

Presbyterian turnabout: Delegates urge gay ordination

by [John Dart](#) in the [July 4, 2001](#) issue

Presbyterian moderator Jack Rogers has an unenviable task over the next 12 months. As a part of the General Assembly's surprising recommendation, by a 317-208 vote, to allow gay and lesbian ministers, elders and deacons, Rogers was directed to write a pastoral letter to congregations "interpreting" the turnabout proposal endorsed by 60 percent of those who met in Louisville, Kentucky, in June. In addition, the new moderator must travel about the country, as is customary, to speak in many of the 173 presbyteries as they prepare to vote on whether indeed the denomination should remove barriers to ordaining gay and lesbian Presbyterians.

The church's progressive wing sees the General Assembly action as a breakthrough after a quarter-century of often-heated resistance. But some conservatives fear a falling away of members, even if the majority of presbyteries eventually reject and thereby nullify the General Assembly action.

"It is unthinkable that a majority of Presbyterians favor the removal of our ordination standards," said a joint statement by two conservative groups distributed only minutes after the June 15 decision. Delegates on the assembly floor were already warning of reverberations in the pews if the overture passed—continuing "rancor and polarization," "an emotional bomb [sent] to congregations where it will explode," and "a mass exodus of members of our congregations."

What will Rogers say to the PCUSA's 11,178 churches? Probably much of what he said at a news conference after the vote. A veteran of 30 past assemblies, Rogers characterized the makeup of the Louisville meeting as "the broad center" of the church—garden-variety Presbyterians, just regular folks out of our churches that didn't come here deeply precommitted to one position or another." Some spoke of changing their minds at the weeklong meeting, he said.

As a onetime evangelical seminary professor who is a board member of the liberal Covenant Network of Presbyterians, Rogers said, "I am rejoicing and weeping at the same time." He said he rejoiced with "the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Presbyterians because now they have hope that they might become fully included members of the church." And he said he wept for people who "absolutely, sincerely believe that the church has done a terrible thing today . . . who really believe that the scripture is so clear that homosexuality is a sin."

Both sides feel victimized by the prevailing culture, he observed. The culture that conservatives bewail is typified by the mass media moving in a "more liberal direction." But he added that liberals bemoan the broader culture in America that, according to polls, says same-sex intimacy is immoral.

Rogers said that many Presbyterians fear that biblical tradition and Christian history are in danger of being jettisoned. Yet, Rogers said, "There are intelligent, devout Presbyterians who . . . really believe they are reading the Bible correctly" when they derive from it an accepting gospel of grace that does not target one group of people as sinners. And rather than refer to 2,000 years of Christianity, he said, people should recall that for much of the last 250 years many Presbyterians believed African-Americans were to be excluded from the church and women were to be denied leadership roles, and both "were sinners if they didn't accept their God-given lower place in society."

Rogers is unlikely to be widely seen as a neutral ambassador of the denomination during his one-year, unpaid post as moderator. Though he wrote *Claiming the Center : Churches and Conflicting Worldviews* to stake out the middle, his position on homosexuality puts him in the liberal camp within a polarized church.

In that 1995 book, Rogers cited biblical scholars who argued that "texts which speak against homosexuality are not directed toward faithful, enduring relationships," but instead to "sexual practices in Near Eastern fertility cults and in Greek culture that allowed the systematic exploitation of boys by adult men." God's prime intent is for sexual relations between one man and one woman, he said, but some exceptions occur in the biblical record, such as multiple wives for Old Testament heroes. "Despite the general prohibition of divorce in the New Testament," Rogers wrote, "most mainstream Christians now understand that prohibition as an ideal rather than an absolute one that bars divorced persons from further ministry."

Rogers taught at the Southern California branch of the PCUSA's San Francisco Theological Seminary during the 1990s, and philosophical theology at the interdenominational Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena from 1971 to 1988. "One of Jack's great contributions to Fuller was his important mentoring of evangelical students for creative ministries within the PCUSA," Fuller President Richard Mouw told the Century. "Needless to say, we are disappointed in the direction his thinking has taken on questions of homosexual practice," said Mouw, adding that the school still looks forward to friendly conversations "about the cause of Presbyterian renewal."

The initial move at the Kentucky International Convention Center toward approving gay ordinations began when the committee on ordination standards voted 31-25 to urge the full assembly to remove two barriers. First, the committee majority asked that a "fidelity and chastity" requirement for ordination—faithful heterosexual marriage and celibacy for single persons—be deleted from the Presbyterian Book of Order. That restriction was approved by the 1996 General Assembly and ratified 97-74 by the presbyteries.

