

A simple solution

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [July 19, 2000](#) issue

When a friend of mine was invited to a retirement party, he responded, “Sorry, can’t make it. I am going to be climbing a mountain in Kenya. Besides, I prefer to live in the future, not the past.” There is nothing inherently wrong with retirement parties, but my friend has a point. Living in the future should take preference over living in the past. That is the advice I want to give my fellow United Methodists who limped away from a General Conference dominated by acrimonious debate over the status of gays and lesbians in the denomination.

The United Methodist Church has made a sharp turn to the political and theological right, and it appears that it will continue to move in that direction. This particular battle is over, at least for the moment. The liberal dominance in United Methodism, the denomination that helped end the war in Vietnam and bring a halt to racial segregation in the church, has ended.

The Good News movement, the United Methodist wing of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, and many of its bishops and tall-steeple pastors have taken over the church’s governing body. That means, in the long run, that it will also take over the national and regional institutions. It is important to remember that the IRD came into being in the early 1980s with support from, and as part of, the conservative movement that elected Ronald Reagan president. Why this happened, and how long this trend will prevail, is a more complicated matter. But this much is clear: what started in the age of Reagan is now a reality in United Methodist power circles.

But take heart, liberals: you don’t have to live in the past. The future does not have to remain entirely in the hands of conservatives who insist that homosexuality is sinful. There is room in United Methodism to celebrate gay and lesbian relationships without violating current church law. If you believe, as a passionate minority of the General Conference delegates did, that an affirming ceremony for gay and lesbian persons who wish to create faithful unions is consistent with the gospel, there is hope.

Pastors who violate church law by performing ceremonies in their churches face disciplinary action that could lead to their dismissal. This outrageous ban will lead some to further challenge church law. A political hint: if you believe you must violate the law, do it as part of a group, not individually; church leaders will be reluctant to reduce their numbers by 75 in a single trial.

For pastors who want to stay within the church, a colleague of mine offers a solution that will honor homosexual commitments to fidelity. This solution would not work for pastors and couples who want to duplicate heterosexual marriage, but it would provide an interim solution.

Remember, first, that United Methodists do not consider marriage to be a sacrament. That status is confined to the Lord's Supper and baptism. The UMC recognizes the pastor's role in a wedding service as a sacred task, not a sacrament. When UMC pastors perform a heterosexual marriage ceremony they do not perform a sacrament; they stand with the couple and proclaim that the choice this couple has made is recognized in the sight of God and in the presence of the assembled church. God's blessing is bestowed on the couple's pledge of fidelity "till death us do part."

Current UMC law states that the pastor may not perform any such ceremony for a homosexual couple, but the General Conference's legislation is aimed at pastors, not laypeople. Any congregation that wished to do so could designate a layperson to perform a ceremony adapted from the established ritual for marriage. The pastor could be a witness to this event and even be involved in the ritual, but the designated layperson would be the official in charge, acting on behalf of the church.

The United Methodist Discipline does not provide for the ouster of lay members of a congregation who violate the "order and discipline" of the church. To my knowledge, the Methodists have rarely, if ever, chosen to punish lay members for misconduct deemed immoral, illegal or distasteful—not that some pastors haven't on occasion looked longingly at that passage when confronted by the behavior of some of their congregation's more recalcitrant members.

In time, of course, the General Conference could revise its antigay stance to specifically include laypersons who participate in a bonding ceremony for gay and lesbian couples. But fortunately, the UMC's lawmaking body meets only once in four years. By the time it assembles again, God may have decided that enough is enough and send us a message that gay and lesbian fidelity is consistent with God's

understanding of love and responsible behavior. I don't know what form that message would take, but I live for the future, not the past. Surely, after four or maybe eight more years, God will find a way to remind us to embrace all of his children, regardless of their sexual orientation.