

May 1st Report From General Conference

Race To The Finish

By Dr. Riley Case

One day left for General Conference and most of the petitions are left to be considered. This promises to be a long night.

A majority of the agenda time on Thursday (May 1) was spent considering the proposal for a total restructuring of the church with the creation of "Regional" conferences. The proposal is so radical that a whole series of constitutional amendments would be required to put the plan into place.

According to the plan present "Central Conferences" (these are conferences outside the United States) would continue as they are except for the name change. What is different is that the United States would become its own "Regional Conference" in order to deal with matters of U.S. national interest. All the Regional Conferences would then gather together for what is now known as the General Conference.

The reason for the proposal has to do with the fact that much of what the General Conference deals with presently applies primarily to the church in the U.S. (almost all of the resolutions for example). Supposedly, matters of importance to the whole denomination would be dealt with by the General Conference while articles of national interest would be dealt with by the Regional Conference.

No one yet can explain how this would work practically. What is known already is that there is a difference of opinion as to whether the Social Principles (and particularly the part dealing with homosexuality) are principles to be applied globally or regionally. Arguments are already being made that homosexuality, for example, is a regional issue. What the African culture believes to be sin is not considered sin in the U.S.

The implications of this are easy to see. It was the Central Conference delegates whose votes were decisive in the petitions relating to homosexuality. If the Central Conference votes were removed the U.S. delegates might well vote to change the church's stance on homosexuality.

Thus the debate for most of Thursday (of course the arguments were not nearly as clearly put as in the explanation above). Since the petitions considered were constitutional amendments a two-thirds majority was required. One amendment failed, but eventually was brought back, the rules suspended and the vote reconsidered and the petition passed.

The matter is not yet settled. The matter must now be considered by all the annual conferences. So the arguments can be made all over again.

The other "happening" on Thursday (which is being reported in the media) was the demonstration by Soul Force and other homosexual advocacy groups on the floor of the conference which was in response to the conference's voting to retain the stance on homosexuality. The demonstration was officially

clocked at 15 minutes (but timed by others more like 20-25 minutes) and consisted of a number of marchers (one estimate was 250) who sang and circled the floor of the conference. As demonstrations go this one seemed not as disruptive as some before when, for example, police had to be called in to make arrests (including those of demonstrative bishops), the chalice on the altar was smashed (although the table used as an altar in Fort Worth was appropriated for the demonstration), and the demonstrators would not disperse as they promised they would.

Although the rules of the conference indicate that the permission of the conference must be given for persons not delegates to speak or have the floor of the conference, the bishops circumvented the rule by citing another rule that the floor is accessible when the conference is not in session. The presiding bishop simply announced the conference not in session and the demonstrators took over. As in the past a number of bishops stood in solidarity with the demonstrators and one bishop spoke. It was then explained that twelve bishops were in "dialogue" with the demonstrating group. When reported by the official press (UM News Service) the demonstrators were referred to as "witnesses" and the whole event was referred to as "Christian conferencing."

To put it in another perspective, bishops circumvented the rules of the conference to allow demonstrators, many of whom were not United Methodist, to publicly protest the actions of the conference. Figuring how much the conference is costing, the 20-minute demonstration used \$18,300 of agenda time. The bishops appeared to show much more sympathy for the demonstrators than the delegates (who have been referred to by the demonstrators as doing "spiritual violence" because of the decision). In terms of pain the Africans (with much less experience about such things) are reported to be simply devastated because of actions which appear disrespectful to them and their convictions. And in the end this was all referred to as "Christian conferencing."

If there was a piece of good news from Thursday's proceedings it was the report of action to allow qualified Local Pastors the right to vote on General Conference delegates. This too will involve a constitutional amendment and will be considered by the annual conferences. The Reform and Renewal Coalition has long advocated for such rights, believing that this will give more voice to many of the small town and rural churches, many of whom are served by Local Pastors.

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