FAQ on the Recommendations from the AIC on SSA and Ordination Standards

This is an FAQ from the Ad-Interim Committee on Same-Sex Attraction and Ordination Standards. We encourage all commissioners to the General Assembly to read our recommendations and report for themselves. You can find them at EPConnect.org and in the commissioner's handbook. The following are brief answers to the main questions we have received about our recommendations.

Theological Framework

Q 1: How does the Bible shape these recommendations?

A: Our recommendations are built upon the foundation of God's Word. The Position Paper and Pastoral Letter rely heavily on scripture and both documents are chock-full of scriptural citations. Biblical passages that provided special guidance include Genesis 1-2; Jesus' teaching on marriage, singleness, and adultery in the Gospels; Romans 1; Romans 7-8; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 2 Corinthians 12; Colossians 3; 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1; and James 1:12-15. Christ's teaching on temptation in the Lord's Prayer and the Garden of Gethsemane, and then the commentary on the person of Christ and temptation in Hebrews 2 & 4 especially formed our recommendations.

Q 2: How do our recommendations rely on the Westminster Confession and Catechisms?

A: The Westminster Confession and Catechisms contain the system of doctrine found in the scriptures and provide the theological framework for how we understand the Bible and apply it to this issue. We are putting the first ever confessional citation into the *Book of Government* (WLC 138-139, on the 7th commandment). WCF 6 (Of the Fall of Man), WCF 13 (Of Sanctification), WLC 23-27, 149 (Sin & Misery & the Law), WLC 45 (Christ's office of king), WLC 75, 77-79 (Sanctification), WLC 138-139 (the 7th Commandment), and WLC 195 (Lead Us not into Temptation) especially shaped our recommendations.

Q 3: Do these recommendations diverge from the EPC's historic views on sexuality?

A: No. Scripture is unambiguous. All people are created in God's image, and his good design for marriage and sex is present in creation. Marriage is instituted by God between one man and one woman and sexual intimacy is reserved exclusively for that union. Jesus affirmed the goodness and purpose of marriage and the single life. Homosexuality, including homosexual lust, is sinful. These recommendations continue to uphold the EPC's historic affirmation that the Bible requires chastity in singleness and fidelity in marriage.

Q 4: Is this making the issue of same-sex attraction a non-essential?

A: No. A non-essential in the EPC is a subject left unaddressed in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, whether directly or by necessary inference, and upon which reasonable people could disagree about the Bible's teaching. The Bible and the Westminster Standards are clear on, and our recommendations affirm: i) God's design for marriage and human sexuality and singleness; ii) the sinfulness of lust and same-sex sexual activity; iii) the reality of indwelling sin and total depravity and the necessity for repentance; iv) the reality of progressive sanctification

in our union with Christ; v) and the nature of temptation and weakness in the condition of misery. Our recommended amendments to the *Book of Government* would be binding upon the whole denomination, while the Pastoral Letter provides guidance on how Session and Presbyteries should wisely exercise their judgment when addressing this issue.

Q 5: Will these recommendations allow for the ordination of homosexuals?

A: No. Officers in Christ's church are called to the church by Christ. Such disciples are marked by their commitment to Christ and his lordship, reflected in their godly character. Homosexuality is incompatible with the Christian life.

Q 6: Are these recommendations the same as the PCA's position?

A: The proposed language for the *Book of Government* revisions is taken almost verbatim from the PCA's constitution. The approach used in the Position Paper and Pastoral Letter was both theologically and pastorally informed by the PCA's study of this issue.

Terminology

Q 7: What definitions are being used for the terms "gay", "homosexual", and "same-sex attraction"?

