

The Affirmation and Good News Caucuses of the United Methodist Church

Introduction: The Current Context of United Methodist Conflict

At the end of 1994, the United Methodist Church in the United States reported a membership of 8,607,909. Since 1964, when the denomination reported its highest U.S. membership of 11,054,634, there has been a steady decline (p. 16, Wilke, 1986). This change is substantial and represents a troubling trend within the denomination. When the population growth of the United States is taken into account across the same years of 1964-94, it is evident that, as a percent of the United States population, the United Methodist Church is shrinking at an alarming rate. Bishop Wilke (1986) in his book, *And Are We Yet Alive?*, has amply demonstrated the decline. While this paper focuses on the United Methodist context, it is interesting to note that other mainline denominations such as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Episcopal Church are reporting similar trends (Mead, 1991).

This decline encourages introspection and analysis. If the current trend continues unabated, survival will be perceived as the primary, encompassing goal, even if demise is not imminent. This type of environment exacerbates conflict as budgets decline, churches close, and concern grows. While conflict is quite normal in all organizations, these negative feelings surrounding the denomination's future makes it more difficult to conduct productive conflicts. As remedies are debated and analyzed, there is increasing evidence among United Methodists of polarization along political and theological lines (Doran & Troeger, 1992; Walls, 1986; Oden, 1988).

Loren B. Mead, President Emeritus of the Alban Institute and an Episcopalian priest, argues that a major paradigmatic shift is occurring within Christian thinking (Mead, 1991). Considerable debate surrounds such a proposition and many pastors and theological instructors (in my own experience) have offered differing assessments. In his book, *No Other Name?*, Knitter (1986) discusses models of the Christian faith. In Figure one (p. 2), a christocentric perspective is contrasted with a theocentric perspective. Knitter (1986) argues that the theocentric perspective is more philosophically appropriate and useful for our time. At the heart of this viewpoint is a fundamental recognition that God has revealed God's self in more than one religion. Consequently, it can be appropriate for adherents of the Christian religion to acknowledge truth claims in other religions or faith expressions.

As more faith adherents of Christianity and United Methodism may embrace Knitter's theocentric model, the rationale for strict adherence to Christian and/or United Methodist doctrine is diminished. To some degree, the theocentric perspective gives tacit approval for syncretism and for an ever-greater interreligious dialogue. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to formally examine these various perspectives, I hope you can appreciate some of the implications of the enormous paradigmatic change being debated within United Methodism, within other Protestant denominations, and within much of Christianity. The short-term implications of a declining membership and a

potential paradigmatic shift in Christian theology are clear. Without substantial and effective intervention, more intense, destructive conflict can be expected in every expression of United Methodism. The motivation to survive coupled with new theological proposals will produce vigorous struggles as a viable future is sought for the denomination.

THE CHRISTOCENTRIC MODEL

THE THEOCENTRIC MODEL

Figure 1. The christocentric model suggests that there is no pathway to God except through Christ; however, some may suggest that by responding to our consciences, what John Wesley called prevenient grace, we may "confess" Christ without knowing the name. By responding nonverbally to the grace we are given, the person who has never heard of Christ (e.g., because the Bible has not been translated into his/her language), still may respond to the grace of God given through Christ. This person comes to God through Christ but does not realize that it is through Christ. This model supports the need to proclaim Christ vigorously in every location because Christ is the only way to God: "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'" (John 14:6). This model describes a pressing need to share Christ with all people, even with people who are active with, and committed to, other religions.

Conversely, the theocentric conception of religion suggests that multiple pathways to God exist, or perhaps said a better way, that God has chosen to reveal God's self in more than one faith or religion. Each revelation is authentic and efficacious. This understanding supports ecumenical dialogue as each faith adherent can share his or her own understanding, celebrate that understanding, and yet, not judge (or try to convert) those with other faith commitments. In this model, the impetus for conversion of other faith adherents no longer exists. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16).

If X=need for evangelism and Y=need for ecumenical dialogue, then simplistically said, $X=1/Y$, an inverse relationship.

Concept taken from *No Other Name?* by Paul F. Knitter, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1985. -diagram prepared by Rev. Tony Gattis

Additionally, church congregations and church agencies can experience conflict from any number of issues common to all organizations. Examples include power struggles, resource allocation, role strain, institutional confusion, and incompatible leadership styles, simply to name a few. These common sources of conflict will be compounded by the larger contextual issues described above.

