

PCUSA cuts funding to Avodat: Support had been controversial

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

Officials of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) decided to cut off funding for congregation Avodat Yisrael as of July 1. The funding had been a source of controversy inside and outside the denomination. The March 29 decision, made by a special administrative commission charged with overseeing the Messianic Jewish congregation for the Philadelphia presbytery, stemmed largely from the congregation's failure after two years to attract members and dollars, though the theological debate surrounding the congregation also played a part.

The leader of the congregation, Andrew Sparks, will continue as a member of the Philadelphia presbytery and as leader of Messiah Now ministries, whose multidecade work in Jewish outreach will continue. Avodat will attempt to remain in existence as an independent entity (affiliated with the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations) while still leasing space from the presbytery.

The denomination's stated clerk, Clifton Kirkpatrick, praised the PCUSA's efforts to clarify its stance on Judaism and to strengthen relations with Jewish neighbors.

Bill Borrer, pastor in the Philadelphia presybttery and cochair of the administrative commission, told the *Century* that more than finances were at issue. He noted that the commission in November had asked whether Avodat "inappropriately uses the sacred symbols of Jewish identity from the synagogue," and had suggested Avodat would need to "strengthen its identity as a Christian church (through signage and liturgy)." Borrer said his panel asked Avodat to change its name, refer to Sparks as a "pastor" rather than a "spiritual leader," and leave off portions of its Jewish liturgy in order to make clear its status as a Presbyterian church. Borrer said Avodat's leadership determined it could not do those things without compromising its own "sense of self."