

Wrap up: Assembly retains stance on homosexuality

April 30, 2008

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

*By J. Richard Peck**

FORT WORTH, Texas (UMNS)—After a long and emotional debate, the 2008 General Conference voted April 30 to retain statements in the Social Principles that the “United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”

The final action replaced a “majority report” from a legislative committee, which called for recognition that “faithful and thoughtful people who have grappled with this issue deeply disagree with one another; yet all seek a faithful witness.” The assembly replaced the majority report by a 517-416 vote.

The committee had voted 39-27 to ask for United Methodists and others “to refrain from judgment regarding homosexual persons and practices as the Spirit leads us to new insights.” Frederick Brewington, a layman in the New York Annual (regional) Conference who chaired the legislative committee, said the proposed statement would eliminate a sentence that has “caused festering sores among the body for three decades.”

The Rev. Eddie Fox, director of world evangelism for the World Methodist Council, led the effort to retain the current language. “My integrity will not allow me to be silent,” he said in introducing the “minority report” to keep the church’s stance unchanged. He said the Social Principles must be faithful to biblical teaching, and he suggested that any change in the language would harm the global church.

In approving the minority report, the assembly affirmed that all persons are “individuals of sacred worth created in the image of God.” Delegates also retained statements asking “families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends.”

In a separate resolution, the conference asked the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, the church’s social advocacy agency, to develop educational resources and materials on the effects of homophobia and heterosexism, the discrimination or prejudice against lesbians or gay men by heterosexual people.

The Rev. Deborah Fisher, a pastor in the Northern Illinois Conference, described how her husband’s cousin was severely beaten because he was a gay man. That hate crime reduced him to functioning on a second-grade level and he died 10 years later.

The conference also retained a rule that prohibits United Methodist clergy from conducting ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions.

When delegates returned for the evening session, they walked by some 100 people standing in silent protest of the afternoon votes.

Membership

General Conference let stand language in the Book of Discipline regarding pastoral authority over church membership.

Petitions were brought to the assembly after considerable controversy over a 2005 decision by the United Methodist Judicial Council supporting the Rev. Ed Johnson of Virginia who denied membership to a man who was in an openly homosexual relationship. The council reinstated Johnson after he had been placed on involuntary leave by the Virginia Annual Conference.

A majority report of a legislative committee asked the conference to make it clear that pastors and congregations “are to faithfully receive all persons who are willing to affirm our vows of membership.”

The Rev. Ted Virts, a superintendent in Sacramento, Calif., argued for the majority report. He said his job is to be “an errand-runner for God” who tells people they are “invited to a banquet,” not to be “a ticket-taker or a security guard.”

A minority report urged delegates to declare that “pastors have the responsibility of discerning one’s readiness to take the vows of membership.”

The Rev. Bob Moon, a pastor in Macon, Ga., supported the minority report, saying pastors must be good shepherds who care for their flock. Allowing anyone to come into the community could have unintended consequences.

The minority report was defeated 515-384, while the majority report was defeated by 51 percent of the delegates, leaving in place the Discipline’s current language: “All people may attend its worship services, participate in the programs, receive the sacraments and become members in any local church in the connection.

‘Sin of racism’

“If we’re going to be serious about the future of our church around the sin of racism, some tables will have to be overturned,” New York Area West Bishop Violet L. Fisher said in her morning sermon to the assembly.

She said Jesus deliberately and unabashedly modeled both gender and racial inclusiveness by going into Samaria and speaking with the woman. “Are we willing to go through Samaria?” Fisher asked.

The bishop encouraged the denomination not to pretend it’s done all it can do to “eliminate racism, white privilege, discrimination and clever tactics of subterfuge that

leave our racial and ethnic ministries and pastors of color underfunded, underappreciated, and misunderstood.”

The church must create and build “ministries that are culturally congruent with God’s children,” said Fisher. United Methodists must also “confront the institutional racism that infects the structures of the church and perpetuates the forces of oppression in the world,” she added.

100 years of men’s ministry

Shortly before adjourning at noon, delegates celebrated the 100th anniversary of ministry to men in The United Methodist Church and predecessor denominations. A six-minute video presentation noted that men’s ministry was launched in 1908 because two-thirds of Methodists worshipping on Sunday morning were women.

