

Elephant at the quadrennial: United Methodists confront gay issues

by [Jean Caffey Lyles](#) in the [April 19, 2000](#) issue

When United Methodist delegates take their seats at the church's May 2-12 General Conference in Cleveland, they'll be facing decisions on 2,500 or more pieces of legislation, including a far-reaching proposal to restructure the denomination. But during the 11-day marathon of "quadrennial madness," the top governing body of the 8.5-million-member denomination won't be able to ignore "the elephant in the living room"—the escalating disputes over the church's stance toward homosexuals. Most other mainline Protestant denominations are also struggling with the issue.

Homosexuality has been a focus of passionate debate at every General Conference since 1972. Because of legislative actions over those past 18 years, the Book of Discipline, the compendium of church law, calls the practice of homosexuality "incompatible with Christian teaching" and stipulates that "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" cannot be "accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers or appointed to serve" in the UMC.

On the other hand, the Discipline states that homosexuals are "persons of sacred worth," and should have their human rights and civil liberties protected. A 1996 resolution asserts that gays and lesbians should not be barred from U.S. military service solely on the basis of sexual orientation.

The high pitch of emotion has been intensified in recent months by charges, trials and church court decisions affecting clergy who have performed "same-sex blessings." The UMC's Judicial Council, or supreme court, has ruled that one clause in the church's Social Principles—a document previously seen as more descriptive than prescriptive—is binding law. That clause states that ceremonies celebrating "homosexual unions" are not to be conducted by UMC clergy or in UMC buildings, and that those who violate the rule are subject to trial, discipline and even loss of ministerial credentials.

Some partisans say the church's disagreement over homosexuality is the most divisive moment since the slavery dispute that sparked a north-south Methodist split in the 1840s—a break not mended until a 1939 unification.

Of clergy who have performed same-sex blessings, former Nebraska pastor Jimmy Creech has been defrocked by a trial court, and a Chicago pastor, Gregory Dell, is under suspension until July 1. (Dell was elected a General Conference delegate but was later ruled ineligible to serve.)

Conservative caucus groups in the church were angered by the refusal of an investigative committee in the church's California-Nevada Conference to bring to trial the so-called Sacramento 67, a group of active and retired clergy who "concelebrated" a same-sex blessing ceremony for a lesbian couple. Even more galling to conservative groups was San Francisco area Bishop Melvin G. Talbert's explanation: that while the committee's decision may have violated the Book of Discipline, "another more basic and fundamental covenant . . . has precedence"—the covenant binding the clergy of the Cal-Nevada Conference, who share long-held commitments "for inclusiveness and justice."

One conservative delegate more or less invited the Cal-Nevada Conference to secede from the church and start its own denomination. One interest group has petitioned the General Conference to approve the formation of a separate "Evangelical Missionary Conference" so that local churches and pastors in the western U.S. can escape the heresies of liberal bishops and conferences.

By some coincidence, clergy against whom charges have been brought have tended to serve under bishops who are sympathetic to their cause. Bishop Joseph Sprague of Chicago said that Greg Dell's supporters had asked him not to "go ballistic," that is, not to take any dramatic action that might damage his ability to influence others.

Referring to a document criticizing current church law on homosexuality issued four years ago by 15 active and retired bishops, Sprague said he didn't foresee such an action this year. The 1996 statement blindsided bishops who hadn't been asked to sign on, and Sprague said he would not sign anything unless it had been shared with the entire Council of Bishops.

Perhaps the most outspoken leader has been retired Bishop Jack Tuell of Des Moines, Washington, who once was regarded as a somewhat stodgy, cautious middle-of-the-roader. Tuell, a law-school graduate and the denomination's premier

“canon lawyer,” has petitioned the General Conference to remove words prohibiting clergy from presiding over same-sex unions. He also advised, however, crafting language to make clear that the terms “marriage” and “wedding” apply only to sacred vows uniting a man and a woman.

Tuell sent a letter explaining his stand to 60 delegates (it was later made public). His experience in presiding over Dell’s trial persuaded him that the 1996 ban on clergy performing same-sex blessings was “not good legislation.” Said Tuell: “We got along quite well for 212 years (1784-1996) without such legislation.” The provisions “are likely to hit some of our most able, conscientious clergy the hardest,” the bishop added.

