

After ardent debates, PCUSA changes little

by [John Dart](#) in the [August 8, 2012](#) issue

The nation's largest Presbyterian denomination has decided not to redefine marriage as a contract between "two persons" instead of between a woman and a man. And the nearly 700 delegates, or "commissioners," at its General Assembly in Pittsburgh which ended July 7 also did not favor allowing clergy to perform same-gender marriages in states where those marriages are legal.

But then the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) had taken a bold step just last year by accepting ordination of gay and lesbian ministers after years of discord and declining membership. In late June, statisticians said the PCUSA's membership in 2011 dropped from 2.01 million to 1.95 million, continuing the yearly attrition.

Putting a positive spin on the weeklong General Assembly, the four top executives of the PCUSA declared in a joint pastoral letter that the deliberations, often lasting into early morning hours, reflected a church wrestling "respectfully and graciously"—despite repeated requests from the floor "to reconsider items already approved."

Rarely were votes taken that had a wider margin of 60 percent to 40 percent, the executives said. After hours of debate, delegates voted to neither reaffirm nor change the definition of marriage.

A committee dealing with civil union and marriage issues had recommended changing the definition of marriage from "between a woman and a man" to "between two people." But the full assembly voted it down 338 to 308. Delegates then called for two years of "serious study and discernment" about Christian marriage. More Light Presbyterians, a gay rights advocacy group, predicted victory for "marriage equality" at the next General Assembly in 2014.

The narrowest vote came on what many called the most passionate issue—whether the PCUSA should divest its holdings in three corporations said to profit from selling

products to Israel that enhance the country's ability to enforce its control of Palestinian territories. Jewish organizations and Israel, as well as their church supporters, have long argued that divesting actions would be unfair and further exacerbate religious and political tensions.

On July 5, delegates—by a vote of 333 to 331 and two abstentions—rejected the majority committee report favoring divestment of holdings with Caterpillar, Motorola Solutions and Hewlett-Packard and replaced it with the committee's minority report. The latter was amended to emphasize the "positive investment" element by adding recommendations to "raise funds to invest in the West Bank."

Emotional arguments to divest or not continued over two days, according to Presbyterian News Service. Appeals ranged from a lifelong Caterpillar employee who choked up while defending his company to a Florida delegate who asked, "How can you write a check when a family may wake up to find an eviction notice on their door saying a [bulldozer] will come to tear it down later in the day?" The final form of the resolution passed 369 to 280 with eight abstentions.

A similar scenario unfolded within a week as the Episcopal Church held its triennial General Convention in Indianapolis. But Episcopalians overwhelmingly approved a resolution calling for "positive" investment to assist Palestinians to create a sound economy and "a sustainable infrastructure." A separate resolution that called for "more vigorous" engagement with companies selling goods to Israel was postponed indefinitely by bishops in the bicameral General Convention, arguing that the church already has policies on corporate social responsibility.

The Presbyterian and Episcopal conventions echoed the recent decisions by two other mainline churches on this issue. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted against divestment last year, and the United Methodist Church did so at its Tampa meeting in May.

But the PCUSA delegates were like-minded on several matters. The General Assembly approved a long list of recommendations aimed at illustrating the church's solidarity with immigrants and refugees in the United States. Included were reaffirmations of advocating for comprehensive immigration reform, providing hospitality for immigrants regardless of their legal status and backing legislation that offers hope for young immigrants seeking paths to citizenship.

Conservative congregations unsure of whether to leave the generally liberal PCUSA and join more traditional Presbyterian denominations received little encouragement to stay. A proposal to create nongeographic presbyteries that are focused on missions was defeated by a nearly three-fourths majority, 480-169. Such a radical change, "experimentation for a limited period of time," was urged by Tod Bolsinger from Southern California. Those speaking against it included pastor Bill Hennessy of western New York, who said he believed that "the purpose is theological affinity which would undermine unity and reconciliation." Joann Lee of Minnesota said her experience growing up in one of the Korean-speaking presbyteries was not a positive one. "We should not be running away from our differences; creating nongeographic presbyteries simply avoids the problems," she said.

General Assembly business began July 1 on a unanimous note. Gradye Parsons ran unopposed for a second four-year term as stated clerk, the church's top ecclesiastic position, and was elected unanimously by voice vote. Parsons was the only uncontested candidate for that post since the 1983 reunion of the southern and northern branches of Presbyterians.

Formerly a pastor in Tennessee, Parsons was remembered this year for his advice (drawn from the gospel story of Jesus stilling the storm) when he was first nominated in 2008 as stated clerk in the oft-contentious PCUSA: "We are in the boat. There will be storms. We will not die."