

Presbyterians push again for gay clergy: Regional presbyteries must follow suit

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The nation's largest Presbyterian denomination has again pushed open the door to ordaining noncelibate gay and lesbian clergy, though the decades-old fight is far from over.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly, meeting in San Jose, California, voted 380 to 325 to remove a clause in its constitution that required clergy to be either faithful in a heterosexual marriage or chaste if they are single.

But that action adopted June 27 still needs approval by a majority of the PCUSA's 173 regional bodies, or presbyteries. Similar votes to drop the "fidelity and chastity" clause failed to win ratification by the presbyteries in 1997 and 2000.

Under the proposal, the sexual-activity clause incorporated into the PCUSA Book of Order in 1996 for ordination candidates would be deleted. In its place would be language stating that clergy candidates must "pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the scriptures."

In related actions, delegates adopted an "authoritative interpretation" to nullify rules barring "homosexual clergy" adopted three decades ago by Presbyterian churches that joined in the 1983 merger that created the PCUSA.

Another measure passed by delegates was meant to piece back together a compromise forged two years ago to allow ordination applicants to declare their conscientious objection to the chastity clause. The church's highest court later ruled that those who stipulate their objection must nevertheless abide by the rules.

If a majority of presbyteries during the coming year vote to eliminate the sexuality clause, it would open the door for otherwise qualified gay clergy.

If it doesn't pass, observers say, the other measures adopted in San Jose may allow churches and presbyteries to ordain gay or lesbian candidates who have conscientious objections to the rules after holding discussions with the candidates "to determine the seriousness of the departure."

As expected, liberal and conservative activists at the biennial meeting that ended June 28 were divided over the results. Divisions over homosexuality are seen as a major factor in the PCUSA's loss of more than 57,000 members last year, a 2.5 percent decline from 2006—the steepest annual drop in decades.

The proposal "is more than we expected from this General Assembly," said Jon Walton, co-moderator of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, which supports gay and lesbian clergy. "But it is all that we hoped for."

Leaders of the conservative Presbyterian Coalition felt "grief," said Terry Schlossberg. "We think the implications are very serious and will do a great deal of harm to the church."

William Stepp, a minister from Tropical Florida Presbytery, opposed the deletion, saying the church "needs a continuing strong witness to biblical standards for sexuality." According to Presbyterian News Service, Stepp warned that the proposal will "destabilize the denomination, obliterate trust and reduce funding for the church." He added: "Don't send a shock wave through the church."

But another minister, Susan Fisher of Pacific Presbytery, said the PCUSA and its predecessor church bodies had discussed the ordination standards issue for 30 years, and a proposal for more dialogue was pointless. She urged fellow delegates to "let the wider church decide if now is the time" to change ordination standards.

California proved an interesting setting for the assembly's debate on same-sex issues. County clerks in mid-June began issuing marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples after the state's high court said bars to such unions were unconstitutional.

A proposal to change the PCUSA definition of marriage to a union between two people was defeated in committee. Duncan McColl, a southern California pastor, said that in light of the General Assembly's decisions earlier in the day regarding ordination standards, "to introduce this to the church at this time would not be a wise thing."

Talking to reporters after the vote, outgoing PCUSA stated clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick, who decided not to run for a third four-year term, pleaded for unity during the voting at regional levels. He remains as president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

The delegates elected Gradye Parsons as Kirkpatrick's successor. He received 57 percent of the votes on the first ballot. Parsons defeated Winfield "Casey" Jones, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Pearland, Texas, who received 25 percent of delegate votes.

A minister and former church executive in his native Tennessee, Parsons has served eight years as director of operations for the General Assembly.

San Francisco minister Bruce Reyes-Chow, 39, who is active in the Emergent church movement, was elected moderator. He will serve as a key denominational ambassador in his two-year term. The grandson of Chinese and Filipino immigrants, Reyes-Chow is pastor of Mission Bay Community Church.

"We know that storms may come," Parsons, Reyes-Chow and Linda Bryant Valentine, executive director of the General Assembly Council, said in a joint message to the church's 11,000 congregations shortly after the PCUSA meeting ended. "We know that the assembly actions may do little to ease the anxiety that seems to permeate our life together," they wrote. But they asked members "not to act or react immediately," but to pray and talk about the issues with other members.

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