For this paper, I have selected two groups within United Methodism to illustrate the growing conflict within United Methodism concerning homosexuality. The first

group, "Affirmation," is a liberal, ecumenical caucus that advances the agenda of the Lesbian, Bi-sexual, and Gay community within Christianity, and thus, also within United Methodism. The other group, "Good News," represents a conservative United Methodist caucus dedicated to Evangelical Christianity, and as such, is a group manifesting strong opposition to the agenda of Affirmation. The term "evangelical" came into use following the Reformation to identify Protestants, especially as they "held to the belief in justification by grace through faith and the supreme authority of scripture (often considered the material and formal principles of Reformation teaching)" (p. 191, Richardson & Bowden, 1983). As I will demonstrate shortly, Affirmation and Good News are polar opposites and manifest polarizing communication. To represent the typical speech of these two caucuses, I have chosen two articles--both of which come from periodicals dedicated to their respective causes: Good News and Open Hands.

The Most Visible Issue

Paragraph 65, parts C and G, of The United Methodist Book of Discipline 1996 (see appendix) contains the statement which is the primary source of contention between these two groups within United Methodism. The practice of homosexuality is described as "incompatible" with the "Christian lifestyle." This means that self-avowed, practicing homosexuals cannot be ordained in the United Methodist Church. Also, unions between homosexuals cannot be publicly blessed, and marriage, even if legally permitted, cannot be conducted on church premises between same-sex partners. One of the primary goals of Affirmation is to change the official church position in regard to these matters. Conversely, the membership of Good News vehemently opposes these changes. While their evangelical agenda includes other issues (such as being against abortion), the homosexual issue serves as the flash point of intergroup conflict.

Intergroup Communication

Tajfel observes that as the intensity of intergroup conflict increases, the more likely that communication will be based on group memberships (p. 112, Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). Membership in either of these two groups is not visually indicated at the outset of any communication encounter (unlike race or gender) unless the meeting context identifies membership (i.e., Good News Convention). Thus, it is possible to have random interpersonal encounters not based on group membership among the members of these two groups until a religious or political conversation reveals membership and/or viewpoint. This issue becomes more complex as members desire to visually identify themselves. I have discovered recently that members of Affirmation in my region of the country often wear a small piece of jewelry, a pink triangle, to identify themselves to each other and to invite the uninitiated to ask questions. The triangle represents solidarity with Christianity and a belief in the Trinity, one of the hallmarks of Christian doctrine: the Father, Son, & Holy Spirit, or the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. The pink color represents membership in Affirmation. This in itself is a political statement: "We believe there is such a group as Christian homosexuals. And, we support them!" Or, "I am a Christian homosexual." The pink triangle may also have the effect, intentionally or unintentionally, of discouraging interpersonal encounters with members of Good News

and other likeminded United Methodists. In this United Methodist context, these random encounters over time can lead to an initiation whereby people can visually identify group memberships. There are also a myriad of symbols which identify general theological viewpoints which are in harmony with the agenda of the Good News group as well (e.g., the Walk to Emmaus symbols--a colorful rooster or a rainbow). All such symbols make random encounters (or the avoidance of them) less interpersonal and more intergroup in nature.

The use of language by group members also serves to demarcate and identify the two groups. First, with increasing interpersonal contact, it is more likely for opposing group members to identify themselves to one another. A member of Good News may simply say in conversation, "I subscribe to Good News magazine." Or, "I support Friends of the Family" (another United Methodist caucus with a similar agenda--dual memberships are probably common). Affirmation members may indicate they subscribe to Open Hands. Viewpoints about homosexuality or abortion will eventually be shared. The vocabulary used establishes both the characteristics of the group categories and the perception of membership status among the communicators.

In a second sense, a specific vocabulary accompanies the theological and political viewpoints of each group. The phrases "affirming diversity" and "practicing inclusivity" are important slogans, common to the conversation of Affirmation members. In the article chosen for this paper to represent Affirmation, entitled, "Dealing with Diversity: Confessions, Convictions, and Commitments," Toinette M. Eugene, Ph.D., describes in poignant terms the need to affirm diversity and to deal with diversity in ever more accepting ways (Eugene, 1996).

