



# Issue Paper

## The United Methodist Church and Gender Reassignment

### **Official Position as of the 2004 Book of Discipline**

The United Methodist Book of Discipline has no specific policies regarding gender reassignment. The 2004 Book of Resolutions contains no citations referring to the issue.

### **Historical Background**

In 2002, the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church scheduled a hearing to consider the future of Rev. Rebecca A. Steen, a United Methodist pastor who had undergone gender reassignment. At the hearing and before any decisions were reached, Rev. Steen announced that she surrendered her clergy credentials and withdrew from membership in the United Methodist Church. In 1999, she had sought voluntary leave from the Conference and underwent gender reassignment. Prior to the process, Steen was Rev. Richard A. Zamostny. Rev. Zamostny had served churches in three Maryland communities during a career that lasted 17 years. Her request to return to active ministry sparked the controversy. A formal complaint was lodged against her in early June. Apparently the contents of the complaint did not mention the issue of gender reassignment. Instead the complaint focused on issues related to ministerial effectiveness.

On May 24, 2007, Rev. Drew Phoenix — formerly Rev. Ann Gordon, spoke to a closed clergy session and a general plenary session sharing his story with members of the Baltimore-Washington Conference. During the prior year he had been undergoing medical procedures for the transition from female to male.

During the discussion about Phoenix at the executive clergy session, two requests were made for the bishop's decision of law. The first asked whether a name change based on a change of gender identity should be listed in a category which requires no discussion or approval, or whether it should be placed under another disciplinary area that requires consent and recommendation by the conference Board of Ordained Ministry. The second question asked whether transgender persons are eligible for appointment in the United Methodist Church. In his ruling the presiding bishop wrote that "there are no paragraphs in the 2004 Book of Discipline that prevent transgender clergy from serving an appointment in the United Methodist Church." Both of these questions were before the meeting of the Judicial Council held in San Francisco in October of 2007.

At that meeting of the Council, Decision Number 1074, made the following statement: "A clergyperson who remained in good standing in the annual conference is required to be continued under appointment. A clergyperson's good standing cannot be terminated without administrative or judicial action having occurred and all fair process being accorded. All clergy name changes regardless of the reasons for the name change are to be placed under minute question # 91. The Judicial Council does not reach the question of whether gender change is a chargeable offense or violates minimum standards established by the General Conference."

The Judicial Council did not rule on whether changing gender is a chargeable offense or violates minimum standards set by the General Conference. Rather, the court said that "a clergyperson's standing cannot be terminated without administrative or judicial action have occurred and all fair process being accorded."

Because Rev. Phoenix is a clergy member in good standing, the ruling means that he will continue to

serve his church. However, the subject of whether transgendered clergy are eligible for appointment are likely to be among the issues debated at the 2008 General Conference.

### **Why This Is an Issue**

There are many issues on which the United Methodist Church "lacks a common mind." This issue, however, presents many unique challenges for the church and for the Conference. The issue of gender reassignment comes at a time when the church is already divided over sexual orientation. However, a scientific advance and changing sexual mores allow transgender people to slowly move into the mainstream, all churches will have to grapple with the ethical and theological implication of gender identity. The medical community is facing controversy regarding the same issue. The American Psychiatric Association is caught on the horns of the same dilemma. While it labels transgenderism a mental "disorder, it also points out that "many transgender people do not experience their transgender feelings and traits to be distressing or disabling, which implies that being transgender does not constitute a mental disorder per se."

Other churches and religious institutions have already faced the issue with various approaches. In 2003, the Vatican said transsexuals suffer from "mental pathologies" and barred them from Roman Catholic religious orders. Last year, a Christian college in Michigan fired a transgender professor for failing to live up to Christian "ideals." On the other hand, the United Church of Christ, traditionally the country's most liberal Christian denomination, ordained its first transsexual pastor, Bran Scott, in 1999. Reverend Erin Swenson, a Presbyterian pastor who transitioned from male to female in 1996, has continued in ministry but feels isolated because of gender reassignment.

Many groups and caucuses have already pledged to bring petitions to deal with the issue of transgendered clergy. Some will seek a total ban on gender reassigned persons in the ministry of the church. Others will seek total acceptance of such persons. Others will suggest what is often suggested when the Conference faces a new and difficult challenge: a time of study and reflection with a report made at the next General Conference in 2012.