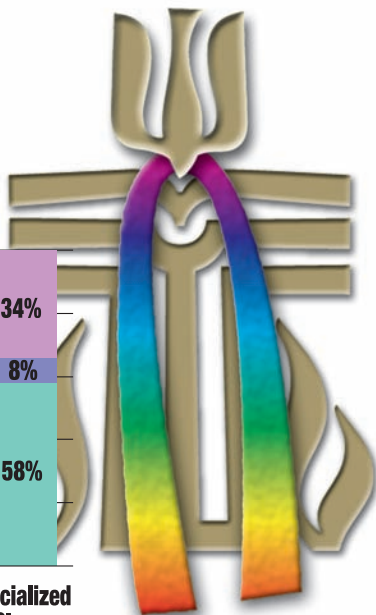
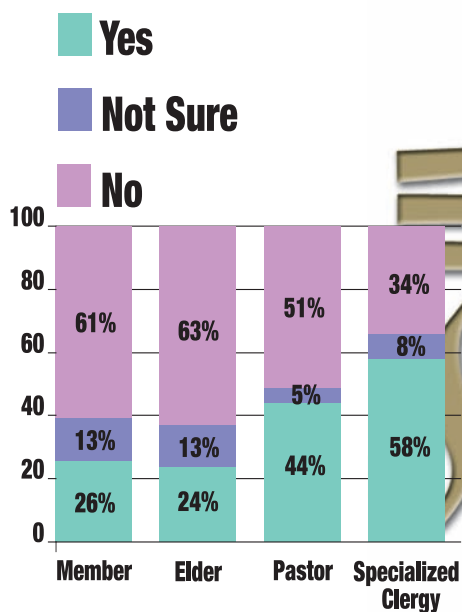


Should non-celibate gays and lesbians be ordained as ministers of the Word and Sacrament?

research | numbers | viewpoints | trends

GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM



GRAPHICS BY KATE ANYAN

Sexual orientation and ordination

No issue has been as contentious among Presbyterians in recent decades as homosexuality and ordination. Yet the policy adopted in 1978 remains essentially unchanged: only gays and lesbians who remain celibate are eligible for ordination to church office. And if recent opinion is any guide, that policy is likely to remain in place for some time to come.

When asked on a 2005 survey whether “you personally [would] like to see the PCUSA permit sexually active gay and lesbian persons to be ordained” to each of the offices of deacon, elder and minister, majorities of members and elders respond “no”: For the office of deacon, 51 percent of members and 53 percent of elders respond “no”; for the office of elder, 52 percent and 54 percent; and for the office of minister of the Word and Sacrament, 61 percent and 63 percent.

And as the figure shows, because of a sizable number of “not sure” responses, no more than 36 percent of laity respond “yes” to this question for any of

the three offices.

Pastors are more evenly split: for the office of deacon, 47 percent respond “yes” and 47 percent respond “no”; for the office of elder, 46 percent and 48 percent; and for the office of minister, 44 percent and 51 percent.

Majorities of specialized clergy (ministers in positions other than pastor, such as chaplains or seminary professors; in secular jobs; or not employed) favor permitting ordination of non-celibate gays and lesbians: for the office of deacon, 64 percent respond “yes” and 31 percent, “no”; for the office of elder, 63 percent and 32 percent; and for the office of minister, 58 percent and 34 percent.

LITTLE CHANGE IN FIVE YEARS

When we last gathered opinions on this same topic, in 2000, results were very similar: 62 percent of members, 63 percent of elders, 51 percent of pastors, and 28 percent of specialized clergy opposed allowing presbyteries to ordain sexually active gays and lesbians as ministers. (We didn’t ask about the offices of deacon and elder.)

What the research shows

Most lay persons oppose changing church policy on homosexuality and ordination, especially for the office of minister of the Word and Sacrament. Pastors, however, are more evenly divided, and sizable majorities of specialized clergy favor a change.

That responses in 2000 and 2005 are nearly identical suggests that opinion on this matter is quite stable. Generational progression will gradually result in some shift in the pattern of opinion, but in opposite directions. While younger laity are more likely than older ones to favor allowing non-celibate gays and lesbians to be ordained (among members, for example, 32 percent of those less than 40 years old but only 17 percent of those 70 or older favor permitting ordination as ministers), the opposite is true among pastors (37 percent, age 40 or less; 50 percent, age 70-plus).

Given these results, the controversy is unlikely to disappear. Whether current policy is maintained is less easy to predict, since voting to permit ordination of sexually active gays and lesbians—especially as deacons or elders—is possible even now, depending on the particular mix of ministers and elders at relevant General Assembly and presbytery meetings. Barring something unforeseen, however, such action would likely refocus rather than resolve the ongoing debate. □

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