

Watershed in Cleveland: At the UMC General Conference

by [Jean Caffey Lyles](#) in the [May 24, 2000](#) issue

Seizing the blessings of a rising stock market and unexpectedly plentiful reserve funds, the United Methodist General Conference approved millions of dollars for innovative programs serving overseas churches, ethnic groups in the U.S., young people, older adults, urban needs, ministries to the deaf, and even the production of cable TV spots to attract new members. But good feelings about expanding the mission of the 9.6-million member church (which includes 1.4 million members overseas) were dampened by a stormier-than-usual conflict over homosexuality. This year's clash over how to regard gays and lesbians—it's been on the agenda of these quadrennial meetings since 1972—may mark a watershed in the debate.

"The body is lacerated. . . . This issue is not going to go away," said Linda Campbell-Marshall, a United Methodist district superintendent from Hope, Maine.

"To blame us for the disunity seems unfair," said Maxie Dunnam, dean of Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, and a leader of a doctrinally conservative coalition. "I have not had a joyful moment today, and I am not joyful now."

Amid a host of protesters, delegates from the U.S., Europe, Africa and the Philippines firmly rejected efforts to soften the church's stance on homosexuality. The 992 delegates—half clergy, half lay—voted rather consistently along a two-thirds to one-third divide. (Votes in favor of abolishing antigay policies had been creeping up slightly each quadrennium and reached their high point, almost 40 percent, in 1996.)

After heated debate, the conference acted to retain three major statements in the denomination's Book of Discipline:

- That the practice of homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching."

- That “avowed practicing” homosexuals are barred from candidacy, ordination or appointment as United Methodist ministers.
- That ceremonies blessing same-sex unions shall not be performed by United Methodist ministers, nor take place in a United Methodist church building.

The body also let stand a provision prohibiting the use of church funds “to promote the acceptance of homosexuality.” Rejected was a compromise statement that would have acknowledged that United Methodists are not of one mind on homosexual practice.

On the other hand, delegates voted by a wide margin for continuing dialogue on all sides of the issue. They rejected a “loyalty oath” proposal that would have required all ministers and ministry candidates to sign a document declaring that homosexuality is not “God’s perfect will for anyone. I will not practice it. I will not promote it.” And they gave a thumbs-down to a request for a program to help “persons who seek to leave or not start the practice of homosexuality.”

The church’s heavily southern conservative wing, according to some observers, had already won the battle a year ago, having organized to get its people elected as delegates at annual (regional) conferences. The moderate-to-liberal camp—strongest in the West, Midwest and Northeast—may have been more complacent about electioneering and lobbying.

This General Conference took place amid controversy about clergy who, after performing same-sex blessings, had complaints filed against them, were brought up on charges, subjected to church trial, suspended from a pastoral assignment, or, in one case, expelled from the ministry. Chicago pastor Gregory Dell comes off suspension July 1, and he plans to resume his ministry to the gay population. “But I imagine I’ll be watched closely,” he told a reporter.

Tensions rose further early in 1999 when charges were brought against 67 clergy in the church’s California-Nevada Conference for concelebrating a service of blessing for a lesbian couple. More tremors were registered when an investigative committee that worked for months on the case dropped the charges. Brushfires flared again when Cal-Nevada Bishop Melvin G. Talbert defended the committee, declaring that the conference’s longstanding goal of practicing inclusiveness and justice took precedence over the disciplinary provision. In April a formal complaint was brought against Talbert by a California laywoman, backed by the Coalition for United

Methodist Accountability (made up of three conservative or evangelical caucuses). Talbert's bishop colleagues in the Western Jurisdiction have not been in a hurry to consider the complaint. Talbert retires this summer from presiding over Cal-Nevada.

People on all sides of the issue fret about the cost—in money, time, energy and lost mission opportunities—of handling complaints, charges, investigations, trials and appeals. What if clergy continue to perform same-sex blessings, singly or en masse, and the church continues to follow the prescribed disciplinary steps? How many capable, conscientious pastors might be ousted? How many weeks will church officials spend conducting trials?

United Methodists have lately been heard uttering the word “schism,” but few believe that homosexuality will split the church. United Methodists are held together by what one bishop calls “Wesleyan DNA” (for Methodist founder John Wesley), by their attachment to the Board of Pension and Health Benefits, and by a clause in the Discipline that bars departing local churches from taking their property with them. (Delegates rejected an effort to change that policy. They also turned down a request for a separate “Evangelical Missionary Conference” in the West to shelter conservatives who feel “marginalized” in that jurisdiction.)

For supporters of full acceptance of gays and lesbians, the handwriting is on the wall: The church is losing members in liberal territory and gaining them in conservative areas, and the resulting reapportionment of delegates will probably mean a stronger conservative presence at the 2004 session. Moreover, the church is growing overseas, where church members' disapproval of homosexuality is expressed in even stronger terms, especially in parts of Africa, where delegates are apt to speak of homosexuality as “an abomination.”

