

Breakaway Presbyterians launch new church body

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Conservative Presbyterians have formed an alternative to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which they say is too consumed by internal conflicts and bureaucracy to nurture healthy congregations.

The movement toward a "new Reformed body," made official January 18-20 in Orlando, Florida, had drawn growing interest—but not necessarily commitment—after the PCUSA voted to lift its longtime ban on gay clergy.

More than 2,000 people attended the Orlando event, but a straw poll indicated that most had not yet decided whether to leave the denomination of about 2 million members, according to the Presbyterian Outlook, an independent magazine. In a pre-gathering survey, 60 percent responded that they were in "a period of discernment" about denominational alignment, said a key leader, John Crosby, pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Edina, Minnesota.

Groups of PCUSA leaders, before and after the meeting, appealed to those contemplating separation to stay with the Louisville, Kentucky-based denomination, which hopes to simplify some of its bureaucracy at its biennial General Assembly this summer.

In a joint statement January 12, eight PCUSA elders, including General Assembly Moderator Cynthia Bolbach, pleaded with dissident churches not to leave, even as they acknowledged tensions over the decision on gay clergy. The PCUSA "has not turned its back on proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior," they wrote.

Two dozen PCUSA leaders who attended the Orlando gathering urged reconciliation between the denomination and the dissident group. Acknowledging the "estrangement" that conservatives felt after the change in ordination standards, these leaders urged "all those who are talking about leaving or distancing themselves from the PCUSA to slow down."

The author of this appeal, Paul Watermulder, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Burlingame, California, wrote that "a wide range of centrist leaders seeks unity of purpose. "Our shared pursuit of the Great Ends of the Church are far more important than any polity structures or processes designed to fulfill those ends."

Though homosexuality goes unmentioned in documents of the new Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians, its stated commitment to conservative theology and the "infallibility" of the Bible indicates that gay clergy will not be tolerated.

The ECO "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 church body. 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 PCUSA, according to a statement.

Incoming congregations will be given the option of pursuing joint membership in the PCUSA and the ECO or joining the ECO as full members, which would require dismissal from the PCUSA. Several dozen congregations have started to leave the PCUSA to join another conservative denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Unlike that denomination, the ECO says it is "fully committed" to allowing female clergy.

Initially called the Fellowship of Presbyterians, the ECO has emphasized its desire to be mission-oriented and not a forum for resentment. "We are not angry, we are determined . . . we are not 'after' or 'against' *them*—we all need time, space and grace," said Crosby, as quoted by PCUSA's Presbyterian News Service.

Adding to Crosby's comments, John Ortberg, pastor of the Menlo Park (California) Presbyterian Church, said the new group's name includes *covenant* because churches ought to be in covenant with one another and *order* because of a hope for "a way of life together so that God can raise up a new order of Christians" at the grassroots level. "We want to honor, not dishonor, our brothers and sisters in the PCUSA," Ortberg said.

Though still the largest Presbyterian denomination, the PCUSA lost more than 500,000 members between 1998 and 2009, according to church statistics. —RNS, added sources