

THE NEW YORK TIMES **NATIONAL** WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2002

Presbyterians Reject Amendment on Gay Ministers

By DANIEL J. WAKIN

Conservatives in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) defeated an effort yesterday by four New York City churches to allow the ordination of gay men and lesbians nationwide.

Local councils, or presbyteries, of the church have voted in recent months on a recommendation by the church's General Assembly, the national policy-making body, to permit gay ministers.

The recommendation came as an amendment to delete a requirement in the church's constitution that ministers, deacons and elders must "live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness."

The New York City Presbytery proposed the amendment last year, and it was approved by 60 percent of the General Assembly delegates.

But the presbytery of South Louisiana voted against the amendment yesterday, putting the opposition at 87 out of 173 votes, the majority needed for a decision, the Presbyterian News Service said. Forty have voted in favor.

A similar amendment in 1997 was opposed 114 to 57. If all the remaining presbyteries vote as they did then, the outcome would be 124 to 49 against the amendment, the news service said.

The church is the nation's seventh-largest Christian denomination, with 3.6 million members.

"I'm definitely frustrated by it," the Rev. Byron Shafer, pastor of Rutgers Presbyterian Church in Manhattan and an organizer of the campaign, said of the vote. "I've come over the years to know a lot of gay and lesbian Christian Presbyterians who have had the gifts of the

spirit, who obviously are gifted for ministry. This is just a failure of our church to recognize the gifts of the spirit in these people."

Few denominations openly permit men and women in gay or lesbian relationships to serve as ministers. An exception is the United Church of Christ, which does not disqualify people for sexual preference.

Individual congregations of some other denominations, including the Episcopal Church and the American Baptist Church, may turn a blind eye, said the Rev. Eileen Lindner, the deputy general secretary of the National Council of Churches.

The latest Presbyterian effort was led by Rutgers and West Park Presbyterian Church on Manhattan's Upper West Side; Riverdale Presbyterian in the Bronx; and Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn.