rogers admits that at first he viewed the controversy as a nonstarter in terms of how he understood the scriptures. He had an opportunity to go on a four-year mission trip to the Netherlands, and his travel around Europe and access to resources such as the British Museum Library offered him a broader view of theological issues affecting his church. He points to in-depth study of the scriptures most often associated with the condemnation of homosexuality which led him to conclude that those passages did not address the committed

³⁷ Amanda Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

³⁸ Udis-Kessler, 145.

³⁹ Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

LGB people with whom he became acquainted. As his view evolved, he accepted the call to speak to evangelical Presbyterian groups. At first he resigned himself to rejection and little response, but he was surprised by the large turnouts that came to his engagements. He then decided to document his experiences in this book. His chapter titles are good examples of his changing views about homosexuality. In Chapter 2, “Studying Homosexuality for the First Time,” Roger describes his experiences on a task force at his local church that was assigned to study the status of LGB people. In Chapter 2, “A Pattern of Misusing the Bible to Justify Oppression,” he compares how Presbyterians in the nineteenth century used the scriptures to justify slavery as some are using them to marginalize gays. Chapter 3, “A Breakthrough in Understanding the Word of God,” focuses on how beginning in the 1930s biblical interpretation moved away from the negative stereotypes to keep African Americans and women down. In Chapter 4, “Interpreting the Bible in Times of Controversy,” he discusses seven guidelines for Biblical interpretation that were developed in the 1980s and proved useful for better understanding of gays and lesbians. In Chapter 5, “What the Bible Says and Doesn’t Say about Homosexuality,” he discusses frequently cited biblical passages and attempts to show how their meaning had been twisted over time. Chapter 6, “Real People and Real Marriage,” stands as an affirmation of gays and lesbians. In Chapter 7, “Recommendations for the PCUSA,” Rogers concludes by summarizing how these changes in his views over time have real implications for the PCUSA as a whole.

The PCUSA’s Definitive Guidance: The Church’s Statements on Homosexuality affords a historical backdrop on how the PCUSA predecessor denominations, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the Presbyterian Church in the United States, which merged to form the PCUSA in 1983, dealt with the issue.⁴⁰ In addition to the official documents, a study guide for congregations or regional denomination associations is included to assist in discerning how to address the issue of reaching out to LGB persons. The study guide was constructed by the late Dr. Jack L. Stotts, a former president of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

The United Church of Christ was the first of the mainline denominations discussed in this essay to reach out officially to potential gay members and to ordain gay clergy. Two months before the Stonewall riots in 1969, the UCC Council for Social Action passed a resolution stating its opposition to all laws that criminalized same-sex relations between consenting adults. In 1972 the UCC’s Golden Gate Association ordained the first openly gay person within a mainline Protestant denomination. At its General Synod in 1985 the church called on its congregations and other bodies to study homosexuality and to declare that they were “open and affirming” of LGB persons. In 2005 the General Synod took the brave step of supporting a resolution that backed equal marriage rights for all people without distinction to gender. While the ECUSA, the PCUSA, and UMC witnessed very close votes resulting in the passage or blocking of such measures, the 2005 General Synod vote was reported to have garnered eighty- to ninety-percent approval, depending on the source.⁴¹ A resource that provides the actual texts of the above official actions of the UCC for the period 1969-1999 is the UCC’s *That We May All Be One: 30 Years of United Church of Christ Social Justice Policy Statements on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Concerns*. This

⁴⁰ Jack L. Stotts, *The PCUSA’s Definitive Guidance: The Church’s Statements on Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

⁴¹ United Church of Christ, *That We May All Be One: 30 Years of United Church of Christ Social Justice Policy Statements on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Concerns* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, Division of the American Missionary Association, United Church of Christ, Office for Church in Society, 1999).

denominational publication also includes the initial proposals affirming marriage rights for same-sex couples in 1996, nine years before the General Synod voted to approve.

