

UPDATED: Fidelity-Chastity ordination standard remains in place in PC(USA)

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The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has once again voted to uphold a requirement that those being ordained practice fidelity in marriage or chastity if they're single — the third time the denomination has voted to retain the “fidelity and chastity” standard since it came into effect in 1997.

On April 25, three presbyteries — Northern Plains, Sierra Blanca, and Boise became the 86th, 87th, and 88th presbyteries to vote not to change the standard, meaning that a majority of the denomination's 173 presbyteries have voted “No” on the proposed amendment to the denomination's constitution. A fourth presbytery, de Cristo, voted that weekend to approve Amendment 08-B by a vote of 59 to 48, according to Stated Clerk Steve Bronson. Some presbyteries have yet to vote; under the rules they have until June 28 to do so. As of April 26, the ongoing vote stood at 69 “yes” to 89 “no.”

But the result already had been determined: the “fidelity and chastity” standard will stay.

Despite that, however, this vote has convinced virtually no one that the gay ordination issue is now dead and buried in the PC(USA). Why?

For one reason, the tally was closer this time than ever before. As of late April, 27 of the 127 presbyteries that voted to keep “fidelity and chastity” the last time around (when the vote was taken in 2001 and 2002) this time supported the change. Many presbyteries in the South — for example, four of the five presbyteries in North Carolina — shifted. Two presbyteries, San Francisco and Sierra Blanca, flipped the other way.

So even though a majority of the 173 presbyteries have voted to retain “fidelity and chastity,” there's been a visible, almost visceral shift. When all the presbyteries have weighed in, the vote is expected to be closer than ever before.

“I think the story of this ratification campaign are those flips,” said Michael Adee, national field organizer for [More Light Presbyterians](#), which wants to remove the restraints on ordaining gays and lesbians. “It's not a matter of if” the standards will change, Adee said. “It's when.”

Adee is not alone in seeing the shifts as significant. Many evangelicals, whose side prevailed in this campaign, are paying as much attention to the voting pattern as to the final outcome. Despite keeping “fidelity and chastity” intact, theirs does not feel like a celebratory mood.

“It's a baffling question — how exactly do we define a win?” asked Paul Detterman, executive director of Presbyterians for Renewal.

If the PC(USA) holds on to the “fidelity and chastity” standard this time, “Gee, do you think it might come up again?” Detterman asked, laughing, the answer being obvious. “If the revisionist side were to win on this vote,

it's not going to be a situation where the conservatives sit back and say, 'Oh, well, darn, the mood of the church has changed, I guess we're going to have to live with it.' There isn't a clear win. The question is how do we help shape a future that holds as much of the denomination together as we can in the mission to which we are called?"

So what does lie ahead?

- It's virtually certain that presbyteries will again ask the General Assembly, which meets next in June, 2010, to remove "fidelity and chastity" from the Book of Order, although exactly what the overtures will say remains to be seen. Some say the proposal voted on this time around, the so-called "Amendment B," may have been appealing because it not only asked that "fidelity and chastity" be deleted, but provided replacement language that those being ordained pledge "to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church." In other words, it didn't just get rid of the old standard, it offered up something new.

- [Presbyterians for Renewal](#) is preparing to circulate a proposal that would raise the possibility of creating a non-geographic synod — a way to build a bigger comfort zone for evangelicals who want to stay in the PC(USA) but oppose the ordination of gays and lesbians. Detterman said a proposal is being test-driven now and is likely to be released publicly by early June.

- The next General Assembly will hear reports from a [cadre of special committees](#), including one considering language in the Heidelberg Catechism relating to homosexuality, and another considering issues of civil union and Christian marriage. Their proposals could impact the discussion too.

- And the churches will continue to watch how the issue of gay marriage plays out in the secular world. Four states — Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, and Vermont — have decided to allow gay marriage. California — on-again, off-again on this one — is considering the issue again. And legislation or court rulings are pending in other states as well. A key point of discussion is how much changing views on homosexuality in the secular culture should or will influence the church, or whether the church should try to guide the culture, and in what ways. Those questions take on new weight at a time when many believe that western Christianity is living through a time of sea change, when the whole relationship of the church and the secular world seems to be in flux.

A decision has been reached in this round of voting in the PC(USA), and the outcome is known. But answers to the bigger question of "what comes next" are anything but settled. Here are some of the nuances of that discussion. .

Don't discount the outcome. Some Presbyterians have turned their scrutiny almost immediately to the details, to analyzing how close the margin was and trying to understand why so many presbyteries flipped. But others say the PC(USA) should not gloss over the significance of the overall vote. For the third time in a row, the denomination has voted to uphold the "fidelity and chastity" standard.

"It has to be read as a positive outcome, that the church has decided to stay in the mainstream of the (Christian) church overall and not join a minority," said Terry Schlossberg, who led the [Presbyterian Coalition's](#)

[campaign](#) to retain the current language. “It really is a minority of denominations and churches that have changed their sexual ethic. A win on this – the defeat of Amendment B – will show that the Presbyterian church has decided to stay in the mainstream.”

