

United Methodists reject changes to homosexuality stance

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NOTE: Photographs and video are available with this report at www.gc2008.umc.org.

*By Robin Russell**

FORT WORTH, Texas (UMNS)—Delegates to the 2008 General Conference on April 30 rejected changes to the United Methodist Social Principles that would have acknowledged that church members disagree on homosexuality.

Delegates instead adopted a minority report that retained language in the denomination's 2004 Book of Discipline describing homosexual practice as “incompatible with Christian teaching.”

The adopted wording in Paragraph 161G also states that “all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God,” and that United Methodists are to be “welcoming, forgiving and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us.”

Delegates also approved a new resolution to oppose homophobia and heterosexism, saying the church opposes “all forms of violence or discrimination based on gender, gender identity, sexual practice or sexual orientation.”

Majority and minority reports

In its majority report, the legislative committee, chaired by Frederick Brewington, New York Conference, recommended that delegates delete the incompatibility sentence and adopt the statement, “Faithful, thoughtful people who have grappled with this issue deeply disagree with one another; yet all seek a faithful witness.”

The revision also would have asked United Methodists and others “to refrain from judgment regarding homosexual persons and practices as the Spirit leads us to a new insight.”

Brewington told delegates the petition would be “an exciting and mature way forward,” calling it “an honest, yet humble approach to how we are to view one another.”

“Moving forward means we have come to a point of telling the truth. And we do not agree,” he said. “We can make the determination to move forward, and stop the hurt.”

In presenting the minority report, however, the Rev. Eddie Fox said that any United Methodist statement on human sexuality needs to be “clear, concise and faithful to biblical teaching.”

Leaving out the statement that homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching” would be confusing, especially for members of the church outside the United States, Fox said.

“I have seen and experienced the pain and the brokenness in parts of our global movement whenever our church has failed to hold fast to this essential teaching of the Holy Scripture,” he said.

The delegates’ action prompted a coalition of gay advocacy groups immediately to stage a silent vigil outside the Fort Worth Convention Center. Members of Soulforce, Affirmation, Reconciling Ministries Network and Methodist Federation for Social Action lined the entrance as delegates returned from a dinner break.

Heated debate

Earlier in the day, the petition opposing homophobia generated some heated debate from the floor when a delegate from the Democratic Republic of Congo described homosexual practice as among the things “that come from the devil.”

“Homosexuality is a practice that is incompatible with the love of God,” he said. “We love homosexual people, but we detest what they do.”

But the Rev. Judy Stevens, New York Conference, countered: “We are all aware of the violence used against homosexual people in the world today. ... It’s time to stand with people whose orientation may be different from us.”

The Rev. Debbie Fisher, from the Northern Illinois Conference, told delegates about a gay relative who was beaten to the point of being unable to function as an adult. “I ask you to think about Wesley’s three rules,” she said. “Great harm was done to this man who loved God.”

The Rev. Steve Wende of the Texas Conference said the debate was painful, but cautioned delegates against changing the Discipline’s language: “If we do this as a way of making some people happy, it won’t make anyone happy.”

Will Green of the New England Conference urged delegates to adopt the committee’s recommendation. “It allows for gay and lesbian people like myself to stay in the church in a safe way that doesn’t cause us to be sacrificed for the sake of church unity,” he said.

The Rev. Kent Millard, South Indiana Conference, said the petition reflects reality among United Methodists. “The truth is, we are divided,” he said. “Let’s just acknowledge that it doesn’t say one is right and one is wrong. It just says we disagree.”

After replacing the majority report with the minority report, delegates approved it 501-417.

In other action on sexuality issues, delegates voted to:

- Add the words “sexual orientation” to an existing resolution regarding a commitment to educational opportunity regardless of gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin or economic or social background;
- Retain language of Paragraph 341.6 in the Discipline that prohibits United Methodist ministers from conducting ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions;
- Reject a proposal to add “civil unions” to a list of basic civil liberties in Paragraph 162.H because delegates felt the language was already inclusive;
- Reject amending Paragraph 161.C to include “committed unions” in a section describing the sanctity of the marriage covenant.

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