

Presbyterian church opens door to gay clergy

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By Verna Gates

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama (Reuters) - The largest U.S. Presbyterian Church body approved a measure on Tuesday that would open the way for the ordination of gays and lesbians under certain circumstances.

The new policy was approved on a vote of 57-43 percent among 500 church representatives at the biennial meeting of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. It gives local church organizations more leeway in deciding if gays can be ordained as lay deacons and elders as well as clergy, provided they are faithful to the church's core values.

"It permits local governing bodies to examine candidates on a wider criterion than sexual orientation ... it allows these bodies to look at the whole person and not categorize them," said John Walton, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New York's Greenwich Village and a member of the "Covenant Network of Presbyterians" which backed the change.

Kim Clayton Richter of the Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, a member of the same group, said it's wrong to interpret the Bible literally on homosexuality.

"You cannot pick out two or three passages to prove your point. You have to look at the whole witness of Jesus Christ. We've changed our mentality on slavery and the role of women. We have to change with reality," Richter said.

But Donald Baird, a pastor from Sacramento, California, said the Bible is very specific about homosexuality, and he worried about Tuesday's vote undermining church unity.

"We used to act as one church," he said. "Now we'll have 11,000 churches ... chaos," he said.

The 2.5 million-member church is the largest body of that denomination in the United States. Its policy in the past has been against the ordination of anyone not living faithfully in a heterosexual marriage or a single chaste life.