A: The terminology on this issue is constantly shifting and almost everyone has their own definitions. In our work, especially the Pastoral Letter, we use "gay" and "homosexuality" as umbrella terms to describe homoerotic worldview, lifestyle, conduct, and desires. The term "same-sex attraction" (SSA) is used to describe someone's inward desires or proclivities. Additionally, we speak of "latent propensity," which applies to individuals who know themselves to be especially vulnerable to homosexual temptations but who are repentant of all their homosexual lusts. In short, "gay" and "homosexual" equate to embracing sin; "SSA" and "latent propensity" equate to those who repent of and mortify this sin, yet either still experience the pull of sin and temptation that must be resisted or recognize that they need to make special effort to avoid that sin and temptation.

Q 8: Is it appropriate to use the term "gay Christian"?

A: No. Individuals who experience SSA may want to use the term "gay Christian" in order for the church and world to more readily understand their experience of a persistent, latent pull towards same-sex sexual temptation even as they make every effort by God's grace to think and act according to His will. However, in our culture, the term "gay" is normally understood as affirming or engaging in homosexual practice. It is sinful to intentionally approve of sin and missionally foolish to invite that misunderstanding. Our identity is in Christ as his new creation, and we should not inadvertently communicate to the world that Jesus approves of sin. It is inappropriate to use terminology, including "gay Christian", that welcomes confusion from the church and world.

Q 9: Are these Side B recommendations?

A: No. While Side B is a diverse movement, there are some areas of agreement between it and our recommendations. We agree that sex is reserved for marriage between one man and one woman, that homosexuality is a result of the fall into sin, that homosexual sex and lust are sinful, and that those who identify as gay are called to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus. This is commendable. However, we disagree with Side B in a number of crucial ways. We insist that homosexuality and same-sex attraction is a moral and sinful condition that demands repentance and mortification. We firmly reject the idea that there are any unique, healthy parts to same sex-sexual orientation that are gifts to be enjoyed and received. EPC officers must treat impulses towards same-sex attraction as impulses and temptations towards sin which must be denied.

The AIC's Recommendations

Q 10: What are the concrete recommendations from the committee?

A: We have four items that will be presented for a vote. They are to amend: i) the EPC's "Position Paper on Human Sexuality"; ii) the section "Same-Sex Attraction" (which we are recommending be retitled "Homosexuality and Same-Sex Attraction") in the EPC's "Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality"; iii) B*ook of Government* 9-3.A and 9-3.B; iv) and *Book of Government* 12-2.B, 12-3.A, 12-3.B.1, and 12-6.

Q 11: Where can I find a summary of the committee's recommendations?

A: Our committee is providing a report to the 46th GA. You can find it on EPConnect.org and in the commissioner's handbook for GA. The substance of the report is only 2.5 pages long.

Q 12: Brass tacks, can someone who is same-sex attracted be ordained in the EPC?

A: We affirm that only those "who conform to the biblical requirement of chastity and sexual purity in their descriptions of themselves, their convictions, character, and conduct should be considered for leadership." Additionally, we affirm that "Courts may consider for ordination candidates whose ongoing experience of SSA is a corrupted sin nature unindulged, repented of, and mortified; a temptation not entered into, but rather fled; a weakness not embraced, but rather mourned as they rest upon the grace and strength of the Lord." This is not a change in the EPC's doctrine, but a clarification and strengthening of our language and standards.

Creation, Sin, & Sanctification

Q 13: What is concupiscence, and what is its connection to same-sex attraction?

A: While the term "concupiscence" is absent from the Westminster Standards, the Reformed understanding of the doctrine is present. The human heart is sinfully corrupt and gives rise to disordered desires, which are also sin. Until Christ returns, this corrupt nature, while pardoned and mortified by Jesus, remains in the regenerate during this life and the corruption itself and all

motions proceeding from it remain truly and properly sin (WCF 6.5). Same-sex sexual lusts and desires are an example of such sin. This means that these desires are to be repented of and mortified, and the totally depraved heart which gives rise to them is also to be repented of and mortified. This corrupt nature is often called indwelling or remaining sin and remains with the believer their whole life long (WCF 6.5, 13.2-3, 17.3; WLC 78) and therefore the whole of the Christian life is one of repentance.

