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Presbyterians take half step on gays

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Jul. 13, 2010

In a whirlwind of activity, the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted to lift a ban on partnered gay clergy, but turned down a bid to expand its definition of marriage to include same-sex couples.

The more than 700 Presbyterians gathered for their General Assembly in Minneapolis also adopted a 170-page report on the Middle East and denounced Caterpillar Inc. for allowing its machinery to be used for ?non-peaceful purposes? in the region.

With just more than 2 million members, the PCUSA is the nation's largest Presbyterian denomination, though like most mainline Protestant churches it has been bleeding members for years. Nearly all of mainline churches have been roiled in recent years by internal debates over gay marriage and gay clergy.

The PCUSA clergy resolution, which passed on Thursday (July 8) by a vote of 373-323, strips any mention of sexuality from ordination requirements.

For the fourth time in nearly a dozen years, the denomination's 173 regional governing bodies, called presbyteries, must now decide whether to ratify the General Assembly's vote to allow partnered gays to serve as elders, deacons, and pastors.

Though similar measures have failed at the presbytery level each time, church progressives say they are encouraged by their slimming margin of defeat. In the last round of voting, which ended last year, gay ordination fell just nine votes short of the simple majority needed for passage.

?We're hoping very much to re-engage and continue the momentum,? said Pam Byers, executive director of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians. ?As more Presbyterians recognize that they know good, faithful gay Presbyterians, it becomes harder to maintain this exclusion.?

Conservatives, though, pledged to fight against allowing gay clergy, saying it would contradict biblical strictures against homosexuality and balkanize the church.

?By giving local presbyteries a local option on ordination standards, local ministers will be restricting their portability of mission,? Larry Lindsay, a church elder from Santa Barbara, Calif., said during the debate.

?I can assure you there will be great consternation and debate in our local congregations,? he said.

Progressive Presbyterians were disappointed by the defeat of a measure on Thursday to expand the definition of marriage to include any couple, straight or gay.

The resolution was essentially voted down in a parliamentary maneuver, and never came to the floor for a full debate; an attempt to revive the resolution failed by a wide margin on Friday morning.

?The church was not yet ready to make a decision,? General Assembly Moderator Cindy Bolbach said at a press

conference after Thursday's vote. ?This kind of thing happens at every assembly.?

On Friday, Presbyterians voted 418-210 to denounce Caterpillar, Inc., saying that friendly engagement had failed to convince the company to take responsibility for the way Israel uses it bulldozers and other construction equipment to build walls and destroy Palestinian homes.

But more than 70 percent of the delegates voted not to consider selling the church's $10-million worth of Caterpillar stock.

Caterpillar has said it does not condone immoral use of its property, but ?cannot monitor the use of every piece of equipment around the world.?

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