

Presbyterian dissidents find church refuge: Evangelical Presbyterian Church invites them in

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Dozens of church representatives of a movement of people unhappy inside the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have voted unanimously to pursue possible refuge within the conservative Evangelical Presbyterian Church, which proposes to establish a temporary, nongeographic presbytery for dissident PCUSA congregations.

The show-of-hands vote February 9 at the New Wineskins Association of Churches meeting in Orlando, Florida, was reported by both the Layman Online Web site and the Presbyterian News Service.

In the proposed New Wineskins Presbytery, pastors and staff would be self-governing and eligible to take part immediately in the pension and medical plans of the 182-church, 75,000-member Evangelical Presbyterian Church, based in Livonia, Michigan.

But New Wineskins leaders acknowledged that two-thirds of its 151 “endorsing” congregations may delay their departure from the mainline Presbyterian denomination or may stay despite their theological discontent with PCUSA leaders, especially over the last General Assembly’s adoption of compromise measures on ordination of gay and lesbian ministers.

About 130 congregations had representatives at the February 8-9 New Wineskins meeting at First Presbyterian Church in Orlando. But the number of churches intent on switching to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church was not determined in the vote.

EPC officials extended the invitation to New Wineskins churches last year. Now the EPC General Assembly must approve that plan during its own General Assembly June 20-23.

Dean Weaver, New Wineskins co-moderator, told the Orlando gathering that after the courtship by the EPC and this meeting's affirmative response, "October 29 and 30 is our wedding date, if you will"—referring to New Wineskins fall convocation in Fair Oaks, California.

Gerrit Dawson, another co-moderator of New Wineskins, said that the vote is not binding on any congregation. Nevertheless, after the vote Dawson declared, "We've crossed the Rubicon from which there is no turning back, nor should there be."

The Presbyterian News Service reported February 14 that a 1976 decision by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission indicates that a PCUSA congregation—either with or without its church property—may be dismissed in order to transfer to an ecclesiastical body "whose organization is conformed to the doctrines and order of this Church." The EPC falls within that requirement, General Assembly officials said.

Prior to the New Wineskins gathering, two top officials of the PCUSA sent a letter to their 11,300 congregations saying that they were "saddened" by the prospect of some congregations leaving the denomination.

"We are better followers of Jesus when we stick together, mutually encouraging one another in the work of discipleship," said the letter dated January 29 from stated clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick and executive director Linda Valentine of the General Assembly Council.

Concerns did arise at the New Wineskins meeting that women's ordination and leadership in the church should be affirmed in any move away from the PCUSA.

After the EPC-related vote, the group approved a motion to draft a paper that affirms and outlines the biblical basis for women serving as pastors, elders and deacons. Dawson cautioned delegates against presenting women's ordination as an "essential tenet" during a transitional period. "They [the EPC] know who we are," he said.

The EPC has two ordained women ministers, one of whom is retiring, according to stated clerk Jeff Jeremiah. The denomination leaves decisions on women's ordination to the "Spirit-guided consciences" of congregations and presbyteries, according to a position adopted in 1984.

Nancy Lee Cochran, a minister from Pittsburgh, noted that the strategy team had no women members. "Everyone of them was a white male," she said. One official countered that only males were nominated at the 2006 New Wineskins meeting.

Another motion approved in Orlando, according to Layman Online, was to establish a task force for those churches that want to remain in the PCUSA and "to flesh out what it means to be part of the New Wineskins Association."