

Methodists retain policies on homosexuality: A quadrennial ritual

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In what is almost an every-four-years ritual, the United Methodist Church has upheld traditional rules on homosexuality, refusing to support or celebrate same-sex unions and maintaining language that calls homosexual activity “incompatible with Christian teaching.”

Many Methodists who gathered in Fort Worth, Texas, wanted to see the church’s official stance acknowledge the continuing sharp disagreement over sexuality and biblical interpretation within the largest mainline denomination. But delegates narrowly rejected efforts to remove the “incompatible” phrase at the ten-day quadrennial General Conference that ended May 2.

Defeated by a 517 to 416 margin was a measure to adopt a mandate to “refrain from judgment regarding homosexual persons and practices as the Spirit leads us to new insight.” Delegates spent almost all of April 30 debating Methodist policies on homosexual issues, continuing a contentious discussion that the church has pursued for almost 40 years.

Many Methodists declared from the floor that a clear continuation of traditional teachings is essential, especially for evangelism in a world they said is beset by moral confusion. “Friends, this is serious business,” said H. Eddie Fox, director of evangelism for the World Methodist Council. “It matters what we believe and what we practice, and we do not meet here in isolation.”

Indeed, several delegates warned that actions taken by the General Conference directly affect Methodists in Africa and Asia, many of whom are conservative and whose churches are experiencing explosive growth. About 30 percent of the church’s 11.5-million members now live outside the U.S., and some conservative activists credited the rising proportion of overseas delegates for keeping traditional policies in place.

The resolution calling for the church to refrain from judgment until a wider consensus is reached was defended by, among others, Will Green, a lay delegate from New England. “It allows gay and lesbian people like myself to stay in the church in a safe way that doesn’t cause us to be sacrificed for the sake of church unity,” he said.

Earlier in the day, a solid majority— more than 65 percent—rejected an attempt to change the church’s constitution, the Book of Discipline, to recognize same-sex civil unions.

The ban “reflects the sentiment of most [church] members and the majority of citizens in the U.S. and many other countries,” said the committee that handled the resolution. “Sanctioning homosexual unions would give the church’s approval to homosexual behavior and relationships, which would be inconsistent” with church teaching.

Delegates also refused to commit to support civil unions in the wider society. They did agree to open educational opportunities to all persons regardless of sexual orientation. And after an emotional debate, a slim majority of Methodists agreed to strengthen the church’s advocacy against sexism by “opposing all forms of violence or discrimination based on gender, gender identity, sexual practice or sexual orientation.”

The measure also commits the church’s General Board of Church and Society to develop resources and materials for local churches to fight homophobia. Nevertheless, two clergy delegates from the Democratic Republic of the Congo forcefully spoke out against the antihomophobia resolution.

Speaking in French with the aid of a translator, one pastor said that it’s “very sad that the Methodist Church continues to advocate for things that come from the devil. . . . It is time for us as church to get on our knees and proclaim that we have made a mistake.”

But Judy Stevens, a delegate from New York, said, “It’s time for us to stand together with people who, although their orientation may be different from ours, still need to be protected from violent actions that are brought upon them on the basis of who they are.”

Studies have shown that Methodists' disagreements over homosexuality mirror U.S. regional and generational divisions. Slightly more than half of Methodist clergy and laity "agree somewhat" with their church's refusal to condone homosexual acts, according to a "state of the church" report issued last year. But nearly one-third—30 percent of clergy and 28 percent of laity—"disagree strongly" with the church's position on homosexuality. Like other Americans, younger Methodists and those who live in the West and Northeast tend to be more tolerant of homosexuality.

Some 300 supporters of gay Methodists were allowed to stage a 15-minute protest in which they put black cloths over the communion table at a business session May 1—the day after delegates had declined to eliminate the "incompatible with Christian teaching" statement. A retired bishop, Melvin Talbert, said at the protest: "I can do no other than to say what's on my heart. General Conference, General Conference, this is wrong."

Afterward, 16 bishops met with the protesters to acknowledge the pain felt by some church members. Troy Plummer, executive director of the gay-supportive Reconciling Ministries Network, credited the official responses for preventing a possible civil disobedience move, according to United Methodist News Service.

Plummer told the news service that he was "most troubled" about delegates' inability to reverse a 2005 decision by the United Methodist Judicial Council to uphold the denial of church membership by a Virginia pastor to an applicant who was in an openly homosexual relationship. The denomination's Council of Bishops had condemned the ruling.

Delegates debated long into the night April 30 about whether to allow pastors to turn away candidates—or at least delay membership—until they're sure an applicant is serious about Methodism. Amid talk of following Jesus, who welcomed all comers, and Methodist founder John Wesley, the famous circuit-riding evangelist, there was discussion about the painful segregation of the church in the 1930s and a not-so-hidden subtext: the exclusion of gays and lesbians.

Gay rights activists hoped to counter the Methodist high court ruling by passing a law requiring pastors to receive all adults who affirm the church's membership vows. That measure failed by just 12 votes—one of the closest tallies at the General Conference.

Other delegates had different ideas. Pastor Bob Moon of South Georgia warned of “unintended consequences” should the doors to membership be flung wide open. “As pastors, we need to see this not from the perspective of restriction, but of responsibility to care for the flock,” he said. Two women delegates cited examples of membership applicants who wanted to join the church to avoid the wedding fee for nonmembers.

But others said allowing pastors to discriminate contradicts the tenets of Christianity and Methodism—not to mention the denomination’s motto of “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.”

Albert Shuler, a minister from Greenville, North Carolina, said that church membership based solely on pastoral interpretations should not be the guideline. “If the pastor were to use the teachings of Jesus on money as a litmus test, there wouldn’t be any Americans left in our churches,” he said.

The exhausting debates on homosexuality were seen as contributing to delegate disinterest in dealing with a less familiar question—whether a clergyperson who has a sex change may continue in the ministry.

Conservative Methodists had proposed a handful of resolutions that would bar transgender men and women from the pulpit, but those proposals were defeated in legislative committees. One resolution that did make it to the floor stated that transgenderism denies “the sacred integrity of God’s good creation.” It was trounced by a tally of 699 to 175. One conservative activist said the issue was not high on his group’s agenda because transgender persons are such a small minority in the church.

The Methodist Judicial Council had passed on the case of Drew Phoenix, 49, a pastor in Baltimore who entered the ministry as Ann Gordon. The panel said there was no language in church legislation that deals with the question. Only the General Conference can introduce such rules, leaving that matter until 2012. *-Religion News Service*