The article chosen to represent Good News includes several complaints about how language is used in the public debate between Good News and Affirmation. Heidinger uses a number of phrases to portray Good News goals in more positive and conserving terms. He mentions the "apostolic faith" (faith of the Christian Church immediately following the time of Christ), "orthodox Christians," "evangelical Christians," "Bible-believing Christians," and "classic Christianity" among others (Heidinger, 1996, pp. 8-12). Through the use of such conservative terms, he seeks to portray change in church law regarding homosexuality as highly undesirable.

Even more interesting are the charges leveled by Heidinger (1996) against Affirmation members in their use of language at the 1996 General Conference of the United Methodist Church.

As we look at major addresses and floor debate, we fall short at several points. First, United Methodism must recover an integrity of language in the church. George Orwell, in his essay "Politics and the English Language," noted that "Those who would change a culture corrupt its language, particularly by hiding the reality of an evil they desire behind a less revealing name." For eleven days we heard pro-gay advocates and other church leaders speak about "welcoming" gays and lesbians into the church. But what was really being advocated was not just hospitality but an approval of gay and lesbian

practice. This was never stated explicitly, however. What that leaves is a good and wholesome term (hospitality) being used but which has been injected with the new meaning: homosexuality practice is acceptable. The result: those who oppose the church approving homosexual practice are seen as "inhospitable" and unloving. (Heidinger, 1996, p. 9)

The struggle over language and group status is obvious. The reputation or face of Good News members is a deep concern. As members of either group strongly identify with their respective group, each encounter will involve fewer interindividual aspects of interpersonal communication and will reflect more the relationship between these two groups and their respective positions. One instance of circular reasoning can be seen in Heidinger's article. He claims that Affirmation is not inclusive when it excludes his view of "classic Christianity," which ironically, excludes Affirmation's view of Christianity (Heidinger, 1996, p. 8). At this point, both groups claim a victimization status. Affirmation members will "affirm diversity" and "practice inclusivity" in their speech and Good News members will protect "classic, orthodox, evangelical, Scriptural, and traditional, Christianity" with their speech. As the struggle over the meaning of these phrases continues, speech divergence may be commonly practiced (Giles & Johnson, 1992, p. 264), each group with a specific vocabulary.

Unfortunately, as communication among opposing members becomes more intergroup in nature, patterns of speech convergence become fewer in number. There are many concepts that are shared among United Methodists that provide opportunity for an experience of commonality. Grace, love, reconciliation, and forgiveness are common examples of such concepts within United Methodism and provide opportunity for these groups to find areas of agreement and solidarity even with their differences; however, as the issue of homosexuality becomes increasingly polarized, the likelihood of speech convergence is reduced.

While in the current situation ethnic origins are not salient, ethnolinguistic identity theory can serve to describe the encounters between members of the opposing groups. It has been noted by Giles and Johnson (1987) that ethnolinguistic identity theory draws heavily on Tajfel and Turners' social identity theory (1979). Thus it is not too great a "leap" to use ethnolinguistic theory in describing the present conflict. Giles and Johnson state that, "Ethnic language differentiation occurs when members of different groups . . . "a) are strongly committed to an attitude position on which another interactant opposes them and they perceive the issue to be central to their sense of ethnic identity; b) perceive few features of the situation to emphasize status-stressing rather than solidarity-stressing dimensions; c) are not concerned to maintain communicative efficiency; and d) perceive little overlap with their interactant in terms of other shared group memberships" (Giles & Johnson, 1987, p. 87). A, B, C, and even D will frequently apply to encounters between members of Good News and Affirmation, and this suggests that language differentiation (speech divergence) will commonly occur when members of these two groups interact. The struggle over words and their meaning described above seems to "bear this out."

The struggle over words relates closely to categories of identity. What brings Affirmation and Good News into relationship with one another is that both groups profess a Christian identity. More directly, both groups include members professing United Methodist Church membership. Consequently, in United Methodist congregations and conferences across the nation, members of these two groups (and many others) find themselves meeting together. The category, "Christian," becomes muddled in light of the assertions offered by these two groups. Each group's definition of "Christian" either implicitly or explicitly excludes viewpoints and/or members in the other group. In the United Methodist setting, formal rules and definitions are included in denominational documents and explicitly, if imprecisely, define the category of "Christian" and of "United Methodist." The struggle over homosexuality is recorded in the hard-fought changes made to the U.M. Discipline every four years since at least 1972. Affirmation wants to change the explicitly stated identity of "United Methodist Christian" as it regards the homosexual orientation. Consequently, each group's member identity as a "United Methodist Christian" is challenged by the understanding of the other group. Without the superordinate category of "United Methodist Christian," members of these two groups may not have occasion to encounter one another and may "merrily go their own way." The viewpoints and positions of the Good News caucus are better represented in the official United Methodist documents at this time. Group vitality can depend on the ratio of members between each group at any one gathering. In recent years the number of General Conference delegates reflecting Affirmation's viewpoint has grown while leaving a clear majority favoring the status quo. The proposed changes are obviously seen as a threat by members of Good News (Heidinger, 1996, pp. 8-13).

