

SURVEY SHOWS PRESBYTERIAN (USA) CLERGY SUPPORT LEGAL RECOGNITION OF GAY COUPLES' RELATIONSHIPS, ORDINATION OF GAY AND LESBIAN CLERGY

SUPPORT CHURCH DOING MORE TO HELP MEMBERS CONSIDER GAY AND LESBIAN ISSUES

In recent years, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has been debating a number of policies related to the place of gay and lesbian people in society and in church life. The 2008 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) authorized the formation of a special committee to study the place of covenanted same-gender partnerships in the Christian community. The committee is currently collecting opinion from members and clergy on this important issue.

This release reflects findings from the 2008 Clergy Voices Survey (CVS). CVS, conducted by Public Religion Research, is the largest public opinion survey of Mainline Protestant clergy ever conducted. Because of the prominence of debates over gay and lesbian issues in Mainline Protestant denominational meetings in recent years, CVS included nearly 60 questions on gay and lesbian issues related to both public policy and church policy. The findings below represent the opinions of Presbyterian senior clergy currently serving congregations. The study included a national random sample of 411 PCUSA clergy; the Research Services Office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) provided the sample.

Gay and Lesbian Members, Conversations about LGBT Issues in Church

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of PCUSA clergy report that they have lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) members in their congregations. Only 1-in-10 (11%) reports that they are not aware of LGBT members, and one-fourth says that they do not know.

Like other Mainline Protestant clergy, the vast majority of PCUSA clergy (96%) say that LGBT persons are welcome in their church. However, there is less consensus about whether "welcome" is equivalent to "full inclusion." A strong but smaller majority (61%) of PCUSA clergy agrees that the gospel message requires the full inclusion of LGBT people in the church, while slightly less than a third (30%) disagree.

A strong majority (58%) of PCUSA clergy thinks that their church should do more to help members think carefully about LGBT issues. However, a majority (54%) also reports that their congregation has difficulty talking about LGBT issues. Barriers to better conversations are both theological and practical. On the one hand, there is considerable diversity of opinion among clergy on basic issues such as whether the Bible addresses what we understand today as sexual orientation; a majority (53%) says it does not, while 42% affirm that it does. On the other hand, clergy are weighing pastoral concerns. Clergy report that the top two barriers to having conversations about LGBT issues are concerns about creating divisions within the congregation (38%) and congregational discomfort with sexuality issues in general (31%).

Gay and Lesbian Church Leadership

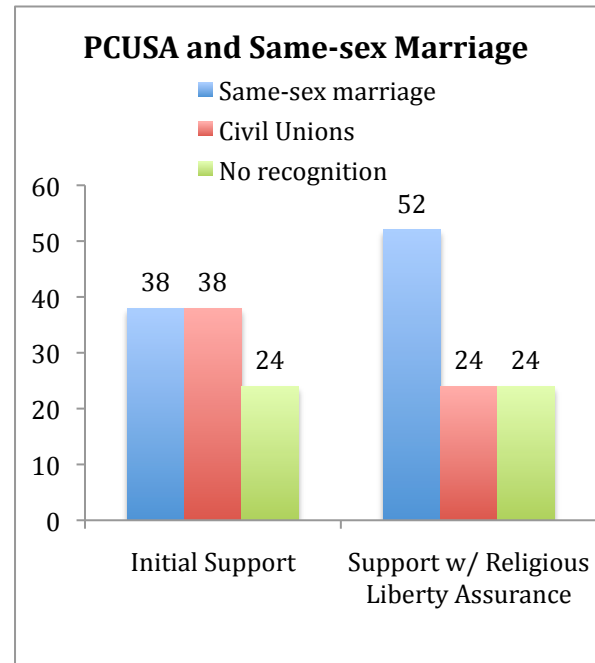
PCUSA clergy strongly support LGBT persons in lay leadership roles, and generally support the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy with some caveats. Nearly two-thirds (66%) of PCUSA clergy agree with the statement, “Qualified LGBT persons should be eligible for lay leadership positions in our church,” compared to 29% who disagree (Note: The survey did not distinguish between ordained and non-ordained lay leadership positions).

Half of PCUSA clergy favor ordaining lesbian and gay clergy without any special requirements, and an additional one-third supports the ordination of lesbian and gay clergy only if they are celibate. Only 15% oppose the ordination of lesbian and gay persons under any circumstances.

Marriage and Civil Unions

More than three-quarters of PCUSA clergy support some legal recognition of gay couples’ relationships. Thirty-eight percent support same-sex marriage, and 38% support civil unions for gay couples. Only about 1-in-4 (24%) say there should be no legal recognition of a gay couple’s relationship.

When clergy are offered a religious liberty reassurance that the law would guarantee that no church or congregation would be required to perform marriages for same-sex couples, support for marriage increases 14 points to majority support (52%), support for civil unions falls to 24%, and the same number say there should be no legal recognition for same-sex couples (24%).



With regard to clergy roles in same-gender relationship recognition, PCUSA clergy are divided over whether they would be willing to perform a civil union or marriage for a same-sex couple even if it were legal in their state. A plurality (49%) says that they would not be willing, compared to 44% who say they would be willing. Seven percent say they are unsure.

Adoption

Approximately 6-in-10 (61%) PCUSA clergy believe that otherwise qualified gay people should be able to adopt children. Only 1-in-4 disagrees, and 14% say they are not sure. PCUSA clergy are somewhat more supportive of adoption rights for gay and lesbian people than Mainline Protestant clergy overall.

Changing Views on LGBT Issues

More than 4-in-10 (43%) PCUSA clergy report that their views on LGBT issues have become more liberal over the past decade. Nearly an identical number (44%) report that their views have not changed over this period. Only 13% say their views have become more conservative.

About the Clergy Voices Survey

The Clergy Voices Survey (CVS) is the largest survey of Mainline Protestant clergy ever conducted. CVS was conducted by mail between March 3 and September 15, 2008, by Public Religion Research and funded by a grant from the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund. Dr. Robert P. Jones and Daniel Cox served as the principal researchers for the study. The margin of sampling error for the Presbyterian subsample is +/- 5.3%. The full report can be accessed at <http://www.publicreligion.org/research/?id=208>.

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