

## A Methodist, a Presbyterian and an Episcopalian

Kate Childs Graham | Jul. 12, 2012 Young Voices

This week, when news broke that the Episcopal Church [voted to approve services blessing same-sex relationships](#) [1], I had a couple of thoughts. First, "Hooray!" And then -- \*record scratch\* -- "Wait. They got to *vote* on marriage equality?"

In the past year, Methodists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians all had the opportunity to vote on equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. And though the outcome was not always favorable for the LGBT community, the fact that they voted remains the same. Each of these denominations has structures that are vastly different -- and dare I say more democratic -- than our own institutional Catholic church.

The United Methodist Church deliberately has no central office or officer. Instead, all church policy is set by the General Conference, a body of 1,000 elected delegates, half laity and half clergy.

The Presbyterian Church USA has a General Assembly, consisting of half elders (laity) and half Ministers of Word and Sacrament (clergy), which sets the priorities for the church.

In the US Episcopal Church, the General Convention is the church's highest legislative body. The House of Deputies has more than 800 members of the laity and clergy. The House of Bishops has nearly 300 active and retired bishops. This body can amend the Constitution and canons.

These are, of course, gross oversimplifications of complex structures. However, the idea is clear: the people in these pews have a voice in a real way, a way that Catholics don't. So, I thought I'd ask a Methodist, a Presbyterian and an Episcopalian why they think it is important that church members are able to vote on church policy.

Katey, a Methodist, answered:

The policies of a faith community reflect its values and priorities. Without the voice of its membership, this reflection is incomplete at best, if not completely off the mark. As a United Methodist, I've witnessed firsthand the struggles of working together as clergy and laity to find common ground in our policies. But what I appreciate most is that even though the process is frustrating, I have the ability to participate and have a voice. This spring at our General Conference I watched as the legislation I had drafted on global maternal health was discussed and adopted by the body. Realizing that my own voice resonated with many others was an empowering moment, one that reaffirmed my commitment to the church.

Alex, a Presbyterian, answered:

This is a tough question to answer because the representative membership of my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church USA, just narrowly defeated an amendment that would have redefined the definition of marriage in our governing documents and allowed ministers to perform same gender weddings. However, I have also witnessed the power in allowing our membership to determine when policy change is right for the denomination. Just last year through a national effort, the PCUSA membership voted to ratify amendment 10A, which removed the barrier against LGBT ordination. I believe that members should be able to vote on church policy because I believe in the power of stories and personal witness as instruments of God's plan for the church community. Amendment 10A was ratified due to the countless telling of our stories. I came out to countless voting elders and ministers over the phone as a queer ministry candidate whose ordination committee believes in my call to ministry, and would love to move forward in the process, but can't due to the restrictions placed on them by our denomination's governing documents. Queer and transgender Presbyterian church leaders stood up on the floor of their home churches and regional church governments and told their stories as into microphones, often vocalizing their sexual orientation for the first time in their church community. When put to the vote, an overwhelming majority of Presbyterians voted to affirm that there should not be a restriction against LGBT ministry candidates. Changing the denomination through popular vote took the PCUSA 30 years, but it is possible, one story at a time.

Matthew, an Episcopalian, answered:

In our work with each other in the communion, it's important that we recognize Christ in each member of our Church. As Episcopalians, it's important for individual voices to be heard because we recognize that no voice is greater than the other. Only when we truly come together in community and move as a majority, while respecting the minority with great compassion, do we move forward as a Church. The Holy Spirit has not called us to sedate following?the Spirit has called us to action in this world to establish the Kingdom on Earth.

Now, I'll turn it to you. Do you think Catholic parishioners should have a voice in the form of a vote? Why?

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