

Church body proposes more open stance on homosexuality

By Heather Hahn Feb. 11, 2015 | MAPUTO, Mozambique (UMNS)

The United Methodist Church could have openly gay clergy and clergy could officiate at same-sex marriages if a proposal affirmed by a denomination-wide leadership body prevails.

The Connectional Table plans to draft legislation that members hope can be “a third way” in the church’s long debate over homosexuality.

The body on Feb. 10 overwhelmingly affirmed a proposal to remove prohibitive language that makes it a chargeable offense under church law for clergy to be “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” or to officiate at same-sex weddings.

The action was not a formal vote, but the reported results of two hours of small-group discussions. The Connectional Table will take up proposed legislative language for an actual vote when it meets in May in Nashville, Tennessee.

The approach would leave the question of whether to perform a same-sex marriage up to individual clergy, just as the Book of Discipline — the denomination’s law book — now allows clergy to decide which couples to wed. Clergy would not be required to bless same-sex unions.

Conferences also would continue to determine who to ordain as authorized by the denomination’s constitution, but would have the option of ordaining openly gay individuals.

At the same time, the proposal notes that the denomination “historically has not condoned the practice of homosexuality and has considered the practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” It also retains the denomination’s ban on using church funds “to promote the acceptance of homosexuality.”

Bottom line: If this proposal prevails, clergy would not risk church trials or the loss of their credentials for officiating at same-gender weddings or coming out as being gay.

A ‘third way’

The Rev. Kennetha J. Bigham-Tsai, who serves on the Connectional Table’s legislative writing team, described the approach as a possible “third way” that can help the church end its impasse on human sexuality and focus more on mission. She is a district superintendent in the West Michigan Conference.

“We’ve tried to allow some exercise of conscience, to allow for varying beliefs, to allow for varying practices within different contexts,” she said, “and to open a space for grace where people can live together in unity with their different beliefs.”

Any legislation adopted by the Connectional Table would go to the 2016 General Conference, the denomination's top lawmaking assembly. Ultimately, General Conference would decide.

The Connectional Table's process

The Connectional Table is a United Methodist body of clergy and lay people from around the world that acts as a sort of church council for the denomination, coordinating its mission, ministry and resources.

The body's discussion followed a motion it affirmed in April 2014 after the first of three public panels on human sexuality. After hours of discussion, the body approved "parallel paths" of dialogue and work toward changing the Discipline "to fully include LGBTQ persons in the life of the church." The initials stand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning.

At this month's meeting, the legislative team presented three directions for the full body to consider in response to that motion.

The first was to bring no changes to General Conference on this matter.

The second option was what the legislative team called "full inclusion," removing all references in the Book of Discipline that cast homosexuality in a negative light.

The third approach was what the legislative team recommended and was ultimately accepted. Bigham-Tsai invited Connectional Table members to discuss each possibility in small "table conversations" and then report back on each option. Many of the tables had people of differing views regarding what Scripture says and what the church should say about homosexuality.

Before introducing discussion of each approach, the body prayed for God's guidance and the church's unity.

Thirty-six of the body's 59 members attended the meeting in this southeastern African country.

Affirmations, objections and possibility

The Rev. Fred Day, the top executive of the denomination's Commission on Archives and History, reported that the consensus at his table was in support of the third option.

"We think it is a powerfully important middle way," he said. "In its own way, it says the Spirit is not done with us on this matter yet. It's clear because of our disagreement we need to allow for us to gain a sense of clarity for how the Spirit is leading."

But that view was not unanimous.

The Rev. Harald Rückert of the South Germany Conference said six people at his table supported the approach and one said "maybe, but with concerns."

"It's the only model we can see right now that allows us to stay in our covenant as The United Methodist Church even though we are of different minds on homosexuality," he said.

However, Matthew “Theo” Williams of the Liberia Conference, said it would be best if the Connectional Table made no move to change how the denomination treats homosexuality.

“In Africa, to even discuss the issue of gays or lesbians is taboo,” he told the body.

He later pointed out to United Methodist News Service that because of church teachings, elders and deacons in Africa are not allowed to have more than one wife. “It is the same thing (about homosexuality), the missionaries told us the Bible says, ‘One man, one wife.’”

Many African United Methodists share Williams’ belief in the denomination’s current stance.

Still, Benedita Penicela Nhambiu of the Mozambique South Conference observed to UMNS that Africans are not monolithic in how they regard same-sex relationships.

H. E. Joaquim Chissano, the former president of Mozambique, wrote an open letter to African leaders last year calling for an end to discrimination “against people on the basis of age, sex, ethnicity, migrant status, sexual orientation and gender identity.”

Nhambiu said she personally thinks the option most Connectional Table members affirmed “is viable,” but she wondered how would be received within the gay community.

Minnesota-Dakotas Area Bishop Bruce Ough, chair of Connectional Table, described the discussion as “one of the better and sustained conversations” of which he’s been a part on this topic.

“There was really a spirit of trying to listen to one another, and I hope that will continue.”

[Boxed copy:]

#UMC clergy wouldn't lose credentials for same-sex weddings or coming out as gay under Connectional Table proposal

TWEET THIS

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What does the church say

The United Methodist Book of Discipline, the denomination’s law book, since 1972 has proclaimed the practice of homosexuality “incompatible with Christian teaching.” The book prohibits United Methodist churches from hosting and clergy from performing “ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions.”

The 2012 General Conference rejected efforts to change that language, including a proposal to say the church was in disagreement about homosexuality. The denomination's top lawmaking assembly will next convene in 2016.

Officiating at same-sex unions is a chargeable offense under the Discipline. Clergy convicted in a church court can face a loss of clergy credentials or lesser penalties. The book also allows for complaints against clergy who officiate at same-gender unions to be resolved without a trial. That has been the case with some recent high-profile complaints, including one against retired Bishop Melvin G. Talbert.

The Book of Discipline states that marriage is between a man and a woman. It also affirms that all people are of sacred worth, that all are in need of the church's ministry, and that God's grace is available to all. The church implores congregations and families not to reject gay and lesbian members and friends.

Read full coverage of sexuality and the church.

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