

Same-sex couple advocate fails to obtain Presbytery's endorsement

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By Ann Rodgers, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Rev. Janet Edwards, a nationally prominent advocate for same-sex couples in a presbytery that consistently opposes gay ordination and gay marriage, tried and failed to obtain Pittsburgh Presbytery's endorsement for her to seek one of the two highest offices in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

After a passionate but respectful debate, commissioners at Thursday's meeting in Pleasant Hills Community Presbyterian Church voted 144-85 not to endorse her as moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly for 2012-13. The endorsement isn't necessary for her to seek the office. After the vote she said she would continue to "pray and discern" whether she should join the four declared candidates. The election will be held when the national body meets in Pittsburgh June 30 to July 7.

Rev. Edwards is co-moderator of More Light Presbyterians, which advocates for gays and lesbians within the church. In 2008, Pittsburgh Presbytery tried her for conducting the 2005 marriage of a lesbian couple. Although Rev. Edwards always said it was a marriage, the court acquitted her on the grounds that she couldn't have done what she said she did because the church says marriage can only occur between a man and a woman.

In a speech to the presbytery, Rev. Edwards described herself as a bridge builder who had remained loyal to the presbytery despite their differences, and could bring people together.

"My view has lost, and I stay. I stay because I believe that the hand cannot say to the foot, 'I have no need of you,' " she said, quoting the Bible. "I stay because the unity of the church doesn't rest on the prevailing of any one point of view. Our unity rests upon one Lord, one faith, one baptism."

She said that Pittsburgh's endorsement "would be a prophetic act of shedding the labels that we slap upon ourselves."

Supporters of Rev. Edwards said that she was fair to all parties as a former moderator of the presbytery, and that she continues to befriend opponents of her cause. Three congregations, East Liberty Presbyterian Church, South Side Presbyterian Church and Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community, South Side, petitioned the presbytery to endorse her for national moderator.

Her opponents argued that she was so clearly identified with one side of a polarizing issue that the national church could only see her as a partisan.

The Rev. Melanie Hamilton, associate pastor of Bethany Presbyterian Church, Bridgeville, said that although she believed Rev. Edwards had the personal qualities to be a good moderator, the job would give her power to appoint partisans to committees examining sensitive issues in the church.

"Every person who ever runs for moderator says they want to be a bridge builder and bring healing. Some of them tried it, but not all," she said.

The vote was taken by secret ballot.

Also Thursday, Presbytery leaders announced a process to allow four of its 148 congregations to leave the Presbyterian Church (USA) with most of their property. Conservative congregations have been seeking to leave the 2 million-member church even before local option on gay ordination became church law last summer. A new denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians, was recently created for theological conservatives who support the ministry of women.

No vote on a process to leave the denomination will be taken until at least this summer.

The four churches now petitioning for such a process are Bellefield Presbyterian Church in Oakland, Mount Lebanon United Presbyterian Church, Lebanon Presbyterian Church in West Mifflin and Round Hill Presbyterian Church in Elizabeth.

The Rev. Sheldon Sorge, pastor to the 37,000-member presbytery, said that creation of the process doesn't mean any church will leave.

"They all know I dearly hope they won't leave and will do all I can to encourage them to stay.

"But I don't want to impugn the integrity of those who are distressed by the state of things in the church and are seeking to follow what they believe to be the will of God. I hope it will be the case that they find the will of God is for us to continue to walk together," he said.

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