The video displayed ministries of United Methodist men such as scouting, hunger-relief efforts through the Society of St. Andrew, the Upper Room Prayer Line, Big Brothers and providing a historic book of daily devotions for members of the armed forces.

The video concluded when Dale Long, a Dallas resident who has served as a big brother to six boys over the past 30 years, introduced his little brother, 15-year-old LaDarius Douglas.

Fewer U.S. bishops

Delegates approved a plan that will result in one less bishop in four of the five U.S. jurisdictions beginning in 2012. In an April 29 legislative session, delegates agreed that savings from those reductions will be used to fund new episcopal areas outside of the United States.

The North Central, Northeastern, South Central and Western jurisdictions each will have one less bishop under a new formula for determining the number of bishops. The action will not affect the Southeastern Jurisdiction, which already has one less bishop than the current formula allows. The Northeastern Jurisdiction likely will lose a bishop in 2008 under the current formula and a second one in 2012 under the new formula.

Africa University

Africa University is a uniting, connectional dream come true. That’s the message received by delegates during a report from its nearly 16-year-old school in Mutare, Zimbabwe.

The report, introduced by James Salley, associate vice chancellor of institutional development of the United Methodist-related school, included the Africa University Choir, the school's chancellor, interim vice chancellor, an alumnus and a video presentation about how some of the university's 2,500 graduates are making an impact in 28 countries in Africa.

On April 28, delegates requested \$20 million over a four-year period for the school—\$10 million in apportionments and \$10 million to be raised through the World Service Special Gifts.

The Philippines

Delegates adopted a resolution addressing the “unabated and egregious violations” of human rights in the Philippines that have resulted in 886 extrajudicial killings and 179 disappearances, including pastors and church workers.

The church called on the Philippine government to “immediately stop the killings and all other forms of human rights violations” and asked other nations to look into the situation.

A second resolution pledged to “pray for the Filipinos as they disciple among their people and call them to fidelity to our Lord Jesus Christ’s imperatives for love, compassion, justice and peace.”

Other items

Judicial Council ruled that General Conference can determine the number and qualifications of its members, and the process of how they are elected, but that the constitution of the church empowers the high court “to adopt its own methods of organization and procedure.” The council also agreed that General Conference has a right to request that all members of the nine-member council be present to rule on the constitutionality of General Conference.

The assembly simplified the candidacy process whereby men and women become ordained as deacons or elders. Currently, a person must be a church member for two years before he or she can be considered as a candidate for ministry by a district committee on ordained ministry. That waiting time was shortened to one year, and the body ruled that membership is not required if the candidate has been involved in a United Methodist campus ministry or other denominational ministry for one year. Delegates also changed “required” into “recommended” readings and study with a pastor or mentor. The district committee will have greater authority to discern who is ready to proceed as a certified candidate.

Four United Methodist bishops and a top agency executive spoke about the human cost of the Iraq war at an April 29 prayer service for the Eyes Wide Open exhibit. The temporary display in a nearby park included a pair of combat boots for every service person from Texas who has died in Iraq and Afghanistan. About 200 pairs of civilian shoes demonstrated civilian casualties. "These are sacred boots, which elevate this parcel to holy space," said Bishop John Schol of the church's Washington (D.C.) Area. "We continue to call on the president and Congress of the United States and the leaders of all the nations in the Coalition Forces to begin immediately a safe and full withdrawal of all military personnel from Iraq." Jim Winkler, top executive of the Board of Church and Society, Virginia Area Bishop Charlene Kammerer, North Katanga Bishop Nkulu Ntanda Ntambo and Denver Area Bishop Warner H. Brown also spoke out against the war.

General Conference rules state that only official materials may be placed on the desks of delegates. A delegate noted that pages were delivering identical messages to several delegates, and he asked the presiding bishop if this was a violation of the rules. The Rev. Fitzgerald Reist, secretary of the conference, said that any mass distribution by pages would be against the spirit of the law, but not the letter of the law. The assembly adopted a new rule restricting such practices in the future.

People in 48 countries have gone online to watch the business sessions, worship services and special events of the conference. Proceedings are being streamed live on the assembly's Web site, www.gc2008.umc.org. The General Conference Web site has been viewed 487,890 times from April 23 to 29.

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