

# Churches show Presbyterian split

Pastors say rift driven by more than approval of openly gay clergy.

**By Brandon Smith-Hebson**

Staff Writer

**SOUTH CHARLESTON —** Four of 60 Presbyterian churches in the Miami Valley recently left their national denomination, including one in South Charleston.

Their ministers pointed to changes in the denomination's constitution that paved the way for openly gay people to become ministers or church leaders, as well as changes to the way the church is governed that could provide for a more top-down leadership in the future.

Churches often organize a sig-

nificant part of the charitable work done in their area, and can influence and reflect the beliefs of a community.

But these recent changes weren't the entire reason for leaving, ministers said — rather, the national denomination, Presbyterian Church (USA), had been on a decades-long drift to a less-specific, more inclusive theology, they said.

“We were concerned,” said Peter Larson, head pastor at Lebanon Presbyterian Church, “that some might see this move as creating a church that's anti-gay people, or homophobic.” Larson's church voted to leave the denomination.

“That's just not true. Every person is welcome here. This is not a condemning place.”

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Dr. Tom Staton, a ruling elder of the South Charleston Presbyterian Church, holds up a new sign that will reflect the congregation's unanimous vote to become part of the relatively new Evangelical Presbyterian Church. STAFF

PHOTO BY BARBARA J. PERENIC

# Churches reflect divide

## Split

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But some pastors from churches that remain with the national organization have their doubts.

“The message it sends is, ‘We love you as long as you aren’t practicing who you are, as long as you aren’t yourself,’ ” said Dwight McCormick, pastor of Northminster Presbyterian Church in Springfield.

McCormick said gay people “have had a lot of violence done to them over the years,” spiritually as well as physically, and that the denomination wants to distance itself from that.

Shortly after the church’s constitution was altered, its first openly gay minister was ordained in Madison, Wis.

Secessions over similar subjects rocked Lutheran churches in the area earlier this year.

In addition to Larson’s church, the Miami Valley congregations that voted to leave include First Presbyterian in South Charleston, Kirkmont Presbyterian in Beavercreek and Green-

ville Presbyterian in Darke County.

Church members were invited to afternoon meetings for a vote — two churches on Oct. 23 and two on Oct. 30. All were said to have good turnout for church business meetings, between one-third and two-thirds of voting membership.

And at each church, more than 90 percent of votes supported measures to split from the denomination. Three of the four churches also voted to join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, another, smaller Presbyterian denomination with more conservative theology.

“There was very little hostility” in the splits, said Dennis Piermont, the top executive at the Presbytery of the Miami Valley, a local grouping of about 60 churches in the denomination.

The national organization isn’t seeking to take individual church buildings or property, according to Piermont. In other states, departing churches have had their buildings confiscated by the denomination, or they’ve had to buy back their buildings.

Piermont considers it an “enormous concern” to maintain theological diversity in the church, something that took a hit when these churches left.

“Let’s recognize we still have some of that here, and to value that,” he said. “A great many people remain who are theologically conservative. It’s now easy for them to feel marginalized, and that is a great concern for me.”

But the churches that left sometimes view theological diversity as a farce, complaining that the church had become a “big tent” denomination — and that it was getting bigger.

“In scripture we see diversity based on races and male and female, but there’s no such diversity in terms of doctrine and theology. It’s a pretty tight document,” said Bill Riesenweaver, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in South Charleston. Riesenweaver’s church voted unanimously to leave.

“Some people believe you can be a good Buddhist, Muslim — different strokes for different folks,” said Larson. “It’s a fundamental disagreement, ‘Who is Jesus?’ ”

The denomination believes it’s following tradition in its more inclusive approach.

“Theological diversity has been a mark of our church from the beginning. There were debates in the early 1700s,” said Grady Parsons, a PCUSA official whose responsibility includes theological discus-

sions. “We’ve never really been what’s called a subscriptionist church, where you have to subscribe to very specific doctrines.”

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the denomination the local churches joined, spells out a set of essential doctrines over and above the basic creeds of the church. Larson said the doctrines simply update the creeds to “a more modern” language. The national church disagrees.

Like most other large denominations, Presbyterian Church (USA) has had a declining membership in the U.S. since the mid-1960s, according to church historians. At its height in 1965, it counted around 4.2 million members, while last year it had just more than 2 million members. It is the largest of the Presbyterian denominations.

But as reported in The Layman, a conservative-leaning source of Presbyterian church news, PCUSA experienced a large drop in membership in 2010 — possibly as a result of the changes to the constitution.

Because presbyteries don’t report their membership loss or gain until the end of each year, officials said, the full effect of the changes won’t be known until early 2012.

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