Q 14: How do temptations and latent propensity to same-sex attraction fit into this?

A: Growth in sanctification does not mean the decline of temptation in a Christian's life, nor does it automatically mean the healing of weakness, but rather means the Christian growing in strength to resist and flee temptation. The experience of temptation is not itself sin (WLC 195). Our corrupt heart tempts us to sin, as do Satan and our fallen world. Our bodies and temperaments are also broken by sin, leaving us weak and vulnerable to sin and temptation — a latent propensity towards them. Same-sex attraction can refer both to the experience of remaining sin, and can also refer to temptation and vulnerability, like a thorn in the flesh. Neither the scriptures nor the Westminster Standards ever teach that we are to repent of temptation or weakness. We are to repent of and mortify sin, including our sinful nature from which some temptations may arise internally, and are to flee all temptation and rest upon the strength of Christ in our weakness. Jesus corrects us in our sins, and supports us in ***all*** our temptations and sufferings (WLC 45).

Q 15: Shouldn't someone who is a new creation in Christ and progressing in holiness be free of same-sex attraction?

A. Someone who is a new creation in Christ, united to him and indwelt by his Spirit, and progressing in holiness should be strengthened in grace and the practice of true holiness, meaning that the power of sin no longer has dominion over them while sinful lusts are weakened in their life and do not characterize their behavior (WCF 13.1). However, sanctification in this life is imperfect and the corruption of sin remains in "every part" of the believer and we "are continually plagued with desires of [our] old sinful nature that are contrary to the spirit" (WCF 13.2; WLC 78, modern edition). Therefore, the sanctified life is one of constant warring and progressive victory against the impulses to sin, not the absence of the pressure to sin (Galatians 5:16-17; WCF 13.3; WLC 78, 195). This is what the mortification of sin is — the ongoing putting to death of what is earthly in us (Colossians 3:5). The growth in holiness for the person who experiences same-sex attraction includes increased strength in resisting sin, including same-sex lusts; the Spirit enabling them to flee every temptation, including the temptation to same-sex lusts; and resting their weakness upon the power of Christ.

Q 16: How do natural/unnatural desires work into this conversation?

A: In Romans 1 Paul says that homosexuality is an unnatural relation which is a dishonorable passion contrary to nature, and Jude 7 describes Sodom and Gomorrah as being judged for pursuing "strange flesh", often translated "unnatural desire". Our recommendations agree with Paul and Jude and we quote them. WLC 139 states "The sins forbidden in the seventh commandment... are adultery, fornication, rape, incest, sodomy, and all unnatural lusts ('unnatural desires' in the modern edition)." Homosexuality is certainly an unnatural sin and

desire. Unrepentant sinners who indulge unnatural lusts or desires have no place in church office (see WLC 151). Our recommendations are clear–Christians are to flee all sexual sin and temptation, and that Jesus is a great savior who can redeem even those of us who have committed these sins (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Standards for ordination

Q 17: What about those who profess, persist in, or identify with unnatural desires or affections?

A: A lot of EPCers have asked why our committee has not used this language, especially since it seems so simple and clear. But we think it's very unclear and either doesn't do anything at all or does far too much. If "profess, persist in, or identify with unnatural desires" means "indulged and unrepentant", then Amen! We agree that those who indulge in and are unrepentant of unnatural desires should not be officers of the church. However, if that's what that phrase means, then it doesn't actually address the issue before the EPC since we are talking about people who *are* penitent and who *don't* indulge same-sex attraction.

If "profess, persist in, or identify with unnatural desires" means something like "sin nature that continues to exist or ongoing temptation we face or besetting weakness we experience" then it bars literally every human ever, besides Christ, from ordained office. This understanding is contrary to scripture and our confessional system. All believers have remaining sin whose desires are contrary to nature and scripture, and who therefore fail to perfectly keep God's law (WCF 6.5, 13.2; WLC 78, 149), and all believers face ongoing temptation (WLC 195) and vulnerabilities to sin and temptation (WLC 27-28, 45, 81). So either "profess, persist in, or identify with unnatural desires" doesn't solve anything or it undermines the EPC's biblical confession of faith.

