COMMENTARY: UMC is more of one mind than two

Walter B. Fenton, May 28, 2008

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Opponents of the United Methodist Church's teaching on the practice of homosexuality have essentially ritualized their response to General Conferences' quadrennial reaffirmation of that teaching.

First, there is protest. In Cleveland, it was civil and ecclesiastical disobedience. In Pittsburgh, it was a choreographed floor protest. And if Fort Worth is any indication, it appears the GBLTQ community and its allies may be allowed 15-20 minutes of protest at every gathering for the foreseeable future.

I say that because the second part of the ritual is the inevitable call for yet more "dialogue," which is what keeps the issue alive between General Conferences.

After more than 35 years, we suspect the opposition's definition of dialogue is, "Let's keep talking until we have convinced you that you are wrong." We find this condescending.

We believe we have prayerfully and carefully studied the matter. We have dialogued in good faith. We are confident our church's biblically grounded, historical and widely held position is correct. We think repeated calls for dialogue distract the church from its larger mission.

But the call for more dialogue is always justified by the claim that "the church is of two minds" on the matter. The evidence offered for this claim is that delegates routinely reaffirm the church's statement in its Social Principles (Paragraph 161G) by a roughly 55 percent to 45 percent margin.

I suppose one could argue this is a relatively close vote—although if a politician won a primary by this margin, the press would call it a landslide. But even granting the vote is close, it is hardly indicative of a "deeply divided" church.

Statistically, General Conference is not necessarily an accurate reflection of where rank-and-file church members are on any given issue. Here are just a few reasons why.

Fifty percent of the delegates are ordained elders, a group more likely to self-identify as liberal on a variety of matters, including homosexuality.

The Western Jurisdiction actually has more delegates than a strictly representative system would allow, and that jurisdiction has made it clear where it stands on this issue.

This year the Cote d'Ivoire Central Conference had a delegation of just two representing

nearly 700,000 members. While we do not know how its full delegation would have voted on this issue, it is fair to say they were woefully under-represented.

I am not suggesting the church is wrong to assemble the General Conference delegation as it does. However, it is wrong to conclude that because delegates divide 55 percent to 45 percent on one vote the whole church is therefore of "two minds" and in further need of a "robust conversation."

When given the opportunity, General Conference delegates make it clear they are not of two minds on the matter. When asked to allow for the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals, for the right of clergy to preside at same-sex unions or to define marriage in such a way as to validate a homosexual lifestyle, delegates overwhelmingly support the church's teaching, often by 65-percent to 70-percent margins.

It is far closer to the truth to say that a relatively small number of United Methodists are opposed to the church's position.The so-called "time of witness" in Fort Worth bears this out. For an 11.5-million member church purported to be "deeply divided" on this issue, it is telling that only a couple hundred turned out to bear witness to the divide.

Outside the rarefied and hypersensitive confines of a General Conference, there is no evidence that rank-and-file United Methodists are anything but comfortable with the church's position on homosexuality. This is not to suggest they are unaware of the hurt and pain it causes, but simply to say they think it's a thoughtful, fair and balanced position.

In the end, it's a very vocal, committed, but dwindling minority that continues to raise the issue. And a significant number of church leaders continue to support their efforts.

No one disputes their right to organize and advocate for their cause, but the vast majority of us remain committed to our church's biblically grounded, traditional, well-reasoned and gracious position.

The Rev. Fenton, a member of the Greater New Jersey Conference, is presently serving an extension appointment with Good News.