

Gay Christian Rights Protest Clouds Methodist Conference

Gay rights groups pushed as hard as they could, but the United Methodist Church (UMC) isn't following in the footsteps of some of its Presbyterian counterparts.

The UMC decided at its General Conference 2012 in Tampa this week to uphold traditional Christian views of marriage and homosexuality, despite vocal opposition.

"Methodists voted down legislation to change its strong stand against homosexuality," says Phil Chamberlin, a Spirit-filled Methodist pastor at Grace United Methodist Church in Palestine, Texas. "Liberals are protesting and trying to shut down the general conference."

According to the UMC news service, protestors stayed on the plenary floor during the lunch break, and continued to sing "What Does the Lord Require of You?" for several hours until the afternoon session began. Meanwhile, representatives of the Council of Bishops spoke with leaders of the demonstration to negotiate a solution to the impasse.

"I am a lesbian and a child of God," Jen Ihlo, a Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference delegate, was reported as saying. "I strongly urge the body to adopt this compromise so gay youth will recognize the church loves them and the pain will stop."

Nevertheless, delegates of the denomination's governing body maintained language in its official rule book calling homosexual practice "incompatible with Christian teaching." The Book of Discipline, Paragraph 161F states: "The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching."

"Many feel we need to take a strong stand against homosexuality," James Howell, of the Western North Carolina Annual Conference, told a UMC writer. "What matters is God's will. We have said for a long time we do not condone homosexuality, but they are here, they are in our delegations, they are serving our churches. They keep coming back ... there is a kind of miracle in that."

The UMC will continue to prohibit same-sex unions and expect clergy to be celibate if single and monogamous if married in a marriage between man and woman. The development is counter to recent moves in other liberal-led Mainline Protestant churches to liberalize their sexual teachings.

"Successive United Methodist General Conferences have repeatedly affirmed scripture and the church's historic teachings on marriage and sexual ethics," says Mark Tooley, president of the Institute on Religion & Democracy. "Likely to have an African membership majority within a decade or so, United Methodism can anticipate a bright future ahead that is more tied to vibrant global Christianity than to dying liberal Protestantism in America."

The global 12 million member UMC is increasingly comprised of overseas membership, especially from Africa. About 40 percent of delegates are from outside the U.S., mostly Africa, where over 4 million United Methodists now live. In the last reporting year, the church in the U.S. lost over 100,000 persons and gained about 200,000 persons in Africa. African United Methodism is overwhelmingly conservative theologically.