

Presbyterian compromise: Ordaining gay clergy is a local option

by [John Dart](#) in the [July 11, 2006](#) issue

Presbyterians, torn by divisions over homosexuality for nearly three decades, agreed in June to a delicate compromise. The impetus behind the decision to allow exceptions to the ban on ordaining gay clergy—in the case of otherwise qualified candidates who disagree in conscience with the ban—was poignantly expressed at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly by former church moderator Marj Carpenter.

“I’m against the ordination of homosexuals, though I love ‘em,” said the church elder from Big Spring, Texas. “But we’ve been fighting in this ditch for 28 years and the ditch is getting deeper.” Her voice breaking during her plea June 20 from the convention floor in Birmingham, Alabama, Carpenter said, “It’s starting to affect our mission work, our youth ministry and our evangelism, and I’m ready to try something else.”

Shortly afterward, 57 percent of the voting delegates approved (298 to 221) an “authoritative interpretation” of the denomination’s constitution to permit the regional presbyteries and congregations to ordain homosexual Christians as ministers and lay elders.

The measure took effect immediately. Supporters of the change were uncertain how many gay and lesbian candidates might seek ordination in coming months.

Some delegates objected to the fact that the 3.2-million-member denomination has kept its requirement that clergy live in “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.” But in a lopsided vote, 405 to 92, with four abstentions, the assembly rejected a resolution to strike the fidelity/chastity requirement from the PCUSA Book of Order. Eliminating the ban would have broken trust with conservative Presbyterians, one pastor said, by jeopardizing the compromise crafted over four years by a theologically diverse, 20-member task force.

“We were not instructed to solve any of the issues included in our mandate,” said retired pastor Gary Demarest, co-moderator of the task force. “We know that winner-take-all solutions will only perpetuate the conflict.”

Conservative groups and delegates objected to what they saw as inconsistent moves by the assembly. To permit “local license” to deviate from national standards was “a wrong turn,” said David Miller of the Tampa Bay presbytery. Other opponents characterized the change as “a glacial shift” and a “blind quantum leap.”

But two theological task force members defended the compromise as based on Presbyterian precedent in distinguishing between national standards and “essentials” of faith. William Stacy Johnson of Princeton Theological Seminary cited a 1729 act in Presbyterian history that allowed ordination candidates to declare a “scruple,” or moral exception, to “standards,” which might be permitted unless it constituted a failure to adhere to “the essentials” of faith.

When asked at a June 20 news conference exactly what the essentials are, another task force member, Mark Achtemeier of the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, demurred. “Presbyterians serve a living God . . . [who] cannot be reduced to a checklist,” said Achtemeier, alluding to the reluctance by Presbyterian leaders to define the essentials of faith aside from historic Reformed and Presbyterian confessional statements. Even the standards of the church “don’t get applied in cookie-cutter fashion.”

Clifton Kirkpatrick, the PCUSA’s top officer, told reporters after the votes that “our standards have not changed,” but that the process adopted “encourages a more pastoral approach.” Disputed ordinations, Kirkpatrick added, “are always open for judicial or administrative review by higher governing bodies.”

Newly elected PCUSA moderator Joan Gray, in remarks to the news conference, said the full approval of the task force recommendations showed “the Presbyterian process . . . at its best.” Before she was elected to the two-year post, Gray had encouraged delegates to find value in living with ambiguity rather than press prematurely for clarity before “God makes a way.”

Asked whether she would attend postassembly meetings of various conservative groups such as New Wineskins and the San Diego Presbytery, Gray said she would go if invited but would not intrude. “I understand that people need to be together to do their grief work.”

Representatives of 14 conservative Presbyterian groups together decried the local option provision for ordaining gay and lesbian ministers. They called it “a profound deviation from biblical requirements” and said it would throw “our denomination into crisis.” Other Christians worldwide will regard the action “as profoundly offensive,” their joint statement said.

Is schism inevitable? asked a reporter. Terry Schlossberg of the conservative evangelical Presbyterian Coalition said, “We hope not.” The group’s statement clearly says “we intend to remain faithful,” she said. “What we hope is that what happened here today will not stand.”

Parker Williamson of Presbyterian Laymen, however, declared that schism has already occurred in that there are differing religious worldviews. He predicted that various conservative organizations will “look for ways we can work together to lead the people of God in line with the Word of God.”

Presbyterians who have sought full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians in church life were disappointed with the assembly’s decision. But the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, which was created with the goal of removing barriers for gay pastors, praised the acceptance of the task force report, saying it gives the church “an opportunity to recover our oneness in Christ” by clarifying the authority of local governing bodies “to discern gifts for ministry in those whom they know best.”

Acting on another controversial issue, the assembly modified its controversial position, adopted in 2004, calling for “phased, selective divestment” from companies aiding the Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territories. Jewish organizations and pro-Israel Christians had objected vigorously to the position, calling it unfair and counterproductive.

Delegates in Birmingham, by a vote of 483 to 28 with one abstention, restated Presbyterian approaches for investing in peace between Jews and Palestinians, emphasizing that divestment was regarded as a last resort. Gretchen Graf, moderator of the committee that oversaw the new resolution, said the group “tried to make the statement as balanced as possible.” Graf added: “Our concern was how can we be instruments for peacemaking in the Middle East.” The statement also apologized for the “hurt and misunderstanding” felt by Jewish groups, who have been longtime allies with the Presbyterians on many social issues, and appealed for “a new season of mutual understanding.”

Kirkpatrick said June 21 that the 2004 decision was commonly misunderstood. "Divestment was always the last option," he said.

The New York-based American Jewish Committee applauded the decision "to roll back its policies and to endorse constructive investment in peace," said David Elcott, U.S. director of interreligious affairs for the AJC. The organization also praised the Presbyterians for what it called "acknowledgment of Israel's right to protect its citizens and for adopting a more constructive and nuanced approach to Israel's security fence."

David Bernstein, an AJC official at the assembly, said the move will "bring us closer together in advocating a peaceful two-state solution in the region."

In another action, the assembly approved 282 to 212, with seven abstentions, a guide for optional study by churches on language that could be used in some situations for the Trinity. A church, for instance, could use an alternative such as "compassionate mother, beloved child and lifegiving womb."

An amendment specified that the traditional language of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" must be retained in baptismal rites. "With the exception of the baptismal formula itself, we are also free to supplement this language with additional trinitarian images to reflect the expansive grace, love and communion of the one God." The minority report charged that the Trinity paper improperly equated the biblical names of God to varied metaphors or analogies used for God.

"The language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rooted in Scripture and creed, remains an indispensable anchor for our efforts to speak faithfully of God," said the study guide. With that anchor in place, however, "we are freed to speak faithfully and amply of the mystery of the Trinity."

In yet another resolution, concerning biblical history, delegates approved a report affirming a common Abrahamic heritage among Christians, Muslims and Jews, encouraging the "common effort . . . to work together for peace, justice and righteousness." Interfaith discussions between the three religions have regularly noted that common beginning.