

By the Way, Methodists Have Their Own Problems

Ken Briggs | Nov. 20, 2013 NCR Today

Since I've not hesitated to criticize Catholicism's top-down governance that denies laity a voice, I feel obliged to recognize the failings of Protestants who practice open participation in decision making.

This week my own tradition, United Methodism, took the first step toward stripping one of its ministers of ordination for presiding at the same sex marriage of his son and partner in 2007. The Rev. Frank Schaefer, a Pennsylvanian pastor, was suspended by a church jury and warned that his ordination will be revoked if he refuses to desist from espousing gay rights within 60 days. The minister said he had no intention of recanting.

The United Methodist church decides issues such as the morality of homosexuality through a General Conference every four years. It is decidedly democratic, with bishops, pastors and lay people discussing and debating, sometimes heatedly, the positions the church adopts on a variety of matters. The process is inevitably political as distinctly conservative and liberal movements in the church struggle to advance their views with hopes of carrying the day. In the past, United Methodism has been lumped among the liberal mainstream denominations for its activist stands on social justice and personal freedom, including women's ordination and racial equality. But in recent decades, the evangelical wing of the church has been on the rise, resisting liberal trends including acceptance of homosexual sex. Like the Catholic church, the Methodists officially welcome gays and lesbians but consider sexuality among them sinful.

The supreme teaching authority of Methodism, the General Conference, has therefore produced the same position on homosexuality as the Vatican by entirely opposite means. Everyone votes at the Conference while the pope is a government of one.

So is a more egalitarian church the answer? Many American Catholics appear to think so as evident by the heightened enthusiasm over the pre-synod questionnaire now making the rounds. In my view the tons of data that may emerge from that study is an exercise in fruitless redundancy but it does at least witness to the yearnings of lay people for a more inclusive church government. On the Methodist side, advocates of a liberalized teaching on gays and lesbians faces the obstacle of internal lay opposition. That may be a far greater hurdle but if, in ideal terms, the truth wins out, wouldn't that be the goal under any system? Unless the moral rightness of homosexuality doesn't finally make a convincing case to a solid can it be said to have won anything significant?

I'm obviously overlooking big differences between the two church systems, including differences over the meaning of ordination and the nature of authority in each church, but the fundamental question is posed by the case of Schaefer. How does the church decide and who gets to determine how binding its teachings become?