



The Presbyterian Response to Homosexual Clergy

The Presbyterian Church-USA, one of the nation's oldest and largest mainline Christian denominations, is in the middle of a crucial vote among its leadership to determine whether or not open homosexuals will be allowed to fill the church's pulpits. At the denomination's General Assembly in July 2010, delegates approved by a 373 to 323 vote a measure that would allow open homosexuals to pastor and minister in the flagship Presbyterian denomination's 11,000 congregations and serve its estimated 2.3 million members.



A vote on the amendment is now making its way through the church's 173 regional presbyteries, a process that must be completed by this summer. If half of the presbyteries approve the measure, references to sexuality will be stricken from the denomination's bylaws and homosexuals will be allowed ordination. The General Assembly has approved homosexual ordination three times in the past, only to have the change rejected by the regional presbyteries.

Since the national vote last summer, nine of the denomination's presbyteries that had originally voted against the amendment have changed to support the move, including traditionally conservative locales such as Alabama, Georgia, and Oklahoma. "If the 50 percent approval rate is reached, Presbyterians would join the millions of members in Lutheran, Episcopal, and United Church of Christ denominations that now allow LGBT people to serve in leadership," reported [Charisma News Service](#).

Current PC-USA regulations stipulate that church members may serve as clergy, deacons, or elders only if they are married or remain celibate. While ministers are allowed to offer ceremonial blessings to same-sex unions, they may not perform marriage ceremonies for homosexual couples, even in those states that have legalized homosexual "marriage."

Janet Edwards of More Light Presbyterians, a small activist group pushing for the ordination of homosexuals in the PC-USA, argued that a majority of the denomination's members favor the change. "So far, the majority of Presbyterians are voting to return to the tradition of rooting ordination in a person's call from God and their gifts to engage in ministry," she said. "Finally, we may allow faithful and qualified LGBT [lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender] Presbyterians to serve the church with energy, intelligence, imagination and love."

Among the PC-USA presbyteries approving change was central Wisconsin's Winnebago Presbytery, which includes 40 churches and about 8,000 members. The Rev. Susan Zencka, a pastor from Stevens Point, Wisconsin, voted for allowing homosexual clergy, telling the [Wausau Daily Herald](#) newspaper, "In my view, God made people with a variety of sex orientation, and for us to limit the office when God has not limited their gifts seems like an inappropriate interference in God's ministry."

Similarly, in the presbytery representing Toledo, Ohio, the measure passed by a 67-39 margin, representing one of the 37 regional bodies that have voted to allow homosexual clergy, compared to 30



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that have voted against the amendment, with around 100 still to decide at this writing.

Bruce Reyes-Chow, moderator for the PC-USA's General Assembly boasted that "Presbyterians take great care in how we live together in our denomination. The consistent movement toward dropping all exclusionary policies tells us that God is still calling the church to its highest calling — the call to love God and neighbor."

The Rev. Janet McCune Edwards, a PC-USA minister from of Pittsburgh, told the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* newspaper after the national vote in 2010 that "the heart of marriage is the love and commitment between two people. That's what Scripture teaches. Two men or two women can show all the love and commitment we recognize as marriage."

But Alan Wisdom of the Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD) pointed out that the denomination is compromising on scriptural integrity. "Leaders of the PC-USA are still confused about the biblical teaching that channels sexual expression through the marriage of man and woman," he said. He challenged Bible-believing members of the denomination that they have much to do to help their denomination "re-appropriate the beautiful heritage of biblical teaching about how God brings together man and woman in marriage."

Terry Schlossberg of the Presbyterian Coalition, a conservative group that favors maintaining biblical standards in the denomination, said he hoped "the presbyteries will defeat this effort to change the ordination standard. We see it as an important opportunity for the church to reclaim its teaching on marriage by looking more seriously at the historical documents and teaching of the church."

In related news, on February 28 a PC-USA panel acquitted a homosexual minister within its ranks on charges that he violated church policy when he "married" his homosexual partner in 2008. A complaint was filed against the Rev. Erwin Barron after he and his homosexual partner Roland Abellano went through with a "marriage" ceremony following California's short-lived legalization of homosexual marriage that year.

"Shortly after the marriage, Barron wrote several commentaries weighing in on the ongoing debate over homosexuality within the PC-USA," reported the [Christian Post](#). "He suggested that Presbyterians not begin with the Bible when addressing the issue." In one of his articles, Barron wrote that "if we begin with the Bible, we will likely reach a polarized stalemate. Bible discussions are too often divisive. When we begin with the Bible, we are not beginning with a natural place for all of us."

While Christians have traditionally looked to Scripture as their foundation for spiritual guidance, Barron argued that the Bible is not their sole authority. "We also look to the continuing revelation of God in our experiences in history and tradition, in science, in reasoning, and in everyday events to guide us," he wrote. "Scripture and experience both must guide our moral decision-making. And reliance on one without the other can be dangerous and offensive. Experience should lead us into the Bible instead of beginning with the Bible and discounting the importance of personal experience."

The IRD's Alan Wisdom expressed a different view of Scripture. As the PC-USA's leadership was deciding the direction of its fragmented denomination's future, Wisdom noted that both Scripture and the denomination's constitution "consistently teach that marriage is instituted by God as a gift to all humankind, and that we are to honor that gift."

Wisdom warned that should the denomination vote to embrace what he called "sexual revisionism," it would find itself increasingly irrelevant in a world in need of vital spiritual direction. "It would exalt western liberal notions of individual moral autonomy above shared understandings of the Bible," he



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said. "It would follow the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church on the road to theological marginalization, internal division, accelerating membership loss, and cultural irrelevance."

Asked Wisdom of his fellow PC-USA members, "Shall we assert the right to redefine marriage to suit our own contemporary notions of justice? Shall we treat marriage as if it were no different from other sexual relationships? Or shall we reaffirm the biblical vision of an exclusive, lifelong, one-flesh union of the two complementary sexes created by God?"



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