

Signs of the postdenominational future

by [Joseph D. Small](#) in the [May 5, 1999](#) issue

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been through a quarter century of disagreement and division over homosexuality. In the past several years, the church has engaged in wrenching debates over amendments to its Book of Order, the legislative portion of the church's constitution. After a yearlong debate the church in 1997 adopted an amendment (known as Amendment B) that set as a condition for ordination (which includes ordination to the "lay ministries" of elder and deacon as well to the ministry of word and sacrament) "the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness." During the next year the church debated, and eventually rejected, an alternative amendment (known as Amendment A) that would have changed the "fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness" stipulation to "fidelity and integrity in all relationships."

The Battle of the Amendments brought into being two organizations on opposite sides of the struggle. The Presbyterian Coalition is an alliance of "renewal groups" that worked to enact and maintain the church's prohibition of the ordination of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals. The Covenant Network of Presbyterians, on the other hand, is committed to including gay and lesbian persons fully in the life of the church and to eliminating constitutional barriers to ordination.

Although it was the issue of ordination for gays and lesbians that brought these two groups into existence, each group has wider interests. Each has articulated reasons for its continued existence as it seeks to shape the life of the church. Each held large national meetings in the fall of 1998 to rally support for its vision. These developments suggest that a new form of church organization is emerging, one that may offer a glimpse of a future in which denominations play a distinctly different role than they have played in recent decades.

When the Presbyterian Coalition held its third annual meeting in Dallas last fall, the mood was markedly different from the previous year's conference. In 1997 the conference drew 1,000 angry participants; they were upset over the proposal of Amendment A (fidelity and integrity) and determined to defeat it in the presbyteries. The rhetoric of schism predominated. The '98 conference drew 600 participants who were able to see themselves as representing the majority in the church. Though no one imagined that the debate on homosexuality was over, attention could be turned to other issues. The focus of the gathering was a Declaration and Strategy Paper that contained a declaration of faith, "Union in Christ," and an outline of strategies on mission, worship, polity, theological education, educational ministries and church discipline.

The "Union in Christ" statement was remarkable in that it was presented as a response to the grace of Christ, not as a reaction to church problems. Trinitarian in structure and liturgical in form, it begins with the affirmation that "Jesus Christ is the gracious mission of God to the world and for the world." It acknowledges that this confession takes place in a church in which Christ's lordship often is "denied or marginalized or undermined or ignored," and brief mention is made of the sexuality issue: "In these times of moral and sexual confusion we affirm the consistent teaching of Scripture that calls us to chastity outside of marriage and faithfulness within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman." Nevertheless, the statement functions like a traditional statement of faith.

The nature of this statement raises a question about its relation to the PCUSA's official confessions and to its recently approved catechisms. "Union in Christ" recalls the Barmen Confession made by the Confessing Church in Germany in the 1930s, a confession promulgated by one part of the church over against other parts of the church. The subtitle, "A Declaration for the Church," contains an implicit challenge. Although speakers emphasized that the declaration is a "gift" to the church and not a demand, even gifts can be confrontational.

In contrast to this carefully crafted declaration of faith, the Coalition's account of strategies to renew and transform the PCUSA is vague. It gives voice to discontents and hopes rather than expressing clear directions for action. Organizers repeatedly stated that the strategies were "fluid" and "works in progress."

In spite of its many inadequacies, the Strategy Paper is an important window on conservative-evangelical viewpoints. Moreover, the Strategy Paper demonstrates

that the Coalition's existence is not generated by the politics of sexuality alone. Sexuality issues are the lightning rod that attracts a range of other concerns and expressions of resistance to the PCUSA's official policies and practices.

Within the Coalition one detects a tension between those who press for more direct challenge of the PCUSA and those who remain open to possibilities for influencing the structures of the church. Although the moderates predominate, their capacity to control radical elements is not limitless. As the Coalition moves toward elaborated structures--an expanded governing board, the employment of a coordinator, a regularized budget and program--internal struggles may intensify. If the moderates prevail, they may force radicals into forms of independent action. Much hinges on the whether the moderates' strategies appear to be effective.