That We May All Be One signifies the UCC's commitment to diversity and inclusiveness in the context of its denominational leadership and on the national level. However, that commitment to inclusiveness falls well short of universality, as is seen when one examines the grass roots of the UCC. These grass roots/congregational differences on homosexuality are discussed in a very illuminating manner in H. B. Cavalcanti's *The United Church of Christ in the Shenandoah Valley: Liberal Church, Traditional Congregations*.⁴² A Brazil-born sociologist who teaches at James Madison University in the Shenandoah Valley, Cavalcanti embarks on a study whose methodology and content resemble Amanda Udis-Kessler's book. Cavalcanti looks at twenty-nine congregations making up the Shenandoah Association of the United Church of Christ. The study is based on using both quantitative and qualitative research statistical data and interviews with congregational members, clergy, and association staff in the Shenandoah Association. The homosexuality debate is not his main focus, but it is unavoidable in analyzing how local churches go about parish life in contrast to the theology voiced by the UCC nationally. He presents short profiles of all twenty-nine congregations, the patterns of congregational life (he describes the year-round parish life of one church in particular), the characteristics of local worship, and the churches' outreach and mission to their communities. In a short section on sexual orientation, he points out a counter movement to the open and affirming referred to as "faithful and welcoming" (FWC) UCC churches. Churches subscribing to this doctrine formed this subgroup of UCC congregations after the General Synod's vote to support equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender in 2005. About seventy-nine congregations around the country are FWC churches.⁴³ These adhere to a more literal scriptural interpretation, but they also value belonging to the UCC because of the respect and freedom that the denomination grants to local congregations. Of the twenty-nine Shenandoah Association member churches, five churches belong to the FWC and three to the "open and affirming" group. The remainder and majority of the Shenandoah Association churches have not taken a public position on the issue. Cavalcanti indicates that there is also a historical aspect to these differences. The UCC was formed in 1957 when the Evangelical and Reformed and the Congregational Churches agreed to unite.⁴⁴ The Evangelical and Reformed churches came out of a more conservative tradition. Even though the homosexuality debate is not a major focus in the United Church of Christ in the Shenandoah Valley, Cavalcanti offers very helpful insights as to how the debate is engaged on the grass roots level and in more amicable terms than in some of the other mainline Protestant groups.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

This survey of the literature provides the student of the homosexuality debate within these mainline Protestant denominations a fair sense of the existing tensions. They also help the reader to understand how emotionally charged this issue is, and how deeply it has affected these groups. At the risk of oversimplification, the divide within these denominations is based on the members who see themselves as defending the sacredness of the

⁴² H. B. Cavalcanti, *The United Church of Christ in the Shenandoah Valley: Liberal Church, Traditional Congregations* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

⁴³ Connie Larkeman, "Video Message from Faithful and Welcoming Churches Embraces the 'United' Mantra of the United Church of Christ," <http://www.ucc.org/news/video-message-from-faithful.html>.

⁴⁴ "Key Dates in UCC History," <http://www.ucc.org/education/polity/pdf-folder/key-dates-in-ucc-hist.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Cavalcanti, xi.

biblical texts as opposed to those who believe they are living out Jesus' two great commandments to love God and one's neighbor. The opposing views of those who support the inclusion of LGB people within their fellowships and of those who hold up scripture to deny ordination and other privileges to LGB people echo a similar controversy in American history. During the nineteenth century, scripture was interpreted to justify both the institution of slavery and its abolition. Perhaps because of the polity of these denominations, the debate has continued for forty years and shows no sign of resolution in the foreseeable future. Even the most liberal groups, the CCDC and UCC, include churches and members who uphold scriptural authority. However, because their members value the opportunity to be in communion with one another despite their differences, their factions are able to "agree to disagree" and respect each other's positions. The ABCUSA, ECUSA, ELCA, UMC, and PCUSA have yet to reach that level of acceptance and toleration. It seems that there will be continued passionate exchanges as the debate evolves.

