

American Baptists walk a tightrope: Controversy over homosexuality

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The controversy over homosexuality has consumed our agenda, our discussion time and our energy; yet the controversy still threatens to break us apart.”

That statement came not from Methodists or Presbyterians but from a meeting of regional church officials in the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., a denomination with 5,700 congregations and 1.4 million members which has managed to maintain a low national news profile on sensitive issues.

The dilemma for American Baptists, said the statement adopted November 20 and released December 2, is that while the prevailing view in the denomination is that homosexual intimacy is “incompatible” with Christian teaching, American Baptist policies allow for respectful dissent. As a result, “individuals and congregations who hold different viewpoints exist among us.”

Hoping both to “preserve unity” and to “promote faithfulness to the gospel,” the Regional Executive Ministers Council approved (20 yes, 3 no, 3 abstentions) a statement that said they would refrain from “homophobic behavior” and stereotyping gays and lesbians as well as from “withdrawal of fellowship” with homosexuals. “We pledge to continue listening to those who hold differing viewpoints.”

However, the regional officials also pledged to refrain from recommending or approving gays and lesbians as ministers and to abstain from conducting or taking part in “marriage ceremonies for same-sex couples.” The joint statement was distributed afterwards to the ABCUSA General Board, which also met at the American Baptists’ conference center in Green Lake, Wisconsin.