

Church body seeks greater openness on human sexuality

United Methodist clergy could perform same-gender weddings and conferences could ordain openly gay clergy if legislation by a denomination-wide leadership body wins General Conference approval.

By a vote of 26 to 10 with one abstention, the Connectional Table on May 18 approved legislation that would 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.

Bottom line: If this legislation passes, clergy would not risk church trials or the loss of their credentials for officiating at same-gender weddings or, in some conferences, coming out as openly gay.

Dakotas-Minnesota Area Bishop Bruce R. Ough, who chairs the Connectional Table, led the group in prayer after the vote.

“We pray that through the gift of your Holy Spirit, you will use this work in ways that will ultimately honor you and help us find our way forward as the United Methodist expression of the faith,” Ough prayed.

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.

Ultimately, General Conference — The United Methodist Church’s top lawmaking assembly — will determine if the proposal becomes the denomination’s official policy when it meets May 10-20, 2016, in Portland, Oregon.

### What the legislation says

Under the proposal, individual clergy would decide whether to officiate at same-gender marriages 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.

Similarly, the proposal leaves the question of whether to ordain openly gay clergy up to individual conferences. The denomination’s constitution already gives conferences the main authority in determining whom to ordain, within the guidelines of the Book of Discipline.

The proposed legislation defines marriage as a covenant “that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between two people who are married to each other.” It also notes that such marriage “is traditionally between one man and one woman.”

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.”

### The Connectional Table’s process

The vote came after more than three hours of prayer, small-group discussions and finally three speeches each for and against the legislation. The morning discussion also included time for hymn singing and reflection on Scripture.

Each of the small groups had members of varied perspectives on the church’s stance, which currently states that the practice of homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching.”

The Rev. Kennetha J. Bigham-Tsai, who guides the Connectional Table’s legislative writing team, told Connectional Table members before the discussion that no matter what they decided United Methodists would feel a sense of loss.

“Our LGBTQ brothers and sisters are already dealing with a sense of loss of acceptance in our churches,” she said. “If we change our position, our more theologically and socially traditional brothers and sisters will feel a sense of loss of acceptance in our church. No matter what we do, if we remain in conflict with one another, we will continue to feel a loss of stability and unity.”

The Connectional Table’s vote 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 and queer or questioning.

At the body’s February meeting in Maputo, Mozambique, the legislative team announced that it was not considering any proposals to reorganize the denomination’s structure along ideological lines.

Instead, the team presented three directions for the full body to consider in response to the 2014 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 of removing prohibitive language was what the legislative team recommended and the full table overwhelmingly affirmed at the Mozambique meeting. Thirty-six Connectional Table members attended that meeting.

The Connectional Table's May meeting basically put that proposal into legislative language.

### Why the Connectional Table is addressing this

Bigham-Tsai said the legislation is in line with the Connectional Table's mandate in the Book of Discipline to address "emerging issues" and determine "the most effective, cooperative, and efficient way to provide optimum stewardship of ministries, personnel, and resources."

Passionate debate over the church's stance on homosexuality has erupted at every General Conference since 1972. The lawmaking assembly has consistently voted to keep the language and over the years has expanded restrictions against gay clergy and same-gender unions.

But the debate has heated up as more countries and more U.S. states legally recognize same-gender civil marriage and more pastors are asked by gay congregants to officiate at their weddings.

The U.S. Supreme Court is weighing the possibility of overturning state bans on recognizing such unions. A ruling on that question is not expected until the end of June. Nearly 60 percent of United Methodists live in the United States.

Since last year, some United Methodists have raised the possibility of a denominational split around theological views.

Bigham-Tsai said the hope is that this proposal will be seen as "a third way" that can keep people at the table and possibly end the denomination's long impasse.

### Reactions in the room

Representatives from Good News and Love Prevails, both advocacy groups with very different views on the church's stance, were among the observers of the discussion. The Connectional Table invited the guests to share their thoughts on the proposed legislation.

People from both groups spoke out against the proposals.

"We believe this proposal that you are considering has the potential to increase conflict," said the Rev. Thomas Lambrecht, vice president and general manager of Good News, which supports the denomination's teachings on homosexuality.

He elaborated that the proposal will take a dispute that happens at the General Conference level and "bring it down to every annual conference and local church."

The Rev. Amy DeLong of Love Prevails also spoke. Love Prevails aims to change the church's stance on homosexuality and end what it sees as discrimination against LGBTQ individuals.

“Saying that there is a third way on issues on oppression and discrimination is saying there is some level of my discrimination you all are comfortable with,” said DeLong, a lesbian who has been with her partner for more than 20 years. She faced a church trial in 2011.

The Connectional Table’s proposal is expected to be one of many petitions dealing with human sexuality that will go before the 2016 General Conference.

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#### Who is on the Connectional table

The Connectional Table’s membership includes 21 clergy and laity elected by the five U.S. jurisdictions and one member from each from the seven central conferences in Africa, Europe and Asia.

Representatives from each of the denomination's five official racial and ethnic caucuses serve, as well as one youth and one young adult from the United Methodist Division on Ministries with Young People.

The membership also comprises the chief executives of the 12 general agencies and most agency presidents, who are bishops, as well as the Council of Bishops’ ecumenical officer. The 12 agency executives have voice but not vote in the body’s decision-making.

Altogether, the Connectional Table has 59 members, 47 of whom can vote.

General Conference is expected to receive multiple petitions dealing with the church’s longtime debate about how best to minister with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning individuals.