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Presbyterians to study civil unions

Dennis Coday | Feb. 11, 2009

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has tapped a 13-member committee to investigate the place same-sex unions should have in Christianity and wider society and issue a report in 2010.

The Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow, who is currently serving a two-year term as the church's moderator and who chose members of the panel, said it is composed of theologians, lawyers, pastors and professionals from an array of theological backgrounds.

"I know there will be a lot of commentary on the choices I have made," Reyes-Chow, pastor of a San Francisco church, said on his blog before making the announcement, "and on the work that they will do."

Like most mainline Protestant denominations, the PC(USA) has been divided for years about the role of gays and lesbians in the church. Currently, 173 presbyteries, or local governing bodies, are voting on whether to allow gay and lesbian ministers. Clergy are allowed to bless same-sex unions so long as the relationship is not equated with marriage.

Meanwhile, state courts have offered differing rulings on the legality of gay marriages -- they are legal in Massachusetts and Connecticut but illegal in many other states.

Reyes-Chow said in an interview that the committee will "make sure we understand what we're talking about when we discuss marriage in a religious setting or marriage in a civil institution."

The General Assembly, the 2.2-million member PC(USA)'s highest lawmaking body, directed Reyes-Chow to appoint the committee and to potentially offer policy recommendations.

Specifically, the committee is tasked with researching: the history of laws governing marriage and civil unions; how the theology and practice of marriage have developed in the Reformed and broader Christian tradition; the effects of current laws on same-sex partners and their children; and the place of same-sex partnerships in the Christian community.

Reyes-Chow said the committee is part of a Presbyterian belief in communal discernment.

"In the end it may take longer and it may be more frustrating,? Reyes-Chow said, "but it's the best way to determine (guidelines) for our church.?

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