Beneath the moderate-radical tensions are intramural tensions between card-carrying evangelicals, Presbyterian traditionalists, proponents of orthodox Calvinism and other varieties of conservative orientation. The Coalition is a confederation not only of organizations but of cultures and temperaments. The sexuality debate brought them together on the basis of what they all oppose. The Declaration is intended to keep them together on the basis of what they affirm. But it is uncertain that, apart from a common enemy, they hold enough in common to stay together.

Whatever the moderates' good feelings about their influence in the denomination, it was evident from the literature tables at Dallas that Coalition members were erecting parallel structures. Information was available on a range of ministries for youth, women, elders and pastors. Evangelism and justice ministries were presented as alternatives to PCUSA programs, and there were signs of a placement system operating outside the PCUSA structures. People were working on a new confirmation curriculum, a theology journal, and a range of church school materials. It is clear that many evangelicals in the church will not invest in the renewal of PCUSA programs, publications and structures, but will continue to develop their own resources and networks.

On the other side of the church, the Covenant Network of Presbyterians attracted over 300 people to Denver--about twice as many as attended the '97 inaugural meeting. That first meeting was hopeful, focused on strategies to support the adoption of Amendment A. At the 1998 gathering one sensed a mix of resignation to the establishment of Amendment B in the Book of Order (at least for a while), anger at the perceived changes in the church that made Amendment B possible, and

determination to bring about a change in the church's policies on the place of gay and lesbian persons.

Having lost a battle, members of the Covenant Network retain hope that the outcome of the war will be different. But the analysis of the battle and of needed strategies took different forms. One could detect at least four different groups whose interests intersect but are not identical.

Most visible were the pastors of urban congregations. This was the group in charge of the Covenant Network and its conference program. These pastors, whose chief concern is the full inclusion of gay and lesbian members in the life and mission of congregations, approach the issue from a primarily pastoral perspective. How can they minister to gay and lesbian members of their congregations when church policy bars "self-affirmed, practicing homosexuals" from ordered ministries in the church and from church-blessed committed unions? Many of these pastors serve historic downtown churches that attract gays and lesbians. For these pastors, homosexuality is an immediate pastoral issue

A second group is composed of parents and family members of gay and lesbian persons. People in this group have been torn by love for their sons and daughters and love for a church that excludes their children from exercising ordered ministry and from living out committed personal relationships in the context of the church's sanction and blessing. For families, homosexuality is an immediate personal issue.

A third group is the social-justice activists. Veterans of the struggles for racial justice, women's rights, economic parity, peace and the environment, this group sees the struggle for gay and lesbian rights in the church to be in continuity with a long tradition of Presbyterian struggles for justice. The issue for this group is less pastoral and personal and more representative of a larger struggle.

Perhaps the smallest group represented was gay and lesbian persons themselves. Clearly, the matter is intensely personal for these people. Gays and lesbians have their own organizations, strategies and tactics, however. While appreciative of the Covenant Network's efforts, it is not their network.

The Covenant Network conference was a tightly packed two days of worship, lectures, small group meetings and workshops. Sermons seemed to be addressed as much to the whole church and its dilemma as to the gathered congregation. Lectures were excellent, although their focus on general issues of biblical

interpretation, theology, and the role of the Book of Confessions was a step removed from the existential concern that assembled the audience. It was not until the final lecture that a speaker acknowledged "the elephant in the living room" by speaking directly (although briefly) about the ordination of gays and lesbians.

The somewhat cool detachment of sermons and lectures did not carry over into small groups, workshops and (especially) conversations around the edges, however. Even though small groups were random collections of strangers, people understood the nature of their common concern and were able to share their stories openly. The workshops were replete with impassioned expressions of pain, anger, frustration, sadness, fear and hope.

Even so, all the public events--including an open-mike speak-out--were surprisingly contained and polite. "Surprisingly" because so much of the conversation around the edges was bitter and angry, directed at "evangelicals," the Presbyterian Church, church leadership and even Covenant Network leadership. "How could they [church leadership] allow them [evangelicals] to take over our church [the PCUSA and its structures], and why aren't they [Covenant Network leadership] more vocal and vigorous and effective?"

Most participants in the Covenant Network conference have spent their lives in a church whose values, aims and programs reflected their own. Thus, the perceived shift in the church's ethos and perceived changes in denominational priorities, leadership, policies and programs provoke a deep sense of loss. Grief and anger alternate within an odd experience of disestablishment.

