

Presbyterians do turnaround on gay clergy

by [John Dart](#) in the [May 31, 2011](#) issue

Few experts in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) were predicting that 2011 would see the denomination dropping its three-decade opposition to ordaining gay and lesbian clergy. The PCUSA's General Assembly last July approved a measure to do just that—for the fourth time. But in all previous cases, a majority of regional presbyteries had overruled any change.

On May 10, however, when the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area voted 205–56 to approve the change, it became the decisive 87th presbytery to vote yes. Voting nationwide had already shown a steady 55 percent approval rate, well before all 173 regional church bodies had voted. Tallies from across the country showed that 19 presbyteries had switched their no votes in 2009 to yes this year; only three small presbyteries changed from yes to no.

Groups seeking change "wept for years" over the many gay and lesbian Presbyterians who left the church, but "today we shed tears of jubilation," said Sylvia Thorson-Smith of Presbyterian Voices for Justice.

Gay-friendly San Francisco, whose presbytery includes three large suburban counties, was not a sure vote for welcoming LGBT candidates into the ministry. In 2009, change was rejected by a ten-point margin. But on April 12, San Francisco made a 65-vote swing to endorse the measure 198 to 143.

Had conservative Presbyterians simply not shown up? No, said Pam Byers, voting elder in San Francisco. "I think the larger reason for the [shift] is that people genuinely changed their minds," she said in an interview.

With turnaround votes in several Bible Belt states, the nation's largest Presbyterian denomination at 2.1 million members will join—officially on July 10—the ranks of the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in opening doors to qualified clergy and lay leaders without regard to

sexual orientation.

Many congregations grew tired of the fight, and some had left the PCUSA, said Gradye Parsons, the denomination's top executive. "This argument has been going on since at least 1978" when the first policy barring gay and lesbian ordination was adopted, he said. In 1997 the prohibition was tightened by requiring fidelity in heterosexual marriage or chastity in singleness.

The new constitutional amendment speaks of examining "each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation and suitability" as ministers or lay leaders without reference to one's marital status or intimate relationships. Parsons said May 10 that he thought the wording of the new amendment "is more acceptable to more Presbyterians."

The approved language not only avoids "bedroom business" but is also well written, echoed Houston Hodges of Huntsville, Alabama, who retired in 1999 as editor of *Monday Morning*, a now-defunct Presbyterian magazine. "It is not about sexual behavior at all. It's about human beings, their character and their commitment to service," he said.

Hodges said he was surprised that his North Alabama Presbytery switched sides at its meeting in February. "Young pastors spoke in favor, seemingly with no fear of reprisal from their purportedly more conservative . . . congregations," he said. Opponents who spoke were "predictable, seasoned, repetitive: 'The Bible is against homosexuality, and so are we.'"

Conservative groups are dismayed. The Presbyterian Coalition said in a May 10 statement that the results "dealt a wounding blow" to truth and is "further fracturing our already fragile denominational unity." The "sexual confusion of our time" reflected in the change "deeply threatens" relations with international mission partners, said the coalition's board.

Presbyterian mission officials, based at church headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky, said they "continue to be in honest conversation with our partners," particularly in nations such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Malawi, Uganda and Mexico where church leaders have expressed concern.

PCUSA officials and advocates for change observed that it was not insignificant that American society has become more tolerant of same-gender relationships. Parsons cited, for instance, the number of states legalizing same-sex marriage.

Cynthia Graham, a voting elder in the Presbytery of St. Augustine, Florida, said that her presbytery rejected a change two years ago but approved the new amendment 87 to 66. She said in an interview that the most persuasive factors for change were personal, down-to-earth and nontheoretical testimonies. "We had a pastor who spoke about his own brother who had died of AIDS," Graham said. "We know that among young people who have a different sexual orientation there are high levels of homelessness and suicide. I and some of my friends are more and more persuaded that this is a matter of creation, that people are born this way."