

Presbyterians to tackle gay marriage, divestment

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) The Presbyterian Church (USA) will return to two issues that have dominated church life for the past decade, with debates scheduled over gay clergy and whether to pull church investments from companies that are involved in Israeli actions against Palestinians.

The church's 220th General Assembly in Pittsburgh from June 30 -- July 7 will reopen several contentious issues that many in the church thought -- or wished -- had been settled.

When the 2 million-member church last met in 2010, delegates approved a change to the church's Book of Order that allows for the ordination of non-celibate gay clergy; the change was ratified by a majority of regional presbyteries in 2011.

The church's new language sidesteps the issue of sexuality, and specifies that ordination standards should "reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life." Regional presbyteries, which preside over ordinations, are only required to base decisions on common questions asked of all candidates.

Opponents will try this year to undo that change, and revert back to a 1996 standard that required "fidelity in the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness" for all clergy.

Same-sex marriage will also be debated, with four presbyteries petitioning for a modification to the church's constitution from its current definition of marriage as "a civil contract between a woman and a man" to a union of "two people."

Constitutional changes require the approval of the General Assembly plus ratification by a majority of presbyteries. Opponents will seek to reaffirm the current definition of marriage, and change the ratification to two-thirds of regional presbyteries rather

than a simple majority.

Hoping to avoid a lengthy ratification process, five presbyteries are seeking an "Authoritative Interpretation," or declarative ruling, from the assembly that would allow clergy to officiate at same-gender marriages in states where it is legal. Such a ruling would not need to be ratified.

The move to change the definition of marriage follows similar efforts in other denominations to allow clergy to officiate in same-sex civil marriages: "Some states are already ahead of the church in moving the legal definition of marriage beyond gender," reads a proposed resolution from the Hudson River Presbytery in New York.

The assembly is set to consider several overtures regarding Middle East relations and investment. A recommendation from the PC(USA)'s Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) calls on the the PC(USA) to divest itself of stock in Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard and Motorola Solutions, which it says are engaged in "non-peaceful pursuits" in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

In 2004, the PCUSA became the first major denomination to approve a process of "phased, selective divestment," but the move was scaled back in 2006 after Jewish groups complained that the move was impractical, biased and one-sided against Israel. Other churches have been largely reluctant to join the divestment cause.

The MRTI is also seeking a renewal of the call to corporations doing business in Israel to "confine their business activity solely to peaceful pursuits, and refrain from allowing their products or services to support or facilitate violent acts by Israelis or Palestinians against innocent civilians."

Supporters of divestment say Caterpillar machinery and Hewlett-Packard and Motorola technology are used to build barriers against the Palestinians or expand Israeli settlements into Palestinian areas. In the past, Caterpillar has said it has no control over how its equipment is used.

Other proposed resolutions go further, calling Israeli policies the equivalent of "apartheid" -- a comparison to the former South African regime that Jewish groups find deeply offensive.

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs has collected nearly 20,000 signatures ahead of the anticipated debate on divestment, condemning what it sees as political

motivation and historically anti-Semitic overtones in divestment.

"Divestment, and the specious Apartheid terminology that frequently accompanies it, polarizes people and communities so that the policy of divestment, and not peace, becomes the central issue," the letter reads. "Divestment will undermine the ability of many Israelis to imagine peace."

Additionally, the General Assembly will debate issues of denominational funding, special offering apportionment, the viability of geographically independent presbyteries and the addition of the South African Belhar Confession to the PC(USA)'s Book of Confessions.