

U.S. Methodists reject 'open door' membership: Amendment failed to gain two-thirds support

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United Methodists in the U.S. have defeated amendments that would have made church membership open to all Christians regardless of sexual orientation and that would have moved toward allowing the U.S. church to address issues independent of the global United Methodist body.

Delegates at the United Methodist Church's General Conference last year approved the sexual-orientation amendment, as well as several others that would have changed how the international church is governed. But the amendments failed to gain support from two-thirds of the denomination's regional conferences, as required by church law.

Twenty-seven of the 44 regional conferences that reported rejected the amendment that would have made membership in local churches open to "all persons" who take "vows declaring the Christian faith, and relationship in Jesus Christ," according to United Methodist News Service.

The amendment followed a controversial case in 2005 in which a Virginia pastor denied membership to a gay man. UMC's high court later backed the pastor.

The complicated amendments to church polity in the UMC, which counts 8 million members in the U.S. and about 3.5 million more in Asia, Africa and Europe, were seen by some as a way to make it easier for Americans to pass pro-gay resolutions.

Advocates for change, who identify with the UMC's "Open hearts, open minds, open doors" slogan of recent years, do not expect the amendments to pass in voting still under way abroad.

"It is only thanks to the African and other international delegates that United Methodism has upheld biblical standards about homosexuality," Mark Tooley, a Methodist and president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, wrote in April.

"Liberals increasingly resent the growing African influence in our church and know they cannot win when the African churches are growing and the U.S. church declines," he warned. —*Religion News Service*