

## May 1st Report From General Conference

### *An Exhausting Day*

*By Dr. Riley Case*

With long hours and little free time General Conference can be physically exhausting. It is also extremely exhausting emotionally and spiritually. This is especially so when the subject of human sexuality (read homosexuality) comes up for debate. On Wednesday, a great part of the day was spent on these issues.

The key Discipline paragraph, from which other United Methodist positions are based, is Para. 161G in the Social Principles, which states, "we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching."

The debate took place Wednesday, April 30, afternoon and lasted three wrenching hours. The debate included points of order, minority reports, and impassioned speeches. The African delegates spoke frequently. What was finally accepted was a re-writing of Para. 161G which states clearly that sexual relations are affirmed only within the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage, and the phrase, "we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching." The vote was 501-417 (55% - 45%).

After the vote 175 members and friends of Soulforce (a gay and lesbian advocacy group) and the Reconciling Ministries Network (United Methodist related) stood and sang (and kept singing), "Jesus Loves Me This I Know" as a protest and in an attempt to disrupt the conference. Sympathetic delegates stood with them. 20 of the 40 general agency staff persons also stood (which says something about board and agency staff members). On Friday morning, (after this post was originally written), a massive protest was held on the floor of the convention center by pro-gay demonstrators. See tomorrow's report for details.

Another very important vote dealt with Para 304.3 on church memberships. The issue was whether the pastor has authority in determining readiness for church membership or whether the "pastor is to faithfully receive all persons willing to take the membership vows" (suggesting the final authority is the person taking the vows). Does the pastor have discretion in matters of membership, or not? Behind the argument is the matter that one pastor who denied membership to a practicing homosexual was relieved of his pulpit and the case went all the way to the Judicial Council. The evangelical argument is that this matter is not about practicing homosexuals but about standards in general.

A minority report prepared by evangelicals and moderates giving clear pastoral authority was rejected 384-515 (43%-57%). Then in an unusual move, the conference rejected also the majority report 436-448 (49%-51%) which stated that persons determine their own readiness. Thus the present statement in the Discipline remains.

Once the crucial motion retaining the words "We do not condone.." was approved other homosexual-related petitions followed suit.

The statement that ministers are not to perform same-sex marriages was retained. The statement that self-avowed practicing homosexuals shall not be ordained or appointed was retained by a vote of 579-338. The statement that apportionment funds will not be used to promote the cause of homosexuality also was retained.

It was evident that the vote of the African conferences was crucial. One African delegate was heard to remark, "Today we saved the church." Another said, "This is why we are here."

These petitions took most of the time on Wednesday. There are two more days for all the rest of the petitions.

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