

PCUSA barely keeps ban on ordaining gays: A four-vote margin

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It may have been a close vote, but the stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on issues of homosexuality remained unchanged in Richmond, and will stand for at least two more years as the denomination switches to biennial general assemblies.

Delegates to the church's legislative meeting in the Virginia capital decided July 2 by just four votes— 259-255—to keep intact a 1978 policy that prohibits “unrepentant homosexual practice” by church officers. It marked a significant defeat for gays and lesbians who want to serve as pastors and elders.

The language, which was later upheld as “authoritative” by the church's 1993 assembly, also says it is unconstitutional to ordain “self-affirming, practicing and unrepentant homosexuals.”

Rescinding the so-called “authoritative interpretation” from 1978 was a necessary first step for groups wanting to dismantle a constitutional provision adopted in 1997 that mandates “fidelity within the covenant of marriage . . . or chastity in singleness” for clergy. The “fidelity and chastity” language has already survived two attempts to overturn it. The church's highest court has said both provisions would need to be removed in order to clear the way for gay Presbyterians to be ordained.

Supporters of the current law said removing it would make it impossible for the church to overcome its deep divisions on human sexuality. “It will be seen by many in our church as a battle half-lost and a battle half-won,” said former Moderator David Dobler. “And the swords will be unsheathed again, and the opportunity to find that more excellent way will be lost.”

The vote kept all current standards intact and essentially maintains the status quo until the church meets again in 2006 in Birmingham, Alabama.

Delegates said removing the law would complicate the work of a 20-member task force that is examining disunity in the church. The task force is scheduled to make

its final report in Birmingham. The vote was 297 to 218 to call upon the “church to pray for the task force and to engage faithfully in the processes of discernment as led by the task force.”

The church’s new moderator, Rick Ufford-Chase, acknowledged that the vote produced both winners and losers. “This is not a time for celebration, but rather a time to support one another,” said Ufford-Chase, a supporter of gay ordination.

Despite the vote to maintain the status quo, delegates took significant strides to expand the church’s support of gay rights. In a series of late-night votes July 1, delegates decided, among other stances, to:

- Oppose a controversial law in the assembly’s host state of Virginia that prohibits contractual “partnerships” between same-sex couples. Delegates voted 350-132 to voice displeasure with the law.
- Support efforts to extend “all the benefits, privileges and responsibilities of civil union” in state and federal laws to gay couples. That measure, which also affirms the church’s definition of civil marriage as between one man and one woman, passed 386-122.

In other business, delegates reelected their highest officer, Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick, to a third four-year term. Kirkpatrick easily fended off a challenge from three evangelical opponents who accused him of allowing liberals to flout church law. “Dissent is to be honored, but disobedience is not,” Kirkpatrick said in answering questions from delegates.

Delegates also dealt with a request to evaluate the denomination’s relations with Jews after a fledgling Messianic Jewish congregation outside Philadelphia received \$260,000 in start-up funding from local, regional and national church offices. The congregation, Avodat Yisrael, looks and feels like a Jewish synagogue but carries an unabashedly Christian message—to the dismay of some Jewish groups who say the approach is deceptive.

Delegates voted 260-233 to preserve national-level funding for new churches, including those like Avodat Yisrael that are geared toward Jewish converts. A separate resolution adopted without debate reaffirmed a 1999 statement that urged Presbyterians to “eliminate the language, imagery and symbols . . . that perpetuate stereotypes” against other faiths. —Kevin Eckstrom, *Religion News Service*