Three coping strategies are frequently described for disenfranchised groups: social mobility, social creativity, and social competition. In the past (1970s), many gay people left the mainline denominations and started their own congregations. This was a mobility strategy to simply leave the disenfranchised position. In more recent years, Affirmation began its own publication and started holding meetings within mainline denominations in a strategy of social creativity to improve the acceptability of their values. Today, they tout their more progressive and accepting theology and present a more inclusive Christian community. Currently, Affirmation is directly lobbying and campaigning in the denomination to change their disenfranchised status, a good example of social competition.

Tajfel's social identity theory is most appropriately applied to this intergroup situation. United Methodists self-select themselves into any number of caucuses including Affirmation and Good News. Once one includes him- or herself in one of the categories, then social comparisons are made across a variety of issues. Members of Good News see themselves as the guarantors of "classic Christianity." Most especially, they want to contrast how they use the Scriptures to maintain Christianity as opposed to the threat brought by groups like Affirmation. Affirmation members wish to contrast their willingness to accept and love people with the exclusive attitudes of Good News. As Tajfel theorizes, group members establish positive psychological distinctiveness and then derive self-esteem from these differences (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992, pp. 112-117). One of the classic comforts of Christianity is the promise of experiencing heaven forever

in a presumed afterlife. Members of both groups may conclude that heaven is theirs to experience to the exclusion of the other group. This source of self-esteem is unassailable since it cannot be empirically verified; however, the self-esteem can be measured.

If communication becomes more intergroup in nature as conflict increases (p. 112, Gudykunst & Kim, 1992), then it becomes most desirable to increase the extent of interpersonal or interindividual communication between members of polarized groups such as Affirmation and Good News. As described by Sherif and Sherif (1961), communication can improve the relationship between members of ingroups and of outgroups but only under certain circumstances. Members of opposing groups will need to have an equal status, a cooperative venture or outcome (superordinate goal), and a possibility for friendship. As the one of the primary desires of both groups becomes the goal to defeat the other group at the next election, such interpersonal encounters become less likely. A concerted effort on the part of both groups will be necessary to find common ground and arenas for cooperative efforts.

Community in United Methodism

Where will the polarizing communication between these two groups lead United Methodism? A number of my pastor colleagues suggest that schism is now a real possibility. Others suggest that if Affirmation ever succeeds in its campaign to change church law, then schism will result. Arnett (1986) provides the following observation with a definition of polarizing communication.

. . . the major problem of the human community for the remainder of this century and into the next . . . [is] communication from polarized positions. Polarized communication can be summarized as the inability to believe or seriously consider one's view as wrong and the other's opinion as truth. Communication within human community becomes typified by the rhetoric of "we" are right and "they" are misguided or wrong. (Arnett, 1986, pp. 15-16)

In the current example, there is mistrust characterized by polarizing communication because there is misunderstanding. One of the central obstacles for communication between these two groups is that members cannot understand how people in the other group arrive at their theological and sociological conclusions. Members of each group know intuitively, if not explicitly, that they cannot support the positions of the other group using their own, familiar theological methods. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to formally examine the nature and methods of theological inquiry, it is important to realize that mistrust results from misunderstood theological methods. For members of these opposing groups to begin a successful dialogue about homosexuality and Christianity, they will need to first reframe the conflict around the important features of their respective theological methods. Some theological schools of thought rely primarily on Scripture and tradition (church history) while others rely much more on reason (science) and human experience. Using different theological methods, Christians can easily develop incompatible theological perspectives. It is analogous to the continual debate in the communication field over critical, qualitative, and quantitative

methodologies. When your reasoning proceeds from different assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge itself, very different outlooks can and do emerge. To a great extent, as with many conflictual issues, the matter is epistemologically complex.

One of the primary goals around reframing the homosexual issue in terms of theological method will be for members of both groups to appreciate some measure of integrity and of reasonableness that undergirds the thinking offered by "the other side," given their theological methods!

