

Ecclesial protest: Acts of disobedience

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Getting arrested, as advocates for gays and lesbians did at the United Methodist General Conference in Cleveland this month, has become a banal form of protest. Incidents of civil disobedience are now jointly orchestrated by participants and police so they can be carried out with minimum fuss. In Cleveland, the police helpfully pointed out where the protesters needed to stand so they could be arrested for impeding public access. The protesters garnered some publicity for their cause and everyone made it home for dinner.

We're glad, of course, that such confrontations are peaceful, and that the police didn't bring out dogs and water cannons to round up protesters, as they did in the Deep South during the civil rights movement of the 1950s. But there's a crucial element of civil disobedience as it was originally practiced that seems to be ignored or forgotten these days: the aim of civil rights demonstrators was not to break the law and thereby call attention to their cause, but to break an unjust law and thereby call attention to the law's unjustness. That's why they chose to break the laws enforcing segregation of lunch counters, swimming pools and buses. That's why in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" Martin Luther King Jr. took seriously his critics' charge that the movement was being cavalier about the law, and argued at length that indeed laws should be obeyed—except when a law violates God's law.

The protesters in Cleveland, we assume, were not morally opposed to Cleveland's laws on public access. Indeed, their quarrel is not with the civil law at all, but with church law, as codified in the United Methodists' Book of Discipline.

Those who in conscience cannot obey United Methodist Church law, law that has been confirmed once again to represent the mind of the church, should practice ecclesial disobedience, not civil disobedience. Ecclesial disobedience is, of course, precisely what has been practiced by some United Methodist pastors, such as Gregory Dell, Jimmy Creech, and the 67 pastors in the California-Nevada Conference

who jointly celebrated the union of a gay couple last year. Like sitting down at a segregated lunch counter, such ecclesial disobedience calls attention to the law in question and tests whether the authorities are willing to enforce it.

Unlike the civil disobedience at Cleveland, ecclesial disobedience of this kind entails a genuine risk: participants can lose their pastoral position, pension, and possibility of employment in the church. (We note that some of the protesters at Cleveland were not members of the UMC, and therefore no ecclesial relations were even hypothetically at stake.) Accepting this risk is again consistent with the meaning of conscientious disobedience as practiced by King. It is the willingness to suffer the consequences of one's actions that makes deliberately disobeying the law a true act of conscience and of respect for the law. Using the civil authorities to make a point about life in the church is, by contrast, an exercise in media-driven street theater.