

Conservative Presbyterians launch new denomination

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(RNS) Conservative Presbyterians launched a new denomination on Thursday (Jan. 19), saying that the Presbyterian Church (USA) is too consumed by internal conflicts and bureaucracy to nurture healthy congregations.

"This 'new Reformed body' is intended to foster a new way of being the church, just as traditional, mainline denominations rose to serve in their day," wrote leaders of the new Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians.

More than 2,000 people attended the ECO's meeting in Orlando, Fla., this week, but a straw poll indicated that most have not yet decided whether to leave the PC(USA), according to the Presbyterian Outlook, an independent magazine.

The creation of the ECO follows the PC(USA)'s churchwide vote last year to lift its longtime ban on gay clergy. Though homosexuality is not mentioned in the ECO's founding documents, its stated commitment to conservative theology and the inerrancy of the Bible indicates that gay clergy will not be tolerated.

The ECO also hopes to distinguish itself by creating peer review systems for churches, promoting leadership training, and instituting a less hierarchical form of government than the PC(USA), according to a statement.

Incoming congregations will be given the option of pursuing joint membership in

both the PC(USA) and the ECO, or joining the ECO as full members, which would require dismissal from the PC(USA).

Several dozen congregations have already started to leave the PC(USA) to join another conservative denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Unlike that denomination, the ECO says it is "fully committed" to allowing female clergy.

Though still the largest Presbyterian denomination in the U.S., the PC(USA) lost more than 500,000 members between 1998 and 2009, according to church statistics, and now has about 2 million members.

In a joint statement, eight PC(USA) elders pleaded with conservatives not to leave the denomination, even as they acknowledged tensions over the gay clergy decision.

"Do not allow one-sided presentations to be all you consider as you seek to discern God's call to you and your congregation," the elders wrote.