In harmony with this goal, the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns of the United Methodist Church sponsored a 4-day dialogue event, two days in Nashville (Nov. '97) and two days in Dallas (Feb. '98). Twenty-three participants (16 male, 7 female) from across the theological spectrum agreed to participate in the 4-day event. While most participants were clergy including three Bishops, there were five lay participants including one professor of accountancy. By design the dialogue team included Hispanic participants and people of color, although the racial and ethnic composition did not reflect the full diversity of the UMC. The "pro-family," Good News position (6 participants) was represented as well as the pro-homosexual, Affirmation position (5 participants). The selection team consisted of two well-known conservatives and two well-known liberals within the denomination. Dr. John Stephens, a professor of conflict resolution at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, moderated the entire dialogue.

Results from Reframing the Issue

During this dialogue, three interrelated core issues underlying the homosexual stance emerged among the participants. The first issue addresses the role of the Holy Spirit within Christianity. On one side, some participants believe that the revelation of God in Christ Jesus is now closed having concluded after the years of Jesus' life on earth, leaving the Holy Spirit in the role of empowering people to receive God's fixed, given (past tense!) revelation. From this viewpoint, if homosexuality was sinful according to the Church immediately following Christ's time, it is wrong today. There can be no new revelation from God.

According to the opposing viewpoint, the role assigned to the Holy Spirit is to direct the continual revelation from God that "unfolds" to this day. Compatible within this viewpoint, a new revelation (i.e., understanding given by God) about homosexuality can be recognized and received by today's Church and applied in the current culture. There is an evolutionary or developmental aspect to God's ongoing revelation. As one pastor put it, "revelation is not revelation until it is received." And some hear new ideas coming from God.

Closely related to the role of the Holy Spirit is the model of revelation used. Again, some models extensively use Scripture and tradition (church history), while other models of revelation rely much more on reason (science) and human experience. Dulles (1985) describes five different models of revelation that support and enable vastly

different theological conclusions: Revelation as Doctrine, Revelation as History, Revelation as Inner Experience, Revelation as Dialectical Presence, and Revelation as new Awareness (p. v, Dulles, 1985). Interested dialogue participants will find copious material for discussion surrounding these models. Finally, closely allied with the assigned role of the Holy Spirit and with the model of revelation used, is the understanding of Scriptural authority. If the Bible clearly denounces homosexuality, then those giving great authority to Scripture feel bound to maintain the same position perpetually; however, it should be noted that there are biblical scholars who argue homosexuality is not condemned in the Bible (Furnish, 1979).

As an observer to this dialogue, it was my impression that once these core issues were identified, the participants had greater opportunity for explaining their positions and exploring points of contact with differing points of view than when the emotional issue of homosexuality dominated the discussion. As friendship emerged to some degree between opposing participants, it became increasingly difficult for everyone to dismiss, without serious discussion and exploration, opposing viewpoints.

Compatibilists and Noncompatibilists

One of the more interesting outcomes of the dialogue event involved the creation of a new concept with four categories: Compatibilist-Liberal, Compatibilist-Conservative, Noncompatibilist-Liberal, and Noncompatibilist-Conservative. Through these terms, one of the emergent realities of the dialogue group was described: There are both liberals and conservatives that believe they cannot continue to hold membership in a denomination that includes the opposing viewpoint, i.e., noncompatibilists. These members represent the polar edges of this conflict. In fact, some dialogue members enjoyed, ironically, relating to the opposing, noncompatibilist side and agreeing that both groups cannot, with integrity, continue to associate together. Likewise, there are both conservatives and liberals that believe the opposing viewpoints can co-exist within the same denomination. These believe they can live together "in one house" with opposing viewpoints held by members in "different rooms" of that "denominational house." Such metaphors were compelling and used extensively to communicate levels of tolerance and acceptability within the dialogue group. One's self-concept explains in part one's position on the compatibilist-noncompatibilist continuum. The central issue is whether members of these opposing groups can acknowledge and appreciate the superordinate identity which unites them, "United Methodist Christian," while acknowledging and addressing the issues that divide them.

The dialogue event was fruitful and helpful in three regards. First, it provided a safe communication climate with the participants enjoying an equal status, a cooperative venture (the dialogue), and a possibility for friendship as prescribed by Sherif and Sherif (1961). Some opposing group members committed, voluntarily, to an ongoing discussion and exploration that would continue on an interpersonal level after the formal dialogue event ended.

