



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on August 29, 2011

Conservative Presbyterians Weigh Split From PCUSA

A group of nearly 2,000 conservative members of the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) met in Minneapolis August 24-25 to discuss how to move ahead in light of the denomination's policy, begun in July, that allows open homosexuals to serve as clergy. The conference, organized under the umbrella of Presbyterians for Renewal, was called for those members "who are deeply troubled and whose integrity is deeply threatened by the move the denomination has made," said the Rev. Paul Detterman, the group's executive director.



As reported by the [Minneapolis Star-Tribune](#), the meeting was convened by the "newly formed [Fellowship of Presbyterians](#) ... to help churches opposed to the move find ways to work within or leave the Presbyterian Church USA." The Rev. Jim Singleton (left), pastor of the nearly 4,000-member First Presbyterian Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, said of the conference: "With so many critical theological differences and a denomination that continues to decline, we have to ask ourselves, is there something else that God has for us?"

According to the Associated Press, "Earlier this year, several pastors of large Presbyterian churches signed a letter calling for less church bureaucracy and more evangelization, growing congregations and developing leadership." Warning that the PCUSA was "deathly ill," the denominational leaders cited "such things as the loss of more than half its members since its peak in the mid-1960s," reported AP. "Seventy-eight congregations, some of them large, have moved to other, mostly conservative Presbyterian denominations since 2007."

[Mark Tooley](#), president of the [Institute on Religion and Democracy](#), said that the denomination's decision "to abandon Christian sexual ethics predictably is fueling accelerated membership decline and schism. Some traditionalists are struggling to stay within the PC(USA) while creating new forms of accountability to compensate for the denomination's failure."

As reported by [The New American](#), in July 2010, the PCUSA approved a change to a long-time policy that had required clergy to live (as worded in the denomination's constitution) "in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness." The policy change required the approval of a majority of the denomination's 173 regional presbyteries, which occurred last May.

Among the options facing the group of conservative church members are either to stay with the PCUSA, forming a conservative faction within the denomination, or to break altogether with the two million-member church (down from four million over the past four decades) and form their own denomination.

Speaking to the Minneapolis gathering, Dr. Richard Mouw, president of the conservative evangelical [Fuller Theological Seminary](#), suggested the possibility of dissatisfied members continuing with the denomination in their own special subset, working to bring the PCUSA back to its Reformed theological



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roots. Citing the Catholic Church as an example, Mouw told the conference attendees:

Historically, when Catholics felt the church had gone astray, they didn't leave. They formed special orders who took special vows according to their commitments. The commitment to theological orthodoxy for many of us should take the form of a special vow, to witness to the essential tenets and the power of the Reformed faith.

The PCUSA's head, Gradye Parsons, attended the meeting and expressed his hope that disillusioned members would continue with the denomination and "make it a better reformed body," conceding that "the church is broken and we need to find ways to faithfully address that."

But some PCUSA leaders apparently feel that their denomination has already crossed a point of no return, with allowing homosexual clergy being the last straw. One pastor lobbying for a new group altogether is the Rev. John Crosby, pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Edina, Minnesota, who fears the PCUSA is beyond repair: "We have come off track, and Presbyterians have become a declining part of American life instead of a vibrant, growing part," Crosby was quoted by the [Huffington Post](#) as saying. "We have tried to create such a big tent trying to make everybody happy theologically. I fear the tent has collapsed without a center."

Crosby specified that it wasn't merely the PCUSA's decision to compromise on the issue of homosexuality that is killing the denomination. "We do not believe the PCUSA is dying because of theological differences or because of the sexuality culture wars," he was quoted by the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* as saying. "I believe this denomination is dying because all of us ... are failing to reach a world that is passing by the living Christ."

The Rev. Paul Detterman of Presbyterians for Renewal explained that one of the major focuses of the conference was to address an "increasing interest in the creation of a 'new Reformed body,' distinct from the PC(USA) and distinctly different from any other existing 'denomination' in its structure and focus." He said the goal would be "to recapture our core identity, believing that Reformed theology has much to say to our contemporary culture, and that Calvin's original vision for the nature and role of presbyteries offers a better way of relating to one another than most of us are experiencing now."

While participants in the conference sought to downplay the issue of homosexuality as central to their conflict with the PCUSA, the IRD's Mark Tooley noted that every denomination, which, like the PCUSA, "has embraced sexual liberation over Christian orthodoxy has similarly faced schism and spiraling membership."

The PCUSA is one of several mainline denominations in the U.S. that have split with the historic Christian teaching of homosexuality as sinful. Others include the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, and the United Methodist Church.

Wrote Tooley:

Sexual liberationists in the churches clearly are choosing their faddish brand of social justice over the church's health. Love for the church should instead compel us to contend against the secular culture's baser demands rather than surrendering to them.



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