

United Methodist Church and Homosexuality

Overview: Decisions by General Conferences and courts from 1972 to 1996

Every four years, a *General Conference of Methodist* churches from around the world is held. Modifications of their *Book of Discipline* are often considered at that conference. ¹

- **1972:** They passed a motion which added the following statement to the denomination's "*Social Principles*" document. This followed a four year study into homosexuality:

"Homosexuals no less than heterosexuals are person of sacred worth, who need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Further we insist that all persons are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured, although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching."

The final phrase "*although...teaching*" was added to the statement after a floor debate. This motion has since been reaffirmed in subsequent conferences. In 1992, it was passed again with a vote of 75% in favor.

- **1976:** They adopted reports which terminated all funding of gay/lesbian support groups with church money. ²

- **1980:** A motion was proposed to add the following phrase to Paragraph 404 of the Book:

"no self-avowed practicing homosexual therefore shall be ordained or appointed in The United Methodist Church"

It failed to pass.

- **1984:** They passed a "fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness" statement (Paragraph 402.2) which stated:

"Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church."

Shortly after the UMC statement, the *New York Conference* passed a resolution stating:

"We deeply regret our denomination's continued oppression of homosexual persons ... We look forward to the day when the church will accept gay and lesbian persons into full fellowship."

- **1988:** The *General Conference* created a "*Committee to Study Homosexuality*" to present a report to the *General Council on Ministries*.

They established a list of categories for committee membership, in order that it be truly inclusive. In a curious move, only heterosexuals were allowed to join the committee. No gays, lesbians or bisexuals were admitted.

- **1992:** The committee was able to reach a consensus on four items:



The 7 references to homosexuality in the Bible represent ancient culture and not the will of God. They cannot be taken as definitive.

Homosexuality is a normal human sexual variant, which can be healthy and whole.

Covenantal, committed, and monogamous homosexual relationships should be affirmed.

These conclusions are supported by God's grace, which is visible in the life of lesbian and gay Christians.

A majority report recommended:

"The present state of knowledge and insight in the biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological, and sociological fields does not provide a satisfactory basis upon which the church can responsibly **maintain** the condemnation of all homosexual practice."

A minority report recommended:

"The present state of knowledge and insight in the biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological, and sociological fields does not provide a satisfactory basis upon which the church can responsibly **alter** its previously held position that we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching."

[**Emphasis** by us]

The committee recommended that Paragraph 72 of the *Social Principles* be augmented to

G) **Rights of Homosexual Persons.** Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to support those rights and liberties for homosexual persons. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting their rightful claims in same-sex relationships where they have: shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships which involve shared contributions, responsibilities, and liabilities, and equal protection before the law. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against gays and lesbians.

The homosexual report was "received" by the General Conference, but was not approved. ³ As a result, Appendix G was not included in the denomination's *Book of Discipline* .

They did modify the *Book* to state that:

"We insist that all persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured."

They further emphasized that Methodists:

"... are committed to support [basic human rights and civil liberties] for homosexual persons."

It also recognizes that claims of gays and lesbians to "*equal protection before the law*" is a issue of simple justice. However, they did not appear to include the human right to marry the person to whom one is committed for life, or the right to be considered for ordination in the UMC.

Also in 1992, the UMC *Commission on Christian Unity and Inter-religious Concerns* opened its membership to all members, including gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.

The *UMC Judicial Council* later ruled that the Commission's action was constitutional.

● **1996:** The 1996 General Conference was held during the week of APR-15. They voted 553 to 321 to add to the *Book of Discipline's* "Social Principles" section a statement saying"

"Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches." At the conference, 11 active and 4 retired Bishops (out of the total of 130 bishops worldwide) circulated a "In All Things Charity" letter calling for equal rights for homosexuals, including the right to be eligible for ordination as pastors. "Clergy from across the United States added their names to the statement, which [by 1998] had been endorsed by approximately 1,300 United Methodist clergy." 4 The letter reads, in part:

"We the undersigned bishops wish to affirm the commitment made at our consecration to the vows to uphold the Discipline of the church. However, we must confess the pain we feel over our personal convictions that are contradicted by the proscriptions in the Discipline against gay and lesbian persons within our church and within our ordained and diaconal ministers. Those sections are Paragraphs 71F (last paragraph); 402.2; 906.12; and footnote, P. 205."

"We believe it is time to break the silence and state where we are on this issue that is hurting and silencing countless faithful Christians. We will continue our responsibility to order and discipline of the church but urge our United Methodist churches to open the doors in gracious hospitality to all our brothers and sisters in the faith."

This time, the vote on the "incompatibility" clause was again passed, with reduced majority of only 60%.

On 1996-MAY-9, *Transforming Congregations* formally expressed concern about the statement of the 15 bishops. They feel that such a stance by liberal Bishops will adversely:

"... influence our ability to do transforming ministry with those who are struggling and overcoming homosexual behavior and desire."

They urged the Council of Bishops to not "*undermine our ministries through your words and actions.*"

The 1996 conference passed the following resolution about homosexuals in the military:

"Basis: *The United States of America, a nation built on equal rights, has denied the right of homosexuals to actively serve their country while being honest about who they are. The United Methodist Church needs to be an advocate for equal civil rights for all marginalized groups, including homosexuals.*

Conclusion: *The U.S. military should not exclude persons from service solely on the basis of sexual orientation.*" (*Book of Resolutions* . Page 112).

It took until the 2010's before it became obvious to many conservative Christians that a person cannot change their sexual orientation in adulthood. The most obvious indication of this was the closing of the largest conservative Christian group dedicated to making gays into ex-gays: Exodus International during mid-2013.

References:

1. David W. Perkins, "United Methodist Church policy regarding 'Homosexuality'," Archived copy at: <http://web.archive.org/>
2. The *Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* 1992, Paragraph 906.12, Page 450
3. "*The Church Studies Homosexuality*," Cokesbury, Nashville, TN; (1994) Page 19.
4. Jimmy Creech, "*Response to the Judicial Charge*", 1998-JAN-26 is at: <http://www.iwgonline.org/docs/creech.html>

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