



Issue Paper

The United Methodist Church and Ordination for Gays and Lesbians

Official Position of the Book of Discipline

¶ 304.3: Statement regarding the ordination of homosexuals:

- “While persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world.
- Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self avowed practicing homosexuals¹ are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in the United Methodist Church
- ¹*Self-avowed practicing homosexual* is understood to mean that a person openly acknowledges to a bishop, district superintendent, district committee of ordained ministry, board of ordained ministry, or clergy session that the person is a practicing homosexual. See Judicial Council Decisions 702, 708, 722, 725, 764.

Historical Background

The debate on homosexuality began at the 1972 General Conference. The issue of ordination for gays and lesbians became one of the focal points of the 1980 Conference. An unsuccessful effort was made to add the phrase, “no self-avowed practicing homosexual therefore shall be ordained or appointed in the United Methodist Church.” The General Conference noted that “the United Methodist Church has moved away from prohibitions of specific acts, for such prohibitions can be endless. We affirm our trust in the covenant community and the process by which we ordained ministers. A variety of other proposals on homosexuality also failed. This left the statements of 1972 and 1976 intact.

The 1984 General Conference made no changes to the Social Principles, but the requirements of ordination once again became the focal point. A 1983 Judicial Council ruled that the Book of Discipline did not prohibit the ordination or appointment of practicing homosexuals. After much debate, the 1984 Conference adopted, as a standard for ordained clergy, a commitment to “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness.” Language was also adopted regarding homosexuality. “Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained ministers, or appointed to serve in the United Methodist Church.”

Three years later, in 1987, Reverend Rose Mary Denman became the first minister brought to trial under that rubric. A trial jury later found her in violation of the Discipline and her ordination was removed. Since that time several others have been tried and had their credentials terminated. In March, 2003, Reverend Elizabeth Stroud, associate pastor of First United Methodist Church, Germantown, Pennsylvania, disclosed that she was a “lesbian living in a committed relationship with her partner.” A complaint was filed by the presiding bishop and at trial she was found guilty of the charges. An appeal was made to the Northeast Jurisdiction Committee on Appeals who reversed the trial court’s decision. The case eventually found its way to the Judicial Council and in Decision Number 1027 reversed the Committee on Appeals decision and upheld the verdict of the trial court. This decision was made on October 29, 2005.

Why This Is an Issue

In November 2005, the Judicial Council, in Decision Number 1032, supported Reverend Ed. Johnson of

South Hills United Methodist church in Virginia in his decision not to allow a gay man to join his congregation. The Council's decision brings up not only the issue of gay and lesbian membership in the United Methodist Church, but every other issue as well.

On many of these related issues there is disagreement among the five regional jurisdictions of the United States. For example, in the Western Jurisdiction only 28% of clergy and 26% of laity agree strongly or somewhat strongly with the church's position. In the Southeastern Jurisdiction, 66% of the clergy and 67% of laity agree strongly or somewhat strongly with the church's position. The United Methodist Church, as other mainline denominations, is deeply divided on every issue regarding homosexuality, including the ordination of gays and lesbians.