Q 18: Shouldn't the EPC have higher standards for leadership?

A: Yes. The standards are higher for those who would serve as officers in the church and the examinations for TEs are most detailed and strenuous. Unrepentant sinful behavior and unrepented lusts disqualify candidates for office in the EPC. Our examining bodies must use wisdom to ask and understand whether the individual seeking ordination is dealing repentantly with lust, desires, vulnerabilities and propensities or embracing, accommodating or making peace with those. This is precisely why we are recommending that the *Book of Government* be amended to include more specific character qualifications.

Q 19: Why don't your recommendations specifically provide language to amend the *Book of Government* to allow or deny the ordination of individuals experiencing same-sex attraction?

A: Temptations accompany Christians their whole life, confronting both the immature and the mature. To profess the ongoing temptation to same-sex lust is to profess the reality of indwelling sin, bodily weakness and vulnerabilities, the fallenness of our world, and the providence of God in our experience of temptation. The existence and persistence of same-sex sexual temptation is not in itself sin or a sign of spiritual immaturity. If a candidate's corrupt sin nature means there remain "old self" sin vulnerabilities (here, SSA), but they are **not** indulging in it (aren't acting upon it physically or mentally), **are** repentant of it (have turned from it to the

Lord), **are** mortifying it (are putting it to death by engaging in practices that seek to reduce any vulnerability they have to it), **are not** entering into it (don't act on their vulnerability), **are** fleeing it (don't put themselves in risky situations), **are** mourning it (see it as something to grieve), and **are** relying on the grace and strength of the Lord to have it replaced more and more by their new self in Christ, then they may be considered for ordination. To deny ordination to someone solely on the grounds of the experience of possessing a sin nature, ongoing temptation, and bodily weakness contradicts both scripture and our confessional standards.

Q 20: Is someone who experiences same-sex attraction able to be above reproach?

A: Yes. Officers of Christ's church must absolutely be above reproach! They must be blameless — not marked by vice, able to withstand accusations of sinful character and behavior. This is why we recommend the *Book of Government* be amended to say that officers **must** "conform to the biblical requirement of chastity and sexual purity in their descriptions of themselves, their convictions, character, and conduct" and that to "be qualified for office, they **must** affirm the sinfulness of fallen desires, the reality and hope of progressive sanctification, and be committed to the pursuit of Spirit-empowered victory over their sinful temptations, inclinations, and actions." To be above reproach is about how one addresses their sin nature, the temptations they face, and weaknesses they experience. Someone who experiences same-sex attraction can be blameless by their repentance and mortification of sin, fleeing temptation, and resting on Christ's strength.

Q 21: If someone experiences a latent propensity towards same-sex attraction, is a court of the church obliged to ordain them?

A: No. No one has the right to church office. We are addressing eligibility for consideration for ordination, not rights. No Church court is required to take a position on a candidate it feels is unbiblical or imprudent.

Q 22: How should candidates and courts handle disclosures of same-sex attraction?

A: We advise those Christians who experience same-sex attraction to use discretion in disclosing their experience to others, normally only to those who can give good private counsel or to those who would be edified by their largely fruitful struggle. Since we believe, in most cases, "coming out of the closet publicly" is not helpful to others, we advise against that. Ordaining courts **must examine** all candidates in their experience of the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ, faithful conformity to his character, obedience to him as Lord, and steady progress in spiritual growth. All candidates **must affirm** the sinfulness of fallen desires, the reality and hope of progressive sanctification, and be committed to the pursuit of Spirit-empowered victory over their sinful temptations, inclinations, and actions. If a candidate has publicly disclosed that they experience same-sex attraction, the ordaining court **must ensure** that the candidate meets the biblical and confessional standards outlined in the Position Paper and Pastoral Letter.