



# Issue Paper

## The United Methodist Church and Military Service of Gays and Lesbians

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

(General statement regarding military service in the Social Principles of the Church)

¶164.V.I — **Military Service** -- We deplore war and urge the peaceful settlement of all disputes among nations. From the beginning, the Christian conscience has struggled with the harsh realities of violence and war, for these evils clearly frustrate God's loving purposes for humankind. We yearn for the day when there will be no more war and people will live together in peace and justice. Some of us believe that war, and other acts of violence, are never acceptable to Christians. We also acknowledge that many Christians believe that, when peaceful alternatives have failed, the force of arms may regretfully be preferable to unchecked aggression, tyranny and genocide. We honor the witness of pacifists who will not allow us to become complacent about war and violence. We also respect those who support the use of force, but only in extreme situations and only when the need is clear beyond reasonable doubt, and through appropriate international organizations.

We urge the establishment of the rule of law in international affairs as a means of elimination of war, violence, and coercion in these affairs. We reject national policies of enforced military service as incompatible with the gospel. We acknowledge the agonizing tension created by the demand for military service by national governments. We urge all young adults to seek the counsel of the Church as they reach a conscientious decision concerning the nature of their responsibility as citizens. Pastors are called upon to be available for counseling with all young adults who face conscription, including those who conscientiously refuse to cooperate with a system of conscription. We support and extend the ministry of the Church to those persons who conscientiously oppose all war, or any particular war, and who therefore refuse to serve in the armed forces or to cooperate with systems of military conscription. We also support and extend the Church's ministry to those persons who conscientiously choose to serve in the armed forces or to accept alternative service. As Christians we are aware that neither the way of military action, nor the way of inaction is always righteous before God.

### **Relevant Resolutions From the 2004 Book of Discipline**

Resolution Number 49 (P.179)—*Basis*: The United States of America, a nation built on equal rights, has denied the right of homosexuals to actively serve their country while being honest about who they are. Meanwhile, the United Methodist Church is moving toward accepting all people for who they are. The United Methodist Church needs to be an advocate for equal rights for all marginalized groups, including homosexuals. *Conclusion*: The U. S. Military should not exclude persons from service solely on the basis of sexual orientation. Adopted 1996 (This resolution referred to ¶162.3.H—Sexual Orientation.)

### **Historical Background**

There have been a variety of responses to gays, lesbians and bisexual serving in the military throughout the world. Some Western military forces have removed policies that excluded these persons. Of the 25 countries that participate in NATO, more than 20 permit open lesbians, gays, or bisexuals to serve. Those who are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council that are inclusive of gays in the military are the United Kingdom and France. Three other members are generally opposed to their service. China bans gays and lesbians outright. Russia excludes all gays and lesbians during peacetime but allows some gay men to serve in wartime. The United States technically permits gays and lesbians to

serve, but only in secrecy and celibacy. Israel is the only country in the Middle East who has gays and lesbians serving in the military.

The policy of “don’t ask don’t tell” in the US military was introduced as a compromise in 1993 and approved by President Bill Clinton. The actual policy was crafted by Colin Powell and has been maintained by George W. Bush. The policy posits that “Sexual orientation will not be a bar to service unless manifested by homosexual conduct. The military will discharge members who engage in homosexual conduct, which is defined as a homosexual act, a statement that member is homosexual or bisexual, or a marriage or attempted marriage to someone of the same gender.”

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

In 2003, the *San Francisco Chronicle* published an article on the 10th anniversary of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. It reports that in the 10 years of the policy over 10,000 men and women have had their military careers terminated. The article also reports that rather than settling the controversy about military service, the actual application of the policy has created new conflict inside the military and without.

More controversy was created in 2006 when the Pentagon released a report that the number of homosexuals discharged from the military under the policy dropped significantly from previous years. On average, more than 1,000 service members were discharged each year from 1997 to 2001. In the five years between 2001 and 2006, however, the average has fallen below 730, a drop of 23%. The decrease during a time of war and a time when military recruitment was at an all time low prompted the new conflict over the issue.

The United Methodist Church has been in a struggle over various issues regarding Gays and Lesbians for 36 years. During the time of the Iraq war, this issue has gained traction both inside the church and without. The church may be asked to make some statement about the issue at the 2008 General Conference.

### **Discussion Questions for Congregations**

- What beliefs do you hold about God that informs your opinions and your actions about this topic?
- How would you rewrite the Social Principles and the Book of Discipline to reflect your views?
- If you took the Social Principle statement very seriously, what changes, if any, would you need to make in your life? (Questions adapted from the Teaching Guide of the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church, 2005-2008).