



Issue Paper

The United Methodist Church and Membership and Pastoral Authority

Official Position as of 2004 Book of Discipline

¶214 — The United Methodist Church is a part of the holy catholic (universal) church, as we profess in the Apostle's Creed. In the church, Jesus Christ is proclaimed and professed as Lord and Savior. All people may attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments and become members in any local church in the connection.

¶217 — When persons unite as professing members with a local United Methodist church, they profess their faith in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; in Jesus Christ his only Son, and in the Holy Spirit. Thus, they make known their desire to live their daily lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. They covenant together with God and with the members of the local church to keep the vows which are a part of the order of confirmation and reception into the Church:

1. To renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of their sin
1. To accept the freedom and power God gives them to resist evil, injustice, and oppression;
2. To confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put their whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as their Lord;
3. To remain faithful members of Christ's holy church, and serve as Christ's representatives in the world;
4. To be loyal to The United Methodist church and do all in their power to strengthen its ministries;
5. To faithfully participate in its ministries by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, and their service;
6. To receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Why This Is an Issue for the Church

The right to membership in a United Methodist congregation came under scrutiny in 2005 when Rev. Ed Johnson, pastor of South Hill United Methodist Church in Virginia denied membership to an openly gay man who was actively involved with the church. He requested a transfer of his membership from another denomination. Johnson refused to receive the man into membership because the man would neither repent nor seek to live a different lifestyle.

Background

Rev. Johnson's decision was overturned by Virginia area Bishop Charlene P. Kammerer who later placed him on involuntary leave of absence. All bishops' decisions of law are routinely examined by the denomination's Judicial Council. In Decision 1031, the council dealt with the due process problems in how Johnson was disciplined. Decision 1032 was the more sweeping ruling, saying that the church's *Book of Discipline* "invests discretion in the pastor-in-charge to make determination of a person's readiness to

affirm the vows of membership.” The result of both cases was the reinstatement of Johnson to his previous status with all salary and benefits.

In the decision dealing with the authority of a pastor, the council's ruling states that ¶214 and ¶225 are “permissive and do not mandate receipt into membership of all persons regardless of their willingness to affirm membership vows.” The operative word in both paragraphs, the ruling says, is that persons “may” become members.

A statement from the Council of Bishops, in support of Bishop Kammerer's actions: “One thing is clear. The *Constitution* and *Social Principles* of The United Methodist Church have not changed. Our *Book of Discipline* has not changed. All persons are of sacred worth. Our communion table is open to all persons who profess their belief in Jesus Christ and are seeking forgiveness for their sins. God's love is unconditional.”