

UMC Bishops: Conferences, Pastors Should Decide on LGBT Clergy

The bishops of the United Methodist Church have endorsed a plan that would allow individual pastors and regional bodies to make their own decisions on whether to perform same-sex weddings and ordain LGBT people as clergy.

The Council of Bishops recommended the One Church Plan, on Friday (May 4), after nearly a week of meetings in Chicago, according to a council press release.

"The Council's prayerful deliberation reflected the diversity of the global denomination on the matter of homosexuality and many other matters," Bishop Ken Carter, president of the Council of Bishops, said in the release.

"The Council affirms the strength of this diversity and our commitment to maintain the unity of the church."

Differing views on the inclusion of LGBT members have roiled the second-largest Protestant denomination in the United States, drawing to a stalemate at a contentious meeting of global delegates at the 2016 General Conference in Portland, Ore.

Bishops there announced the creation of a 32-member commission that would make recommendations to settle questions of ordination and marriage at a special session of the General Conference to be held in February in St. Louis.

Carter was one of the moderators of that commission.

The denomination's rulebook, the Book of Discipline, states that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching" and "self-avowed practicing homosexuals"

cannot be ordained as ministers, appointed to serve or married in the church.

But since the 2016 meeting, many of its smaller U.S. jurisdictions and regional bodies, called annual conferences, have made their own decisions regarding LGBT clergy. Later that year, the Mountain Sky Conference elected Karen Oliveto, a married lesbian, as the denomination's first openly LGBT bishop.

For more than 20 years, individual pastors have publicly or secretly celebrated same-sex unions, and more recently legal weddings. Several were tried in church courts and some stripped of their ordination credentials.

The One Church Plan is one of three proposed by the commission. Others include the Traditionalist Plan and the Connectional Conference Plan.

Bishops will submit a report to the special session including all three plans and a narrative of the council's discernment process regarding those plans. But they will recommend the One Church Plan.

In their release, bishops said each plan "held values that are important to the life and work of the church."

The One Church Plan would remove the controversial language about human sexuality from the Book of Discipline, according to the council. It also would safeguard pastors and conferences unwilling to perform same-sex weddings or ordain LGBT people because of their theological convictions.

Few details about the plans will be available until July 8, by which date the full report for General Conference delegates is expected to be released, according to the council. {eo}

© 2018 Religion News Service. All rights reserved.