

Presbyterian panel opens window for gays: Local congregations and gay clergy

by [Kevin Eckstrom](#) in the [September 20, 2005](#) issue

A special panel has urged the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to maintain its ban on noncelibate gay clergy, but the panel also wants local congregations to determine when to apply—or bypass—that standard.

The 20-member task force, which has spent four years studying divisions over homosexuality, said the church should retain its 1997 standards that call for church officers to maintain “fidelity . . . in marriage” or “chastity in singleness.”

At the same time, the Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church said local churches “have the duty to apply standards and the right to discern which are essential for ordained service.” The 173 presbyteries, or local church bodies, conceivably could determine that a minister’s sexual orientation and activity is a “nonessential” factor in his or her acceptability, according to many church analysts.

Such exceptions would be made on a “case-by-case” basis, but could also be challenged in church courts. The proposals now head to the church’s June 2006 General Assembly in Birmingham, Alabama.

In essence, the proposals would maintain the status quo and not impose a churchwide stamp of approval on gay clergy. They would also allow the church to sidestep another painful yes-or-no vote on gay clergy.

However, similar “third-way” proposals to settle the decades-long debate in mainline Protestant churches haven’t always worked. In mid-August, a proposal for allowing “exceptions” for ordination of seminary-educated gays and lesbians was rejected by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The task force urged the 2.5-million-member Presbyterian Church to reject any attempt to change the sexuality standards. Several proposals to allow actively gay

clergy are already scheduled for next year's General Assembly.

Three separate attempts to loosen the standards on gays have failed in the past decade. But if next year's General Assembly approves the panel recommendation on permitting presbyteries to find that a candidate's sexuality is not an "essential" factor, the matter would not have to be sent to presbyteries for ratification.

Another task force recommendation urged the church to replace language that prohibits "self-affirming, practicing and unrepentant homosexuals" in the pulpit with more general rules that ban clergy who have "departed from scriptural or constitutional standards."

The panel said Presbyterians have always given the "whole church" the power to set standards for ordination, but traditionally have left decisions about how to "exercise judgment in the application of standards" to the local level.

One conservative leader said the proposals would weaken the church's ability to set national standards and result in a constitution that, "in a national sense, doesn't mean anything."

"You've just said, 'I'm not going to live under the covenant that we've established as Presbyterians, and instead I'm going to go my own way,'" said Parker Williamson, head of the conservative Presbyterian Lay Committee. "That's certainly a departure from constitutional government as Presbyterians for centuries have understood it."

Progressive groups, meanwhile, saw merit in the proposals. Susan Andrews, a former church moderator and a leader in the liberal Covenant Network, said the proposals honor the "flexible and faithful equilibrium" that has always been central to Presbyterians.

"It's not black or white, it's not either/or," said Andrews, a pastor in Bethesda, Maryland. That "never has been in our tradition."

The task force issued five recommendations, all urging the church to "make every effort to prevent schism." Indeed, the panel—which drew from left, middle and right—bemoaned the "constant, often bitter contention that creates factions and rivalries" and adopted the report and recommendations unanimously. No minority report was issued.

(The *Washington Post* quoted liberal and conservative members of the task force who agreed that Presbyterian tradition says ministers can be ordained despite declaring a “scruple,” or principled disagreement on an aspect of doctrine.

(“We ordain human beings, and no human being is perfectly obedient to scripture,” said Barbara G. Wheeler, president of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City and a liberal member of the task force. A conservative panel member and pastor from Houston, Jack Haberer, told the *Post*, “We are reclaiming an historic Presbyterian practice that says ‘national standards, local application,’ which I always have believed to be the way that Presbyterianism operates.”)

A separate debate that has caused friction in recent years—whether salvation can be found outside of Jesus Christ—was answered by the task force when it said “Jesus is Lord” without qualifications.

“It is newsworthy that a group of Presbyterians as diverse as this could come together and make a confident, common confession that Jesus Christ is the only savior of the world,” said Michael Walker, director of the conservative Presbyterians for Renewal.