Second, it was demonstrated that when an emotional conflict like the opposing positions concerning homosexuality is reframed, there is greater opportunity for mutual understanding to grow among the participants. The participants discovered that there is much to discuss!

Third, the dialogue event suggests that when substantial resources are redirected into building "bridges of understanding," the rancor and hostility can be diminished. The dialogue did not produce any "breakthroughs" or new understandings that would "resolve" this conflict; however, I believe that many new understandings did emerge among the participants and that it would be fascinating and productive for more dialogue to occur on a much wider scale. While there may be circumstances in which division becomes the best alternative, the losses associated with schism should be carefully considered, first.

Prelude to Schism?

Rev. Jimmy Creech of the First United Methodist Church in Omaha, Nebraska, was found "not guilty" in March of 1998 of conducting a covenanting ceremony last September between two lesbians. His reinstatement greatly angered conservatives within the denomination; however, when the normal yearly reappointment of pastors occurred in June, Creech was not reassigned by the Nebraska Bishop to FUMC, Omaha. Creech elected to take a leave of absence. The outcome of his trial hinged on the understanding that the prohibition to covenanting ceremonies is part of the social principles (see appendix) of the U.M. Discipline which are considered an advisory to all Methodists. The Judicial Council is currently reviewing this matter in order to rule on whether the Social Principles are advisory or are binding on all U. Methodists.

To be certain, one need not peruse current United Methodist publications to realize that the conservative wing intends to rectify the church law on this matter at the General Conference scheduled in 2000. Their goal will be to close the "loophole" that allowed Creech to be found "not guilty" by adding the necessary prohibitions in a binding part of the U.M. Discipline. The General Conference represents the highest authority in United Methodism and is the only group who can speak officially for the entire denomination. It has legislative authority within United Methodism similar to the United States Congress. It is comprised of delegates elected in regional jurisdictions from across the nation. As the varying caucuses mobilize their resources for the 2000 General Conference, polarizing communication, and even demonization, will--most likely and quite sadly--increase as a prelude to the impending showdown.

Alternatives to a Showdown

The legislative function within our country and, in the current example, within United Methodism, cannot ethically be suspended to deal with homosexuality or any other issue, as desirable as that may be. For those who see primarily a social justice issue underneath this conflict, it is unacceptable to cease advocating for the acceptance of homosexuals, even for a season of dialogue. Likewise, the "pro-family" lobbies see very

grave moral values at stake in the official position taken by the denomination. Thus, as participants in a democracy we must expect the political lobbying to continue; however, all caucuses can and should be encouraged to avoid demonization of their opponents, to focus on the issues, and to sponsor forums for explaining in positive terms their viewpoint. Even better, opposing lobbies can co-sponsor forums for presentation and discussion. Once opposing participants share a healthy relationship (a lofty goal?), respectful public debate can also be useful to those who are "still in process" on this issue. A lively sense of "fair play" needs to accompany all such efforts.

Having acknowledged that lobbying must continue, there is nothing to prevent the denominational leadership from requesting, and the General Conference from granting, new resources for sponsoring and encouraging convocations and dialogue events where participants seek to understand opposing viewpoints while developing interpersonal relationships. Resource allocation and legislative functions must be set aside at such gatherings. An important question to ask is, "Can the complex organizational machinery of United Methodism collectively lead United Methodists into a productive dialogue on this issue?" The answer is uncertain; however, within United Methodism, and within our culture at large, there is a growing need to undergird all legislative tasks with greater understanding and respect. Indeed, I am suggesting that all partisan advocates be encumbered with the responsibility to build respectful relationships with those whom they differ. If we only see our political opponents in large numbers at conferences whose purpose is to legislate and to allocate resources, we will not seek greater understanding and dialogue. Polarizing communication, and on occasion, demonization, will tend to dominate such encounters.

The only scenario I can envision for the denomination (and for our country) during the immediate future is that reasonable and respectable people will continue to stand on both sides of this issue. Most, perhaps, will assume a more moderate, often highly nuanced, position somewhere in the middle. Many more will change their position to a greater or lesser degree. Consequently, it is in the best interest of all to devote greater resources toward developing shared understandings in non-legislative, smaller forums that allow interpersonal communication to occur and allow personal relationships to form.

