

PCUSA to try again on partnered gay clergy, but reject same-sex marriage: At the biennial General Assembly

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [August 10, 2010](#) issue

In a familiar routine, mainline Presbyterians at their biennial General Assembly voted 373-323 to lift a ban on partnered gay clergy, sending the proposed change for the fourth time in nearly a dozen years to the denomination's 173 regional presbyteries for ratification.

The regional bodies in the 2.07-million-member Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) must vote in the coming year on whether to substitute a measure that would strip any mention of sexuality from ordination requirements for elders, deacons and pastors.

Though similar proposals have failed at the presbytery level each time, church progressives say they are encouraged by the increasing narrowness of the vote. In the last round of voting, gay ordination fell just nine votes short of the simple majority needed for passage.

"We're hoping very much to reengage and continue the momentum," said Pam Byers, executive director of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, after the July 8 vote. "As more Presbyterians recognize that they know good, faithful gay Presbyterians, it becomes harder to maintain this exclusion."

Conservatives, however, pledged to fight against allowing gay clergy, saying it would contradict biblical strictures against homosexuality and balkanize the church. "By giving local presbyteries a local option on ordination standards, local ministers will be restricting their portability of mission," Larry Lindsay, a church elder from Santa Barbara, California, said during the debate. "I can assure you there will be great consternation and debate in our local congregations," he said.

In a separate debate, the voting delegates, called commissioners, turned down a bid to expand the PCUSA's definition of marriage to include same-sex couples.

Progressive Presbyterians were disappointed by the redefinition defeat. The resolution was essentially voted down July 8 in a parliamentary maneuver and never came to the floor for a full debate; an attempt to revive the resolution failed by a wide margin the next morning.

“The church was not yet ready to make a decision,” General Assembly moderator Cynthia Bolbach told reporters. “This kind of thing happens at every assembly.”

In other business, the assembly approved by a show of hands a measure calling on the U.S. to end direct combat operations in Afghanistan—the denomination’s first such statement since the war began in 2001. The action also asks the government to increase humanitarian and economic development assistance to Afghanistan.

Assembly voters also approved adding the apartheid-era Belhar Confession to the PCUSA’s Book of Confessions, although the action must be ratified by the presbyteries. In June the Reformed Church in America formally adopted the Belhar Confession as part of that denomination’s statement of beliefs. *-Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*