The four constituent groups --pastors, family members, social-justice activists, and gay and lesbian persons --share a basic commitment: "The church we seek to strengthen is built upon the hospitality of Jesus." There are major differences in the assessment of proximate goals, however. One fissure is symbolized by the difference between those who speak of "gay and lesbian persons" and those who speak of "gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons." The former, whose concerns are primarily pastoral and ecclesial, are willing to work within established channels to achieve long-term goals. The latter are impatient with any strategy short of a frontal assault on the church's current constitutional standards. A second fissure exists between those who see the issue of gay and lesbian ordination as one among a number of crucial issues and those who see it as the defining issue.

Neither the Covenant Network nor the Presbyterian Coalition is a homogeneous bloc--although each group imagines the other to be cohesive, efficient and powerful. The Coalition has had to deal with life after victory on the issue of homosexuality. The Covenant Network has yet to discover whether it can hold together in the face of defeat. What if defeat is a prolonged reality?

Yet both groups are convinced that they cannot count on denominational structures in pursuing their aims. The workings of PCUSA headquarters in Louisville are strangely irrelevant to the Coalition and to the Covenant Network. They do not look to the denomination for leadership or decisive support. Each group raises its own money and seeks to support its own structures and staff to carry out its programs. In addition, both Coalition and Network are affiliated with more specialized groups that have their own funding, structures, staff and programs.

The Coalition voted to expand its board, employ an executive director, and regularize its annual budget of over \$250,000. It intends to promote its declaration of faith by publication of a study guide for personal and congregational use. It also plans to refine and promote its strategies for renewing specific aspects of denominational life.

The Covenant Network already employs an executive director and has an annual budget of about \$175,000. Its energies are directed primarily at opening the church's ordered ministries to gay and lesbian persons, but the executive committee made it clear that the Covenant Network will address other issues as well. It will seek to expand its influence via a newsletter, Web site, theological papers, regional conferences and a third national conference this fall.

The evolution of these two large, broadly based groups shows the evolution of "postdenominationalism" in the old mainline Protestant churches. Decline in denominational loyalty and the demise of denominational hegemony have been apparent for years. These realities, reinforced by the triumph of market consumerism throughout the culture, have led to the multiplication of special-interest groups throughout the church.

Voluntary societies that embody and promote specific causes are not new, of course. In the 19th century organizations such as the American Sunday School Union, Christian Endeavor, the Women's Christian Temperance Movement and scores of missionary societies emerged as expressions of church life. The contemporary

church landscape is packed with organizations descended from that pattern. Where many of these special-interest groups differ from their forebears, however, is that they seek particular and general change in denominational policy and practice. In the PCUSA, these politically active groups have proliferated in the past decade, aligning themselves on the ecclesial/theological/ethical/political left and right. For every "Voices of Sophia" there is a "Voices of Orthodox Women," for every "More Light Presbyterians" there is a "Presbyterians for Faith, Family, and Ministry."

The new factor in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the emergence of alliances that gather together the special-interest groups of both right and left. The Presbyterian Coalition and the Covenant Network of Presbyterians are the major players in the consolidation of evangelical and liberal blocs. Although other alliances exist, notably "Semper Reformanda" on the left and "Presbyterian Renewal Network" on the right, the Presbyterian Coalition and the Covenant Network of Presbyterians have substantial money and staff. These two blocs exercise far greater influence than their separate constituent groups.

A second new reality for the PCUSA is the marginalization of established denominational agencies by the liberal Network as well as the evangelical Coalition. Evangelicals have felt estranged from denominational policies and programs for decades; liberals could always rely on denominational support for their causes. Conversely, the denominational bureaucracy viewed evangelical groups as outsiders while liberal organizations provided grass-roots support. Now, both liberal and evangelical groups are developing their own policy mechanisms and program capabilities. They look to the denomination for less and less.

These developments are pushing the PCUSA toward a new understanding of its internal relationships. The task of denominational leaders is to cultivate relationships with all the church's critics, developing consultative arrangements that can be mutually enriching. Relating to large, staffed, well-financed blocs will be far different from dealing with isolated little groups. In addition, the denomination's agencies and governing bodies must recognize that the major alliances no longer see denominational structures as the primary players. Governing bodies and agencies of the church will have to make their case in an increasingly free market of ecclesial life.