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United Methodists Maintain Standards

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The United Methodist Church voted this week to maintain its official policy that homosexual activity is “incompatible with Christian teaching.” The policy of the church also prohibits the recognition or celebration of same-sex relationships.

Meeting for its General Conference in Ft. Worth, Texas, the Methodists voted 517 to 416 to keep the current policy and language in its Book of Discipline. The denomination voted down a proposal to replace the “incompatible with Christian teaching” language with a statement that the church should “refrain from judgment regarding homosexual persons and practices as the Spirit leads us to new insight.”

As [Religion News Service](#) and [Christianity Today](#) reported:

Many Methodists rose to speak in favor of a clear continuation of traditional teachings, especially for the purpose of evangelizing to a world that they said is beset by moral confusion.

“Friends, this is serious business,” said the Rev. H. Eddie Fox, director of evangelism for the World Methodist Council. “It is an urgent matter for our church. It matters what we believe and what we practice and we do not meet here in isolation.”

A group of 300 delegates protested the decision and blamed it, at least in part, on delegates from Africa. As [The Dallas Morning News](#) reported:

“It was a terrible day,” said the Rev. Eric Folkerth, pastor of Northaven United Methodist Church in Dallas. . . .

Mr. Folkerth said, “American Methodists are ready for change.” But he and others said change was thwarted this time by international delegates, particularly delegates from Africa, whose numbers and influence have grown because the denomination is growing there.

Dogo Jean Yoou, a lay delegate from Ivory Coast, agreed that the African delegates oppose relaxing the UMC’s stands on homosexuality. “We are still very conservative on this issue,” he said.

The United Methodist Church has been debating issues of human sexuality for four decades. The controversy is hardly unique to that denomination. The liberal churches often identified as “mainline Protestantism” have been torn asunder by these debates, with the Episcopal Church breaking up in some regions and other denominations attempting to avert immediate disaster by avoiding a decision for as long as possible. The sand in that hourglass is running out. As one United Methodist leader commented, a decision to approve homosexuality and same-sex relationships would signal “the death knell for the church.”

As some of those pressing for the normalization of homosexuality made clear, they believe that time is on their side. The fact that the most important vote was separated by only 101 votes may indicate that they are right. The next General Conference in 2012 is certain to confront similar efforts.

Nevertheless, the denomination's decision to retain its teaching that homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching" should encourage all those working within other denominations and churches to maintain biblical standards. A narrow victory is still a victory.

Art depicts the historic sanctuary of First United Methodist Church of Huntington, West Virginia.

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