The ascendance of conservative evangelicals was also seen in a well-oiled campaign that resulted in the election of at least three members to the Judicial Council from a slate circulated by members of the Good News and Confessing Movement caucuses. The council is the church's supreme court, a nine-member panel that at times has more power than the Council of Bishops. Also elected to eight-year terms were Larry Pickens, a Chicago pastor and lawyer who served as Greg Dell's trial counsel, and Rodolfo Beltran, a Filipino lawyer and the first person from outside the U.S. to serve on the court. Given the grave illness of Tom Matheny, a 24-year veteran of the council and a gifted drafter of rulings who was president for several terms, the coming months could see four-to-four deadlocks. If moderate and liberal voices fail

to work effectively for their delegates in 2004, the result could be an ultraconservative takeover of what was formerly a moderate court.

In any case, the window of opportunity for compromise has probably closed. Neither progay nor antigay forces intend to quit the battle or leave the church. Years of stalemate loom. But the fight appears to have reached the stage at which the next move could be a risky raising of the stakes by one side or the other. No wonder delegates were saying, “Things will never be the same again.”

The Cleveland conference is thought to be the first in denominational history at which protesters were arrested and removed from the floor of a General Conference. Gays, lesbians and their supporters staged provocative demonstrations on two successive days. The first was sponsored by an ecumenical protest group, Soulforce. Their actions outside the hall, blocking an exit, sparked the arrest of 191 people, including Chicago Bishop C. Joseph Sprague and his wife, on charges of “persistent disorderly conduct.” All were fingerprinted, photographed with the cop who arrested them, and fined \$180.

Inside the hall, where Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey was about to deliver a sermon, a T-shirted group of about 80 people in the balcony stood up, recited a litany with the repeated phrase, “Extend the table,” sang a verse of “We Are Marching in the Light of God,” and sat down.

The next day’s demonstration was more sobering. While individuals stood silently around the balcony, representatives of AMAR, the coalition of progay caucuses, stood in the aisles of the convention floor. Bishop Dan Solomon of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, never raising his voice, repeatedly asked them to leave. The unflappable Solomon was the choice of a committee on presiding officers to chair a tinderbox session. At one point, a woman—apparently part of the Soulforce group—teetered on a balcony ledge, shouting incoherently, and was pulled back by others who feared she would fall or jump.

Hymn-singing broke out; a dozen bishops stood at the edge of the stage in support, and Solomon called a recess. He negotiated a “covenant” with the protesters to remain in the aisle, but assume a sitting or kneeling position. Before he called delegates back to order, protesters and sympathetic delegates began singing the kinds of hymns that open Methodist tear ducts—“Here I Am, Lord” and “We’re Marching to Zion.”

The planned arrests (carefully orchestrated in advance in negotiations involving bishops, police, and caucus leaders) were delayed till after the final vote to retain language barring clergy from blessing same-sex unions. Protesters walked to the stage singing “We Shall Overcome” and waited. One demonstrator spoke about the group’s choice to be forcibly removed. “I plead with you—please leave,” Solomon said, expressing anguish over “the events about to unfold.” Some delegates and visitors wept as at the sight of uniformed police arresting 29 United Methodists, including Bishops Susan Morrison and Sprague.

All 29, charged with “disruption of a lawful meeting,” were bailed out by the Reconciling Congregations program. Each pleaded “no contest” at an arraignment the next morning, and paid a \$100 fine, \$55 in court costs, and a \$5 bond charge.

In other action delegates axed a proposal for a drastic restructure of the church. A 38-member “Connectional Process Team labored four years at a cost of \$660,000 to craft the plan, whose passage some hoped would be the centerpiece of the 2000 conference.

The conference adopted a guideline specifying that members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) wishing to become United Methodists must undergo instruction in the Christian faith and must be baptized. Clergy and laity in the western U.S. had sought clarity on the issue.

Church leaders’ commitment to “a global church” precipitated a crisis for overseas delegates—a shortage of translators and interpreters. Simultaneous interpretation of plenary sessions was provided in six languages. Finance officers said the increased need for translated printed materials and simultaneous translation would raise the cost of both the 2000 and 2004 meetings. (Projected cost of the 2004 conference is \$6.2 million.)

By a vote of 724 to 205, the legislative meeting called for a “total ban” on most handguns and automatic weapons.

The church stiffened language in the Discipline on abortion, for the first time voicing disapproval of late-term “dilation and extraction” procedures (also called “partial-birth” abortion).

The meeting ended disconcertingly. Bishop Talbert was in the chair after the last agenda item, and a motion was passed to adjourn “sine die” after a final worship service. Then Talbert spoke: “When you malign someone,” he said, “have the

courtesy to speak with him about it first.” He went on to defend his own actions and his conference’s, saying he has upheld church law even when he doesn’t like the law. “No one can abridge my right to speak my conscience.” No floor speeches were in order after that, and delegates quietly prepared themselves for worship.