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Will the Methodists Split Over Homosexuality?

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The most urgent dimension of the controversy erupted when an ecclesiastical trial in Bothell, Washington ended in the acquittal of the Rev. Karen Damman, an acknowledged lesbian who has served as pastor of a United Methodist Church. The church's Social Principles and Book of Discipline explicitly disallow the ordination and pastoral service of self-acknowledged homosexuals. Nevertheless, the Methodist jury in Washington put the church's doctrine on trial, rather than the defendant.

Conservative outrage fueled debate on and off the floor as the church met in Pittsburgh. Issues related to human sexuality have been on the agenda for United Methodists and other so-called mainline Protestants for decades, but movements inside and outside the churches have forced a moment of decision.

At their General Conference—held every four years—Methodists do the business of their denomination, establish church priorities, and confront questions of church policy and law. On all crucial votes related to homosexuality, conservatives appeared to have the upper hand. First, the church's Judicial Council ruled conclusively that a “self-avowed practicing homosexual” may not be employed within the church nor appointed to any ministerial position by a bishop. The 6-3 ruling effectively declared that the Washington state jury had acted in blatant disregard for the teaching of the church.

In particular, the Washington jury had claimed that the section of the Book of Discipline that identifies homosexuality as “incompatible with Christian teaching,” fell short of a “declaration.” The Judicial Council declared otherwise, though the court also ruled that the Washington verdicts could not be reversed.

In a further move, the church commanded its bishops to refrain from appointing any self-avowed homosexuals to ministerial posts. This came as a direct rebuke to some bishops who have already pushed the homosexual agenda by appointing homosexual ministers. And in yet another move, the church turned back an effort by liberals to pass a measure that would have acknowledged a legitimate difference of opinion on the issue of homosexuality within the church. If passed, this new statement would have effectively declared that the United Methodist Church has no common policy or conviction on homosexuality. That motion failed on a 527-423 vote.

Liberals were predictably disappointed. “We’re not leaving,” said the Rev. Tiffany Steinwert, in comments published in the Louisville [KY] Courier-Journal. “We’re United Methodists at our core. There’s nothing the General Conference can do to change that.” Steinwert serves as pastor of the Cambridge Welcoming United Methodist Church in Massachusetts. Such “welcoming” churches identify themselves as open to the full participation of openly homosexual members.

Other liberal forces in the church declared their determination to continue the fight for homosexual ordination, same-

sex marriage, and the full endorsement of homosexuals in the church. A group claiming to represent church officials and leadership in the Northwest declared a determination to act in defiance of the church's policy.

Given the fact that conservatives seem to have won the critical votes at the General Conference, many were stunned when the Rev. Dr. William Hinson, one of the church's most respected ministers, called for an amicable division of the church over the issue of homosexuality. Hinson, who served for 18 years as senior pastor at First United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas, now serves as president of the "Confessing Movement," an alliance of evangelical United Methodists working for theological recovery and spiritual renewal within their denomination.

William Hinson is a force to be reckoned with in the United Methodist Church, having served as pastor of one of its largest churches. Now retired from the pastorate, Hinson and his wife live in Huntsville, Alabama, where he continues in ministry and in influence.

Speaking to a breakfast meeting of conservative Methodists associated with the Confessing Movement, Hinson set out a plan for division in the church.

"It is time for us to end this cycle of pain we are inflicting on each other," Hinson said. "There is a great gulf fixed between those of us who are centered in Scripture and our friends who are of another persuasion. . . . Repeatedly, they have spoken of the need to get our church in step with our culture. We, on the other hand, have no desire to be the chaplain to an increasingly godless society."

The response to Hinson's proposal was a mixture of shock, dismissal, and support. Clearly, Hinson had sparked a much-needed discussion by using his breakfast platform to make his proposal. Coming on the heels of apparent conservative victories, his proposal gained credence by its context.

Why would evangelicals now consider calling for a division of the church? The answer is really quite simple—they know that those pushing the homosexual agenda will never accept defeat. Proponents of homosexual ordination will come back again, and again, and again, forcing future votes on the same contentious issues. Hinson and his allies see no profit in fighting the same battles over and over again.

Furthermore, homosexual supporters are confident of eventual victory—and time is not on the conservatives' side. In denomination after denomination, conservatives are losing ground on issues of sexuality.

In a move prompted by Hinson's proposal for division, the General Conference adopted a final measure aimed at underlining unity in the church. The vote to remain unified was intended as a symbolic statement, and press reports told of delegates standing teary-eyed and linked hand-in-hand across the convention center as they sang a hymn just before taking the unity vote.

The Rev. Troy G. Plummer, Executive Director of the Reconciling Ministries Network, an alliance of churches supporting homosexual ordination, told the New York Times that the very idea of a split would have been "anathema" to John Wesley, Methodism's founder. "John Wesley said schism is a sin," Plummer said.

Of course, Wesley also believed that homosexuality is a sin. William Hinson and his fellow evangelicals believe that unity can be established only on a foundation of truth and shared biblical conviction. To abandon the church's historic understanding of homosexuality would be to abandon the Bible itself. That's exactly what the pro-homosexual forces demand. Troy Plummer and his fellow homosexual activists are demanding that the church disregard biblical conviction in order to affirm the homosexual lifestyle. In William Hinson, the liberals may finally have met their match.

One of the most perverse aspects of this controversy is the fact that Hinson is now accused of being divisive, while those who have actually forced the division and controversy pose as forces for progress in the church.

Many observers believe that the so-called "Methodist Middle" will eventually decide the issue. Speaking for moderates, Rev. William McAlilly of Tupelo, Mississippi told The Washington Post, "Those of us in the middle can contain those on both sides of the equation." By making such comments, Rev. McAlilly and his fellow moderates risk becoming cartoons of compromise. There is no credible middle ground in this debate. The church cannot negotiate this issue down to a mutually-acceptable compromise. The church will ordain homosexuals, or it will not. Those who treat the

issue of homosexuality as insignificant offer the greatest insult to truth and provide the clearest indication of how a denomination can reach such a point of confusion in the first place.

David C. Steinmetz, a respected church historian at Duke University, pointed to the fact that the church is already divided over this issue. “What the General Conference demonstrated is what the General Conference refused to concede, even as a token gesture—namely, that on the question of gay ordination there are two Methodist Churches rather than one. Whether these two churches can continue to live together as one family will be severely tested in the next four years.”

Clearly, Steinmetz is correct. Far more is involved in this controversy than the singular issue of homosexuality. At stake in the Methodist debate is the very heart of Christian conviction. Are the Bible’s clear teachings on homosexuality authoritative or not? One way or another, the United Methodists will eventually give a conclusive answer to that question.

In the meantime, William Hinson has forced his church to confront a most significant question: Are United Methodists really united after all?

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