

Now That Amendment 10-A Has Passed...
Suggestions for Guiding
and Strengthening Your Church
by W. P. Campbell

The national media is now broadcasting that practicing gays and lesbians can be ordained into leadership positions in the PCUSA. For over two decades, discussions and debates about this topic have been primarily contained within denominational gatherings; now this divisive issue spills into the lives of our church members. How should church leaders respond?

A small minority of biblically-based churches may find few if any repercussions from this vote. Most conservative congregations, however, will need to take practical steps for damage control and to avoid a loss of church members. The following suggestions may help your church survive and even grow stronger through this challenge:

1. Model Open Communication: Be open with your church members about the changes in our denomination. Attempting to avoid the issue may have been an option for many pastors and congregations through the years, but it is not an option today. It is time to guide our churches with defining vision, using vehicles such as the pulpit, church newsletters, and church mailings. Some of the ideas that follow may help you shape your message.

2. Call for Prayer: Ask your members to commit, along with your congregational leaders, to several weeks of prayer for your church and for our denomination. Tell them that during this season of prayer, their leaders will chart a suggested course for the congregation.

3. Bring a Realistic and Yet Hopeful Message: Don't minimize your congregants' reactions to denominational changes. If some are threatening to leave your church, remind your people that to "react" rather than pray and move together with unity and sound biblical guidance can harm your church and its members. There is no perfect church, and there is no perfect denomination. Those who react strongly against the direction this denomination is taking should be encouraged to look with "kingdom" eyes and remain in your church while the congregation engages in a season of learning and growth about its purpose and call from God.

Also remind your congregants that no matter what they think about the ordination of practicing homosexuals, your church is called by God to love all people while upholding biblical standards, and that the 10-A vote does not force your church to change the way it has always believed and operated. The Bible remains the primary source of spiritual authority for PCUSA members, and if in any area of doctrine the denomination drifts from what your congregation believes to be the message of Scripture, your congregation has the full freedom and right to follow God's Word.

4. Foster Congregational Input: Call for an open congregational meeting in which the pastor(s) and elders update the congregation, and during which congregational input will be encouraged. Show them by the way the meeting is handled that everyone's opinion is important, but that firm and loving leadership will help guide a process that keeps the church together as they develop a united vision for the future.

5. Develop a Leadership Plan: If your church leans toward the middle or right theologically (as does mine), your leadership team may need to step quickly and firmly into a leadership role to help settle your church. As you develop plans for the future, consider the following suggestions:

- a. Help your church leaders to avoid the "either/or," mentality. An extreme example of this would be, "do we stay or do we leave the denomination?" Ask, rather, if we stay (for however long), what adjustments can we make to enable our church to be safe as it moves forward in ministry? And if we wish to leave, what are various scenarios through which that might happen? Do we need some time for study and reflection before we make such choices? Consider all of your options and devise a plan that lays out one or more suggested paths for your congregation. Then hold firmly to the promise that God will lead you (Proverbs 16:9).
- b. If some in your church are set on leaving the denomination, remind your people that there are many congregations around the country in a similar situation, and that some time should be given to see whether or not, at the next General Assembly, congregations that decide to leave the denomination may be provided a fair exit opportunity. Unless you are in one of the few presbyteries that have a track-record for making it easy for churches to move graciously into other denominations, a premature attempt to leave the PCUSA may cause your church to split. (Those who have experienced a church split can tell you that it almost always hurts people—so count the cost.).
- c. If your church has not yet affiliated with one of the denominational renewal networks, consider doing so.¹ If your congregation is already part of such a network, explain its significance to your members. Church members who don't like the direction the PCUSA is taking can find some relief knowing they can tell their friends, "no matter what our denomination does, our church is networked with likeminded churches around the country who believe as we do."
- d. As mentioned above, consider drafting a pastoral letter, to be edited and endorsed by your session, which can be sent to the whole congregation. Likewise, an article in your local paper that explains your churches response to this denominational change may be helpful for potential new members. For

samples of such documents, you can see my church's website at:
<http://www.fpchendersonville.org/denomination.cfm>.

When Jesus said that he would build his church, he also promised that "The gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). God has used trials, hardships, and even persecution through history to make his people and churches stronger and more committed. God can do the same in your congregation today.

W.P. Campbell is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Hendersonville, NC, and author of the book, "Turning Controversy into Church Ministry: A Christlike Response to Homosexuality." For resources to help your congregation deal with issues of sexuality in a biblical manner see: ChurchReflections.com.

ⁱⁱ Some possibilities are listed at:

http://associationforchurchrenewal.com/?page_id=58. See also:
<http://www.fellowship-pcusa.org/>