A schism is possible but unlikely. Church law does not allow a departing congregation to take its property with it. The church’s pension board is also a powerful unifying factor. What some delegates unaffiliated with any faction fear is a hemorrhaging of individual members from the left or right, accelerating the membership declines of two or three decades. The best that some hope for is new language that acknowledges that United Methodists are not of one mind on issues of homosexuality.

Marilyn Alexander of Chicago, coordinator of Reconciling Congregations, a UMC group that favors welcoming homosexuals into all aspects of church life, believes legislation relaxing current church law is unlikely to pass. Her group’s research suggested that “the numbers are similar to a 60-40 split. That means we’ve got to pick up 11 percent more positive votes.” She added, “I’m counting on the Holy Spirit factor, something unexpected, in hope that things can change.”

Philip Wogaman, a Washington, D.C., pastor who is a delegate, noted that recent years have shown a “gender split,” with over half of female delegates voting to support change. And the percentage of women delegates is up 5 percent this year, to 27 percent.

But James Heidinger of Wilmore, Kentucky, head of the conservative Good News group, said that from the vote-counting he’s done, “my best guess is that the vote to retain what is in the Discipline will be stronger than it has been.”

Both Good News and caucuses favorable to the gay/lesbian cause have sent out videotapes, books and other materials to lobby the delegates. Recent years have seen a proliferation of both liberal and conservative caucuses, which tend to

coalesce into cooperative coalitions to “work” General Conference.

Restructuring is one of the other major topics, but it is difficult to find great enthusiasm for the outcome of a four-year study by a “Connectional Process Team.” The panel’s proposed restructure would add an extra decision-making level; give more emphasis to the UMC’s “Central” conferences overseas and the global nature of the church; and entail substantial revision of the church’s constitution. One delegate suggested that restructuring is “the Methodist disease.” Others have predicted that the report will be dead on arrival. Something of the flavor of the document is reflected in its subtitle: “A Process for Envisioning and Resourcing Mission and Ministry for Living into God’s Preferred Future.”

Nonlegislative events are also expected to play a part in shaping the mood of the conference. An “Act of Repentance for Reconciliation,” initiated by the denomination’s ecumenical agency, will include representatives from three historically black U.S. Methodist denominations—all formed by blacks as a result of rejection or discrimination by white Christians. Delegates will express regret for how “people of color” have been treated by the denomination and its predecessor bodies.

For the first time ever, an archbishop of Canterbury will attend a United Methodist General Conference. Archbishop George Carey, head of the worldwide Anglican Communion as well as the Church of England, will preach at an ecumenical service, with participation of other ecumenical guests.

Other proposals and issues worth noting:

- A measure to recognize all the baptized (including infants) as full members (rather than “preparatory” members), in keeping with a church document on baptism, “By Water and the Spirit.”
- A \$3.4 million plan for ministries with young people from ages 12 to 30.
- A \$3.2 million plan for Korean-American ministries, and a resolution asking for adoption of a bilingual Korean-English hymnal as an official church resource.
- A \$455,000 proposal to expand ministries for more than 15 Asian language groups.
- A plan to change the formula for determining the amount of “apportionments” local churches pay for ministry beyond the local church. Regional per capita income, operating costs relative to average worship attendance, and dollars spent would be factored in.

- A call for all church meetings to be open, including those of the Council of Bishops.
- A proposed cable TV media campaign, “Igniting Ministry,” which would include advertisements with production values on a par with the much-praised ads produced by the Mormon Church.
- A \$2 million fund to support theological education in postcommunist Europe for 2000-2004.
- \$100,000 for the National United Methodist Native American Center to develop a report proposing “God-centered alternatives” to gambling-centered economic development on Indian reservations.
- A proposal not to hold national church meetings in cities that have sports teams and mascots demeaning to Native Americans, including “Chief Wahoo” of the Cleveland Indians.
- A 12-year plan to raise an additional \$300 million to add to the current \$205 million endowment shared by the UMC’s 11 historically black colleges.
- A plan to increase the endowment of United Methodism’s Africa University in Zimbabwe to \$14 million, to maintain facilities and meet “technical challenges.”