

Gay acceptance has advances and setbacks in three denominations: No consensus

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 22, 2008](#) issue

“The Church’s Unfinished Sexual Revolution” was the title of an article in the spring 2006 issue of Yale Divinity School’s *Reflections* magazine. In it longtime Christian ethicist James B. Nelson described some progress in church thinking about sexual ethics, but contended that the church’s agenda on sexuality remains “confusing, unsettled, unfinished.”

When asked if he sees himself in a “sexual revolution,” Phil Soucy, publicist for the gay-friendly Lutherans Concerned/ North America, demurred: “It’s difficult after all these years to think of it as a revolution; it is more like an evolution.”

Indeed, three of the largest mainline Protestant denominations continue to move to and fro on issues of sexuality, with leaders often expressing concern about whether the churches will survive the turmoil.

- An Evangelical Lutheran Church in America task force last month released the first draft of a Social Statement on Sexuality. The statement acknowledged that the church is divided on same-gender issues. The 4.8-million-member denomination is inviting individual and group comments through October. Church leaders eventually will present a document for approval by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly in August at Minneapolis.

Lutherans Concerned said the draft “merely tolerates rather than celebrates the presence of same-gender families in the church,” according to Emily Eastwood, LC/NA executive director. The draft calls for an end to violence against sexual minorities, yet the church discriminates against them “by relegating them to second-class status,” she said.

Conservative Lutheran groups, by contrast, saw the document as opening the door to same-gender committed relationships and to changing ordination standards. “There is a surprising absence of procreation as a purpose of marriage,” said Paull Spring of State College, Pennsylvania, chair of the Lutheran CORE steering committee.

- The United Methodist Church, which has 7.9 million U.S. members, opens its quadrennial General Conference April 23 in Fort Worth, Texas, and homosexuality is drawing major attention—as it has since the 1970s. More than 600 petitions seek to keep the longstanding rule that says homosexuals are “individuals of sacred worth” but also declares that same-gender sex is “incompatible with Christian teaching.”

The church’s social action agency is asking delegates to delete the incompatibility clause, replacing it with: “While Christians of good faith differ on what Christian teaching reveals regarding gender and homosexuality, we affirm God’s grace is available to all.” The definition of marriage as the “union of one man and one woman” drew support from 326 petitioners, but the social action agency and eight regional conferences asked that the clause be dropped.

In 2005, the United Methodist Judicial Council ruled that a Virginia pastor was within his rights to deny church membership to a man who was in an openly homosexual relationship. Critics said the decision contradicts the Methodist motto of “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.”

The church’s high court more recently declined to rule on whether transgender clergy could continue as pastors. “Several proposals would add transgender exclusion, whereas there is no biblical support for that,” said Diane DeLap, spokesperson for Affirmation, a caucus supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Methodists.

- The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which will meet in San Jose, California, June 21 to 28, is expected to revisit a compromise approved two years ago on gay clergy ordinations. On February 11, the PCUSA high court ruled that otherwise-qualified lesbian and gay candidates for ordination must comply with “chastity and fidelity” requirements even if local ordaining committees allowed them to take moral exception to church standards prohibiting noncelibate homosexuals from serving as pastors.

It was a surprise decision within the 2.2-million-member church, considering that a theologically diverse task force had unanimously suggested the overturned compromise, privileging the moral-conscience provision and local determination of the undefined essentials of faith over the fidelity/chastity rule. The compromise had been passed by a 57 percent majority at the 2006 General Assembly.

On March 6, an open letter protesting the decision by the Permanent Judicial Commission was signed by 28 Presbyterian candidates aiming for ordination. “The PJC decision puts a wedge between theology and practice, belief and action, being and doing,” the letter said. Fourteen signers were anonymous, listing only their presbyteries. “I know of at least 20 others who are closeted,” said Mieke Vandersall, director of Presbyterian Welcome.

The Presbyterian open letter reportedly is the first indication of how many homosexual church members currently aspire to be ordained. A similar tactic was used successfully by gay activists last year in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

At the 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Chicago, delegates rejected proposals to ordain gay and lesbian clergy in committed same-sex partnerships. But Lutherans Concerned told stories of homosexuals who are seminarians, are in ministry as teachers, or are “rostered” ministers with limited duties—82 in all. Delegates also discussed the case of Bradley Schmeling of Atlanta, a gay pastor defrocked in 2006 after he told his bishop he was in a sexual relationship, but whose congregation requested that he continue as pastor.

“Giving visibility to gays who are practicing clergy helped attach names and faces to the standard questions of whether the church should bless same-sex partnerships and ordain noncelibate gays,” noted a Century editorial after the 2007 assembly urged bishops to exercise restraint in addressing rules violations.

The resolution, which passed 538 to 431, called on church authorities to “refrain” from punitive action or to “demonstrate restraint” in disciplining gay clergy in committed relationships. Many Lutherans considered the resolution a temporary action before the denomination takes up a broader study of human sexuality, commissioned in 2001, to be used as a framework for policy decisions at next year’s meeting.

The first draft of the sexuality study, released March 13, reflected the lack of consensus but urged mutual respect between “those who regard same-gender sexual relationships as sinful and those who do not.” It encouraged all congregations to give pastoral care to same-gender-oriented people.

The document recognized that “some pastors and congregations will advocate repentance and celibacy.” Others will call “our same-gender-oriented brothers and sisters in Christ to establish relationships that are chaste, mutual, monogamous, and lifelong. These relationships are to be held to the same rigorous standards and sexual ethics as all others.”