

# Presbyterian leaders don't want split on gay clergy

## Some urge study of ordination, theology issues

By PETER SMITH  
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Amid fears of an ecclesiastical train wreck at their General Assembly beginning today in Louisville, Presbyterian leaders are seeking a compromise to head off divisive votes on gay ordination and theology.

With about 560 Presbyterian

delegates and more than 2,500 activists, exhibitors and observers expected to attend the eight-day assembly, the denomination's top officers and more than 100 regional executives have encouraged efforts to seek a way out of the liberal-conservative divide.

"There ought to be another way of dealing with (current tensions), which is giving more time to discern the will of God," said Moderator Syngman Rhee, who is calling for a theological study commission to consider the gay-ordination and theology issues. His one-

year term ends when his successor is elected today.

But suspending votes on the issues will be difficult. Liberal activists oppose any delay in their push for a vote on allowing the ordination of non-celibate gays and lesbians, which is currently banned.

Conservatives, meanwhile, are resisting Rhee's proposed study commission, which they fear could cast doubt on the long-standing doctrines of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Rhee said a commission similar to one he's suggesting prevented a major denomina-

tional split in the 1920s by rejecting a five-point loyalty oath sought by fundamentalists while also reaffirming the church's traditional beliefs.

The assembly this week marks the end of a two-year, self-imposed moratorium on debate over gay ordination. It has long been dreaded as a showdown between church factions in the shadow of the denomination's headquarters in downtown Louisville.

Some agenda items call for the removal of the ban on homosexual clergy, while separate proposals call for a reaffir-

mation that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, a reaction to a minister's suggestion to the contrary at a Presbyterian conference last year.

Another calls for a 17-member panel representing various theological viewpoints to "study the present spiritual condition of our church and the causes of unrest."

"Such a body would be an abysmal failure," said Parker Williamson, executive director of the conservative Presbyteri-

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an Lay Committee. "I know of no renewal organization in our church that will give an inch on . . . Jesus Christ or the authority of Scripture or the call to a holy life."

The last item is a reference to homosexuality, which conservatives say is prohibited by the Bible.

But liberals say the Gospel spirit of love should prompt Presbyterians to include homosexuals.

Lifting the ban on gay ordination is "a justice issue that doesn't need to be studied," said a statement from

the liberal group, That All May Freely Serve.

Charles Wylie, an associate for theology at denominational headquarters, said a theological commission could play a historic role in the denomination.

A future General Assembly could reject its proposals, but the commission would carry far more weight than usual agenda items.

Moreover, he noted that the resolution of the 1920s controversy had a price. Some fundamentalists split off, forming the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

"Conservatives now look at the historical precedent and say they're not too sure about that," he said.

Indeed, both factions are starting protest movements.

Some 354 of the denomination's 11,200 churches have joined the "Confessing Church" movement, coordinated by Williamson's Lay Committee, which declares the Bible to be infallible, Jesus Christ to be the only way to salvation, and marriage between a man and a woman to be the only acceptable sexual expression.

Liberals, meanwhile, have started a movement called Affirmation 2001,

which champions freedom of conscience and openness to anyone who professes faith in Jesus Christ, regardless of sexual orientation.

But Rhee, in calling for a theological commission, said most Presbyterians are moderates who want a peaceful resolution.

John Mulder, president of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, said that while general assemblies attract the activists, about 70 percent of the church is made up of moderates who "try not to get swallowed up in the cacophony of voices on the left and the right."