At the dialogue event described above, some participants suggested that United Methodists should not speak of schism. "To speak the word only increases the possibility of it becoming a reality," they argued; however, if the recognized possibility of schism can be used to redirect substantial efforts toward transcending our differences in dialogue, United Methodists may be spared the losses resulting from schism. Even better, our fragmented culture may gain one example of how to approach the issue of homosexuality. We need dialogical, healthy communication around this issue as more United Methodists become better informed.

While no one can predict the outcome of true dialogue, a new understanding of sexuality may emerge that transcends either side's current understanding. At the very

least, there is much to talk about as we learn to relate, and in some modest ways, transcend, our differences, while living in community, together.

Appendix

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 1996

Part III: Social Principles-II. Nurturing Community ¶ 65

C) Marriage-We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. We believe that God's blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage. Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.¹

G) Human Sexuality-We recognize that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons. We believe persons may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the church, and society. We call all persons to the disciplined, responsible fulfillment of themselves, others, and society in the stewardship of this gift. We also recognize our limited understanding of this complex gift and encourage the medical, theological, and social science disciplines to combine in a determined effort to understand human sexuality more completely. We call the Church to take the leadership role in bringing together these disciplines to address this most complex issue. Further, within the context of our understanding of this gift of God, we recognize that God challenges us to find responsible, committed, and loving forms of expression.

Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are only clearly affirmed in the marriage bond. Sex may become exploitative within as well as outside marriage. We reject all sexual expressions that damage or destroy the humanity God has given us as birthright, and we affirm only that sexual expression which enhances that same humanity. We believe that sexual relations where one or both partners are exploitative, abusive, or promiscuous are beyond the parameters of acceptable Christian behavior and are ultimately destructive to individuals, families, and the social order.

We deplore all forms of the commercialization and exploitation of sex, with their consequent cheapening and degradation of human personality. We call for strict enforcement of laws prohibiting the sexual exploitation or use of children by adults. We call for the establishment of adequate protective services, guidance, and counseling opportunities for children thus abused. We insist that all persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured.

We recognize the continuing need for full, positive, and factual sex education opportunities for children, youth, and adults. The Church offers a unique opportunity to give quality guidance and education in this area.

Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Although we do not

condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.²

Part III: Social Principles-III. The Social Community ¶ 66

H) Equal Rights Regardless of Sexual Orientation-Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for homosexual persons. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting their rightful claims where they have shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney, and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships that involve shared contributions, responsibilities, and liabilities, and equal protection before the law. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against gays and lesbians. We also commit ourselves to social witness against the coercion and marginalization of former homosexuals.

Chapter Two: The Ministry of the Ordained

Section I: The Meaning of Ordination and Conference Membership

¶ 304 Qualifications for Ordination

3. While persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world. Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals¹ are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.

Chapter Five: Administrative Order

Section II. General Council on Finance and Administration ¶ 806

12. The council shall be responsible for ensuring that no board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall give United Methodist funds to any gay caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality. The council shall have the right to stop such expenditures.¹⁹ This restriction shall not limit the Church's ministry in response to the HIV epidemic.

The Book of Resolutions of the UMC

The Nurturing Community

Use of Church Studies on Homosexuality

WHEREAS, our Social Principles state: "We recognize that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons. We believe persons may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the church, and society. We call all persons to the disciplined, responsible fulfillment of themselves, others, and society in the

stewardship of this gift. We also recognize our limited understanding of this complex gift and encourage the medical, theological, and social science disciplines to combine in a determined effort to understand human sexuality more completely. We call the Church to take the leadership role in bringing together these disciplines to address this most complex issue. Further, within the context of our understanding of this gift of God, we recognize that God challenges us to find responsible, committed, and loving forms of expression" (§ 65G); and

WHEREAS, the Committee to Study Homosexuality provided a meaningful model and process of study, prayer, reflection, and action on a complex and significant issue facing United Methodists; and

WHEREAS, the study resource includes stories of individuals struggling and growing, sharing their understanding of faithfulness to the mind of Christ; and

WHEREAS, the use of these materials expands our spiritual growth in understanding God's good gift of human sexuality; and

WHEREAS, perceptions and perspectives of individuals continue to benefit from open and informed discussion about homosexuality;

Therefore, be it resolved, that the annual conferences are urged to support the use of this study; and

Be it resolved, that the Council of Bishops is encouraged to use the study; and

Be it further resolved, that the Board of Discipleship facilitate the use of the study in church school, retreat, district council on ministries, and other settings.

ADOPTED 1996

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