

Presbyterians agree to make gay ordination a local option

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By Ann Rodgers, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The explicit ban on ordaining anyone who is sexually active outside of heterosexual marriage has been removed from the laws of the Presbyterian Church (USA), allowing local option for congregations to ordain partnered gay elders and deacons, and for presbyteries to ordain or install pastors in same-sex relationships.

Because presbyteries in southwestern Pennsylvania have a history of opposition to gay ordination, few observers expect partnered gay clergy to serve openly here soon. But the handful of congregations that affirm them expect to celebrate the ministry of openly gay elders and deacons.

"To me, personally, it's very exciting. It's an opportunity for reconciliation," said Carol Chonosko, chairman of Pittsburgh Presbytery's Task Force on Ministry with Sexual Minorities.

"Over the last 40 years we have seen a great exit of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people from the Presbyterian Church and from other denominations as well. ... This is an opportunity to bring people back to church."

Since 2000 about 100 of 11,000 congregations in the 2.1 million-member denomination have left over concerns that support for gay ordination meant weak commitment to biblical authority.

At least nine were in southwestern Pennsylvania, including three in Pittsburgh Presbytery.

A local evangelical leader, the Rev. Paul Roberts, pastor of Eastminster Presbyterian Church in East Liberty, said he could reluctantly coexist with local option but worried that it would later become a requirement to accept partnered gay church leaders.

"For evangelicals like myself, it's a sad day. Our denomination has been changing and we are surprised at the rate of change," he said, attributing the latter to both the evangelicals who have left and a general weariness after 30 years of fighting over the issue. "But I think our greatest fear is that it won't stop here. Will it simply be that we are going to be, in their terms, a more inclusive church? Or is this eventually going to turn into telling those of us with more conservative theology that 'You must change your ways!'"

The amendment removes a constitutional requirement for ordained elders, deacons and ministers to "live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness." It now says that "Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lord Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. ... Governing bodies shall be guided by scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates."

Similar measures had been passed by the denomination's national General Assembly four times since 1998 but were not ratified by a majority of the 173 presbyteries. The Presbytery of the Twin Cities in Minnesota cast the 87th and deciding "yes" vote of 205-56 Tuesday evening. The change will take effect July 10.

The conflict is based on Bible passages that describe same-sex sexual acts as sinful. Opponents of gay ordination that believe they set an absolute standard, while supporters believe that those passages reflect ancient cultural beliefs.

In Pittsburgh Presbytery, Community House Presbyterian Church, North Side, is among four that officially define themselves as welcoming to gay couples.

"At Community House we are continually amazed by the work of the Holy Spirit and rejoice that our church now honors and welcomes anyone who receives God's call to ministry regardless of gender, race, marital status, sexual orientation or other human differences. This is a great day for the Presbyterian Church," said the Rev. Wayne Peck, the pastor.

The Rev. Sheldon Sorge, pastor to Pittsburgh Presbytery, has been asking pastors how the expected change would affect their congregations. Most are conservative, and they tell him that feelings toward the denomination may change but that no one is talking about leaving, he said.

"Some people feel that this represents a departure of the church from the standards that they have come to associate and expect. And so ... they are feeling some alienation," he said.

The Rev. Janet Edwards, a Presbyterian pastor on staff at the ecumenical Community of Reconciliation on Oakland, has

been a national leader in the movement to affirm same-sex relationships in the Presbyterian Church (USA). She described herself as "overjoyed and humbled" by the vote.

"We have participated in thousands of conversations leading up to this moment. Those conversations will continue as we reach out to those who voted against this amendment.

"My hope is that with God's blessed guidance, we can go forward and do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God, stronger together than we could ever imagine," she said.

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