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Methodists uphold policy that calls homosexuality 'incompatible with Christian teaching'

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | May. 4, 2012

Despite emotional protests and fierce lobbying from gay rights groups, United Methodists voted on Thursday (May 2) to maintain their denomination's stance that homosexuals acts are "incompatible with Christian teaching."

Two "agree to disagree" proposals were soundly defeated during separate votes by the nearly 1,000 delegates gathered for the United Methodist Church's General Conference in Tampa, Fla.

One proposal would have replaced the "incompatible" phrase in the Book of Discipline, which contains the denomination's laws and doctrines. Both proposals sought to soften the disputed doctrine by adding more ambiguous statements about homosexuality.

Gay rights advocates in the UMC viewed the compromise proposals as the best chance to advance their cause at this year's General Conference, which convenes every four years. On Friday, delegates are expected to debate the church's bans on noncelibate gay clergy and same-sex marriage.

With nearly 8 million members in the U.S., the UMC remains the country's largest mainline Protestant denomination. But United Methodism is shrinking in the U.S. and growing in Africa and Asia, shifting the balance of power to overseas conservatives. Nearly 40 percent of the delegates gathered in Tampa live outside the U.S.

Thursday's debate put the denomination's wide diversity on display -- as gays and lesbians pleaded for recognition of their "sacred worth" and an African delegate, speaking through an interpreter, compared homosexuality to bestiality.

The proposals defeated on Thursday would have acknowledged that diversity, but, some conservatives argued, at the cost of muddying traditional doctrines.

One proposal would have changed the Book of Discipline to say that gays and lesbians are "people of sacred worth" and that church members differ about
The Rev. Adam Hamilton, a pastor in Leawood, Kansas, argued the proposal would "acknowledge our disagreement on a huge issue that is separating churches in North America today."

That proposal was defeated by a tally of 54 -- 46 percent.

"I see no reason why we should state (in the Book of Discipline) that we disagree," said the Rev. Maxie Dunnam, former president of Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky. "We disagree on almost every issue we consider."

The delegates defeated another compromise proposal by an even wider margin: 61 to 39 percent. The resolution

would have acknowledged a "limited understanding" of human sexuality and called on the church to "refrain from judgment regarding homosexual persons and practices until the Spirit leads us to new insight."

The Rev. Steve Wendy of Texas argued that the compromise would cause confusion and lead the church to "stumble in our witness."

"If you look at our largest congregations, and crunch the numbers, they are all reaching young adults successfully," Wendy said. "And, overwhelmingly, they teach and proclaim God's truth without compromise."

But Jennifer Ihlo, a lay delegate from the Baltimore/Washington Conference, argued in favor of the compromise. "I want to be clear that this is not an abstract issue. This is about people who are being harmed by the church and by the use of the 'incompatibility' language," Ihlo said.

"I am a lesbian and a child of God and I strongly urge the body to support this compromise language so that gay youth ... will recognize that the church loves them and God loves them and the violence and pain and suicide will stop."

After the proposals were defeated on Thursday, gay rights activists flooded the assembly floor and disrupted the session by singing the hymn "What Does the Lord Require of You?"

Indiana Bishop Michael Coyner, chair of the morning session, told the protesters, "I think you're actually hurting your point." When the protesters refused to stop singing, Coyner closed the session, sent the delegates to an early lunch and threatened to bar protesters from the convention hall in the afternoon.

Church leaders and the protesters later worked out a compromise, according to United Methodist News Service. On Thursday afternoon, the delegates shifted their attention to clergy pension plans, leaving key votes on gay clergy and same-sex marriage to Friday, the last day of General Conference.

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