Here’s another way to put it: how the PC(USA) voted this time is part of a much bigger story of Christian churches struggling to come to terms with homosexuality. The question of gay and lesbian ordination is rocking many denominations — the Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Methodists among them — and this Presbyterian vote also will be scrutinized in that more expansive context.

The low turnout. In some presbyteries, the vote flipped. In others, the margin was closer than it has been in the past. And in many, the turnout was lower; fewer folks showed up to vote.

“One of the most striking things to me about this round of voting is the general lack of interest in the discussion and in the vote itself,” said [Michael Walker](#), theologian-in-residence at Highland Park Church in Dallas and an evangelical leader. “I have not sensed any great degree of urgency or interest in the process this time around.”

Why ? Why was the turnout lower and the voting closer this time around?

“We’ve decided there are as least as many reasons as there are presbyteries” for the changes, Schlossberg said.

With widespread cutbacks in the media industry, fewer secular outlets are paying close attention to what’s happening within denominations, so there may be less coverage of the issue in local newspapers, she said. “We know there are churches that are unaware that the vote is happening. We have found that again and again.”

In some places, conservative churches have left the PC(USA) for the [Evangelical Presbyterian Church](#) , which could mean fewer conservatives left to vote. Some of those congregations that left were prominent, and played leadership roles in rallying evangelicals during earlier votes involving gay ordination.

And some Presbyterians are just tired of talking about gay ordination year after year.

“We think fatigue is a factor, probably of some significance,” Schlossberg said. “People are asking why they have to keep delivering an answer to the same question over and over and over. There is an irritation factor at work.”

Also, some evangelicals may have taken it for granted that their side would prevail. “I don’t think that there has been a great concern on the part of folks who are more conservative that it might actually pass this time around,” Walker said. “So they haven’t felt the need to go the extra mile to make sure that they are present for all the votes and participate in all the discussions.”

Impact of culture. The Presbyterian vote does not take place in a vacuum. Even in the midst of this voting season, two more states — Iowa and Vermont — have taken steps to legalize gay marriage. Some see the closer vote in the PC(USA) as reflecting changes of views in the American culture, with some characterizing that as progress towards equality and fairness, others as religion caving in to the secular culture.

“This shows there is a big shift in a positive direction toward accepting the equality of all people,” said Jack Rogers, a former General Assembly moderator who has spoken at congregations around the country after writing a book advocating that the church open its doors to gay ordination. “It appears the equality side will not

prevail this time. But there is such a different atmosphere.”

Some believe that attitudes are changing as gays and lesbians become more accepted – and more visible – in the country generally.

People have responded, said Adee of More Light Presbyterians, to getting to know more gays and lesbians personally, to seeing same-sex couples show up with their kids at church. “Well, that melts hearts,” he said. “In some churches, no one blinks. In other churches, they go, ‘Oh, well, isn’t it nice to have a young family.’ For some churches it isn’t the young family they expected. It’s the family that shows up. ... I think it brings out the better angels in all of us, when people begin to relax and say, ‘These are the people God has put in our care.’ ”

In some places, the debate over gay sexual relationships also ignites discussion of the sexual practices of unmarried heterosexuals, raising questions of whether churches are being consistent.

Day after day, pastors and congregations face questions about sexual ethics — probably most often when heterosexual couples, many of whom are sexually involved or living together, come to the church and ask to be married.

“Churches really just have to decide,” Schlossberg said. “Are they going to just yield to what is the current trend of the culture, or will they try to speak the message of the gospel into it and figure out how they’re going to take their stance? ... Holding the standard is just critical to being able to do that with integrity.”

The close vote this time in the PC(USA) and the discussion it’s sparking about what comes next raises the question of “how the sheep are being tended in the flocks of our denomination,” Schlossberg said. “What message are we proclaiming? What is the teaching that people are getting from the church that gives them an alternative to what they’re living with every day, hearing, reading, being infected by through the culture?”

It won’t end here. Both progressives and evangelicals sense that this vote isn’t the end of the PC(USA)’s debate over homosexuality. More overtures asking for the removal of “fidelity and chastity” seem inevitable. Far from being deflated by the defeat this time, advocates of gay ordination say they’re ever-more convinced that change is just a matter of time.

As Rogers put it: “I don’t have any question that is going to come. We will come to the position of treating all our members equally, and I will be rejoicing in that.”

But those who favor the “fidelity and chastity” standard aren’t giving ground either. Presbyterians for Renewal, for example, is working on a proposal — likely to be made public early this summer — for some sort of an alternative approach that would allow those who favor “fidelity and chastity” to be aligned, possibly in a non-geographic synod, with others who hold similar views.

“Folks are looking at the bigger picture,” Walker said. Regardless of how this vote turned out, he said, many don’t believe “it’s going to resolve the deeper disagreements that are prevalent in the PC(USA).”

Voting on this issue time after time “is no longer a viable way to approach this conversation,” Detterman said.

The underlying question — not resolved yet — is “What does it mean that God has put us together in this time and this place to do ministry together, when we clearly are holding differing views on such an important issue in the culture?”