The committee also recommended that "authoritative interpretations" barring ordained service by homosexual persons—which were adopted by the northern and southern predecessors to the PCUSA in 1978 and 1979 respectively—"be given no further force or effect." The only new language recommended for the Book of Order was to declare that the candidates' "suitability to hold office" was to be determined by the ordaining entities, "guided by scriptural and constitutional standards, under the authority and Lordship of Jesus Christ."

Before the ordination issue was scheduled for full assembly debate, delegates overwhelmingly approved on June 13 the creation of a 17-member task force that was directed to report on grass-roots opinions on theological divisions and "spiritual discernment of our Christian identity, in and for the 21st century." The task force, an idea that was endorsed by outgoing moderator Syngman Rhee, was designed to seek "the peace, unity and purity of the church."

The spirit of compromise was evident the next day on a touchier issue —whether the assembly should reaffirm that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ. The issue arose last year after Presbyterian minister Dirk Ficca, director of the Chicago-based Parliament of the World's Religions, suggested in a talk that God might bring about salvation for non-Christians. Although the committee on theological issues referred

overtures by three conservative presbyteries to a denominational office to prepare study materials, the delegates disagreed with that move and approved by a 2-to-1 vote an amended overture, offered by a North Carolina pastor, Malcolm Brownlee Jr., describing “the unique authority” of Christ.

“All of us believe Jesus Christ is Lord, and we ought to say that clearly,” said Brownlee, whose amendment quoted a line from a Reformed Church in America text. The final statement on salvation, however, included enough ambiguity to satisfy moderate and liberal delegates. It said, in part, “Although we do not know the limits of God’s grace and pray for the salvation of those who may never come to know Christ, for us the assurance of salvation is found only in confessing Christ and trusting Him alone.”

The ordination controversy was saved until the assembly’s next-to-last day. Several delegates proposed referring the matter to the theological task force charged with seeking peace in the church. One minister, Bob Hunter, said gay ordinations would light a “firestorm” in the churches, “perhaps even schism.” Bob Thornton, a clergy delegate from Virginia, voiced the view of many when he said, “We don’t want anybody to be hurt”—but he added that on this issue, he would have to come down on the traditional interpretation of “the word of God.”

On the other side, elder Kathryn Morgan of New Jersey asked, “How can we ask the forbearance [of gays and lesbians] when others do not show forbearance themselves?” Former church moderator John Buchanan, a cofounder of the Covenant Network (and editor-publisher of the Century), said, “In five years, I haven’t seen peace” since the fidelity and chastity amendment was approved. “This action does not require any presbytery to do anything it does not want to,” Buchanan said.

At the end of two hours of well-mannered debate and deliberation, the electronic ballot results were flashed on large television screens with little audible reaction. No applause could be heard, though hugs and tears were evident. The outward calm typified the week. If any demonstrations were held near the convention center during the meeting, they were brief. (The gay-rights Soulforce movement, which disrupted the Presbyterian and other church conventions last year, decided to stage its protest this June at the concurrent meeting of Southern Baptists in New Orleans.)

In order for the 3.6-million-member Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to join the United Church of Christ, Unitarian Universalists and Reform Judaism in ordaining gay and

lesbian clergy, a majority of the 173 presbyteries must ratify the proposal and have it affirmed by next year's General Assembly.

Hopes have been stirred for Martha Juillerat, who gave up a 15-year ministry in 1995 after she came out as a lesbian. "Nothing would give me greater joy" than to return, she told reporters. Likewise for lesbian Janie Spahr, whose call to a Rochester, New York, church was denied in 1992 by a Presbyterian court, and seminary graduate Katie Morrison of Oakland, California, who said her partner is now serving a United Church of Christ congregation.

Predicting the climate in the presbyteries is tricky. The regional bodies rejected a ban on same-sex unions that had been passed by last year's General Assembly, but many analysts faulted the wording of the amendment for its defeat.

Church observers expect the next stage to invigorate advocacy groups on both sides, especially the conservative Confessing Church Movement, which claims a growing number of congregations rallying to the cause. Yet "there is a great weariness in the church," said Elder Nancy Maffett of Colorado Springs, a Presbyterians for Renewal board member who was a distant second to Jack Rogers in the moderator election. Along with others, she agreed in a news conference that delegates this year were very cordial. "But I'm not sure being nice is going to get us out of this," she said.