

## Presbyterian votes continue debate on gay clergy, marriage

### Leaders OK bid for some gays in clergy

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By Patrick Condon, The Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS -- A split decision from Presbyterian leaders on two gay-friendly measures guarantees even more debate among the U.S. church's members on an issue they've been divided over for years.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted Thursday in Minneapolis for a more liberal policy on gay clergy but decided not to redefine marriage in their church constitution to include same-sex couples. Approval of both measures could have made the 2.1 million-member denomination one of the most gay-friendly major Christian churches in the United States.

Even the more liberal stance on gay clergy faces more debate before it can become church policy. A majority of the church's 173 U.S. presbyteries must approve it. Two years ago -- after years of efforts by supporters -- a similar measure was sent out to presbyteries but died when 94 of them voted against it.

Both of Thursday's votes were close. Fifty-one percent voted to shelve the proposal to redefine marriage as being between "two people" instead of between "a man and a woman," just hours after 53 percent voted to allow noncelibate gays in committed relationships to serve as clergy.

Under current church policy, Presbyterians are eligible to become clergy, deacons or elders only if they are married or if they abstain from sex. The new policy would strike references to sexuality altogether in favor of candidates committed to "joyful submission to worship of Christ."

Several major Christian denominations allow noncelibate gays to serve as clergy if they are in committed relationships. Among them are the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ. Among those, only the United Church of Christ explicitly endorses gay marriage.

Delegates at the Presbyterian assembly also shelved a separate measure that would have removed the threat of punishment for clergy who perform same-sex marriages in states where it's legal.

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