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**TESTING THE FAITH****Presbyterian  
Church may split****Conservatives claim 'irreconcilable  
impasse' on homosexual issue**

By Julie Foster

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The 3.6 million-member Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) may be split apart over the issue of whether or not homosexuals should be ordained as ministers.

Two proposals, dealing with ordination of homosexuals and other contentious issues, have been introduced by conservatives of the [Presbyterian Church \(U.S.A.\)](#) allowing liberal congregations to leave the denomination with their property. Critics of the proposals, which will be considered at the church's General Assembly in July, include both liberals and "traditional" conservatives in the church who say the proposals are divisive.

"We're not trying to create division," said Rev. Jeff Arnold of Butler, Pa., author of General Assembly Overtures 00-5 and 00-6. "The division already exists, and nobody has found a way to reconcile the differences."

Those differences include not only issues related to homosexuality, but to larger, more far-reaching theological matters. They include what insiders deem "basic theology," such as "biblical authority and interpretation, Jesus as the only means of salvation, the meaning of salvation and governance of the church."

The overtures contend that divisions in the church have created "two mutually exclusive theologies," an acknowledgment Arnold says is the beginning of healing.

"The first amendment (00-5) is the more important," he said. "It has a simple purpose: to highlight what significant theological differences exist between the far right and the far left, though we realize those people are not neatly in camps. We want there to be a theological discussion ... not about sex and not about homophobia."

Theological discussion may be hard to come by in a church whose judicial body abandoned the practice of ruling on theology matters and instead focuses on technicalities when making crucial rulings.

In [WorldNetDaily's report on the signing of a pro-homosexual declaration by 850 clergy and religious workers](#), WND interviewed Rev. Greg Roth of [Centerville Presbyterian Church](#) in Fremont, Calif. who noted the judicial commission now shies away from theological decisions. That task will be in the hands of the church's General Assembly when it meets in Long Beach this summer, and it promises to be a difficult one.

With so much division in the church, even among conservatives, an overture allowing liberal congregations to leave may not be the simple resolution its supporters hope it to be. There are more than \$1.5 billion in the Presbyterian Foundation that will certainly be a cause of contention during debate over a

possible church split.

The Presbyterian Foundation, established in 1799, receives and administers gifts from individuals, as well as manages funds for Presbyterian churches and organizations. It is not a grant-making organization, like most "foundations." Most of the funds originated from conservative donors and are designated for specific use, although there is a hefty amount for general church use.

One Presbyterian pastor told WorldNetDaily that liberal churches may not leave upon approval of 00-6, the overture allowing individual congregations to cut ties with the 3.6 million-member denomination and take their real estate, because of the access they currently have to the Foundation's resources. He also pointed out that conservative congregations tired of fighting over the issue may also have the prerogative to disassociate themselves, leaving the funds in the hands of liberals.

Such a prospect left one source shuddering at the thought of conservative churches leaving a mainstream denomination with centuries of heritage and worldwide recognition in the hands of liberals who would then gain access to millions of dollars that could be used to advance the homosexual agenda from within the church.

Others, however, say that scenario is unlikely.

Dr. Bill Giles, executive director of the conservative Presbyterian Coalition, told WorldNetDaily that exiting churches may have a right to take with them any funds invested in the Foundation. That means if conservatives are the ones who leave the denomination, the bulk of the funds leave with them.

Giles believes one of the more difficult tasks involved in splitting the church is the division

of its assets.

"How do you ensure that the monies are being and will be used to the purposes which they were designated?" he asks.

Legally, the church may use designated funds only for those projects indicated by the donor.

"We're going to have to work out some way by which resources of the church will continue to be used in a way which their donors wanted," Giles said.

But Giles is not an advocate of a church split, despite his conservative position. He is what some Presbyterians call a "traditional conservative" -- a person with strong beliefs that the church should stay together despite its differences and continue to strive for a resolution. He is not alone.

"[You have to have] a sense of maturity, a sense of trust that the denomination recognizes all sorts of diversity, and you also have to trust the Lord," said the Rev. Bill Jamieson of Butler, a pastoral counselor who for 28 years has been a member of the Beaver-Butler Presbytery, where the two proposals originated.

Jamieson remembers vividly the pain caused by a split in the early 1980s, when five churches left the denomination because of on-going battles and dissatisfaction with the denomination's policies, including the decision to ordain women. In that case, the presbytery lost the property battle in state court; and the breakaway churches were permitted to take their property with them.

The handful of liberal clergy in Beaver-Butler Presbytery read the overtures as a way of saying, "Don't let the door hit you on the way out."

Rev. Judy Angleberger of Beaver Falls, Pa., a former presbytery moderator, says she feels

sadness and resignation as she watches presbyters plunge headlong into what she considers the age-old theological struggle between law and grace.

"We are in a very difficult period in the life of our church," said Giles. "The issue is both political and theological. At the root is how we interpret scripture, which is a theological issue. But it's being worked out in a political arena. When you talk about making changes to the church's constitution, it becomes political."

Church politics, it seems, like secular politics, can't seem to find common ground on the subject of homosexual rights. Perhaps there is none to be found, as many in the Presbyterian Church believe.

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*Julie Foster is a staff reporter for WorldNetDaily.*

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