

138-3

# Presbyterians move toward a clearer ban on ordaining gays

By MICHAEL JENNINGS  
Staff Writer

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Momentum seems to be building for a stronger, clearer ban on the ordination of gays and lesbians as Presbyterian ministers, elders and deacons.

The 208th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is expected to act on the issue before adjourning Saturday. Late Tuesday a deeply divided committee that is laying the groundwork for that action approved language limiting ordination to married people who are faithful to their spouses and single people who refrain from sex.

Yesterday the ordination and human-sexuality committee decided against asking the church's 171 district governing bodies, or presbyteries, to decide whether they want that language or a policy that would let presbyteries determine candidates' moral fitness written into the church's constitution.

The conflict kept the committee in session beyond its scheduled adjournment yesterday, and it appears the committee may issue one or more minority reports. That would leave it up to the 568 elected commissioners who make up the General Assembly to fight the issue out on the floor of the Albuquerque Convention Center.

Since 1978 the 2.7 million-member denomination, which has its headquarters in Louisville, has said practicing homosexuals can't be ordained. Some churches and presbyteries have defied that policy, and many members feel it needs the added weight of inclusion in the Presbyterian constitution, or Book of Order.

The ordination and sexuality committee has struggled to write a resolution that stakes out bounds of acceptable sexual behavior but does not narrowly target homosexuals.

Part of its problem is the risk of damage to heterosexuals. Some of the 50 members pointed out that making sex outside marriage a disqualifier for ordination could affect elderly unmarried couples who might lose their pensions if they marry.

But the more fundamental sticking point is disagreement over whether homosexual behavior — even in loving, faithful, monogamous unions — is sinful. Fred Beuttler, an elder in the Chicago Presbytery and author of the language that won committee approval, called that dispute "a question of

scripture vs. scripture."

Two professors at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary have taken taken opposing stands. A statement co-written by W. Eugene March, an Old Testament professor and dean of the seminary, and one written by New Testament Professor Marion L. Soards were given to members of the ordination and sexuality panel.

The letter written by March and four scholars from other Presbyterian seminaries contends the Bible passages usually cited as condemning homosexuality don't really do that. March said 30 of the 58 professors teaching the Bible in the nation's 10 Presbyterian seminaries signed the statement and only Soards and one other scholar told him they disagreed.

Soards' statement, written in rebuttal and signed by 31 scholars, argues that the Bible does label homosexual behavior sinful, though "no more grave a sin than adultery or fornication." Soards could not be reached for comment, but March said the signers of Soards' statement are all current or former seminary professors but not all are biblical scholars.

Presbyterians have haggled for years over whether six Bible passages — four in the Old Testament, two in the New — require them to treat homosexual behavior as sin. The letter March helped write cautions against taking the passages out of context and says they deal with such matters as ritual purity and universal human sin, not homosexuality.

March said yesterday that some of the six passages deal not with homosexuality but "very special types of perversion," such as pederasty, or with sinful behavior by heterosexuals.

Soards' letter says the Bible clearly condemns homosexual activity, though it adds that fear and hatred of homosexuals "are incompatible with the Gospel."

March said that it's unclear to scholars whether homosexuality is sinful but that many gay and lesbian people are qualified to hold church offices and the church should "put the brakes on making judgments too quickly that harm people."

The Rev. Mary Wright, associate pastor of Memorial Presbyterian Church in St. Augustine, Fla., and a 1991 graduate of the Louisville seminary, said yesterday that as a single clergywoman, she's troubled by the prospect that pastoral candidates will be grilled about their sexual practices.