

U.S. Protestants put gay 'marriage' on 2000 agenda

Leaders to decide dispute this summer

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The deadline passed in December to submit legislation for the year 2000 quadrennial conference of the United Methodist Church, and though the bills haven't been colated yet everybody knows the overriding issue: whether to maintain the church's ban on wedding-type ceremonies for homosexual couples.

In June, the national assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will likely decide whether to enact a similar prohibition, following a liberal ruling from an ecclesiastical court several weeks ago.

In July, an Episcopal Church convention will also debate whether to officially establish same-sex nuptials. A theological report on the idea, five years in the making, was being completed this month and is due for release early in the new year.

The "marriage" debates of 2000 will come on top of still-unresolved U.S. Protestant disputes over allowing sexually active gay and lesbian clergy. (Most churches accept homosexual ministers who remain celibate.)

The basic issue is whether to give moral sanction to homosexual behavior. For those who say yes, homosexuality is akin to left-handedness; Christian compassion and modern circumstances demand change. For those saying no, homosexual activity is akin to adultery; biblical teaching and thousands of years of divinely led moral tradition are at stake.

These positions are deeply held and appear irreconcilable.

Religious conservatives and liberals are also competing in such political fights as California's March vote on Proposition 22, which would prohibit recognition of homosexual couples.

With some American faiths, there's little agitation over homosexuality. Judaism is cleanly split between liberals and traditionalists who simply go their separate ways. The Unitarian Universalists are committed to the gay liberation side, while conservatism dominates in the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodoxy, black Protestantism, Islam, Mormonism and Evangelical groups like the Southern Baptist Convention.

The Vatican reinforced its position in July, ordering an American priest and nun to halt a homosexual-outreach ministry because they did not wholeheartedly back church policy. In November, the Southern Baptists' Georgia unit expelled two congregations for tolerating homosexuals. The same week the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., another denomination, postponed similar action against four California congregations.

The big, Internet-driven wrangles are occurring in the "Mainline" Protestant denominations precisely because change has gradually become a live option after a quarter-century of liberal lobbying. There's now talk of schism.

Both sides are highly organized in the Presbyterian Church, but conservatives won a key round in 1997, passing a new law requiring clergy and lay officeholders to practice either fidelity in a "marriage between a man and a woman" or "chastity in singleness."

There's a moratorium on recon-



The Rev. Jimmy Creech was defrocked by a jury of United Methodist ministers for presiding over a same-sex "wedding" ceremony last year.

sidering that requirement until 2001. But last month a Presbyterian court ruled that this law doesn't bar same-sex unions in church so long as they are not seen as marriages. At June's assembly, conservatives are expected to seek new legislation against recognition of homosexual couples.

The Rev. John Buchanan, a Chicago pastor and editor of the Christian Century magazine, helped found a Presbyterian caucus that seeks to overturn the 1997 law and let local and regional bodies set policies. "Some call this local option. I prefer to call it traditional Presbyterianism. Congregations would come to different conclusions, but I think that's a livable arrangement," he says.

But Mr. Buchanan knows change will not come easily, or quickly. "I think we're talking decades."

Local option has more or less

settled matters in the Episcopal Church. The denomination officially upholds traditional Christian morals and states that "it is not appropriate for this church to ordain a practicing homosexual, or any person who is engaged in heterosexual relations outside of marriage."

But in 1996 a church tribunal acquitted Bishop Walter Righter, who had ordained a homosexual priest living with a male partner. The 1997 church convention took no action, leaving liberal bishops free to continue ordaining homosexuals. And though the church has yet to act officially, local clergy are already conducting same-sex ceremonies.

One complication for Episcopalians, and others, is their ties to fellow believers overseas. Churches outside North America and Western Europe generally embrace traditional sexual morals.

A 1998 meeting of the world's Anglican and Episcopal bishops gave 88 percent approval to a declaration that homosexual behavior is "incompatible with Scripture." Last February, leaders of Anglican branches in Africa, Australia, the Mideast, Latin America and Asia sent a letter beseeching the U.S. Episcopal Church to obey that declaration.

Next to join the fray could be the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Last summer's assembly voted full fellowship with the Episcopal Church and launched a churchwide discussion of homosexuality.

At the moment, conditions are most perilous in the Methodist church.

Since 1972, Methodist policy has stated that "we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching." The church's 1984 conference mandated "fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness" as the sexual standard, and barred ordination or appointment of clergy who are avowed practicing homosexuals.

The focus switched to same-sex ceremonies when dissenters began defying a prohibition passed by the 1996 conference. Nebraska pastor Jimmy Creech conducted a 1997 lesbian ceremony and was exonerated by a church tribunal, but then the Methodists' highest court ruled that the ritual ban is

binding law.

Undeterred, Mr. Creech held a ceremony for a homosexual couple, and was defrocked this fall. Meanwhile, action is pending against 68 ministers who jointly presided at the union of a lesbian couple in Sacramento, Calif.

Mr. Creech says if May's conference does not change Methodist policy, "there are going to be large numbers of people who are going to leave."

But a leading conservative, the Rev. James Heidinger of the Good News caucus based in Wilmore, Ky., says no major split will occur because the conference will keep existing prohibitions in place and that's just what churchgoers want.

"This whole issue has alarmed people at the grassroots of the denomination," he observes.

He adds: "If there are bishops who are unable or unwilling to fulfill this responsibility, they should, as an act of personal integrity, step down."

The Rev. Lyle Schaller, who has advised thousands of troubled congregations in many Protestant denominations, sees parallels with Mainline Protestant struggles over complicated divorce policy in the 1950s. Eventually, "they let the local pastor decide," and he believes that would be the best course on homosexual policy, too.

But he expects his fellow United Methodists will uphold the conservative rules next May and "force the crisis."