

## Sexuality panel displays church's global variation

By Heather Hahn

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A panel discussion offered a rare glimpse of the wide spectrum of thought on homosexuality among United Methodists from outside the United States.

The Connectional Table held its third and final panel on human sexuality on Feb. 10 at its Mozambique meeting — this time with the focus on voices from United Methodist central conferences, church regions in Africa, Europe and the Philippines.

The speakers included a lecturer at Africa University, an elder from the Philippines and a bishop in northern Europe. All spoke of how human sexuality fits with their Wesleyan identity and the life of the church. But their testimonies during the two-hour discussion varied dramatically.

Here is just a sampling:

- The Rev. Nday Bondo told those gathered that God intended people to be heterosexual. “Homosexual people came into existence as a result of the fall of man,” he said. “God is then using the church to restore humanity to its original nature.”
- The Rev. Israel Alvaran, sitting beside Bondo, came out publicly as a gay clergy member, two weeks after telling his bishop in the Philippines. He emotionally shared his experiences of asking God why he was called to serve a church that would not have him as he is. “There is a reason why I was named Israel, for like Jacob, I wrestled with God,” he said, “and was transformed from hating who I was to celebrating my identity as a gay man.”
- Nordic and Baltic Area Bishop Christian Alsted said some of the conferences he serves want to allow same-sex marriages and gay ordination, while others would be opposed to such a move. Still others, he said, are split on the question. But he sees no reason those differences should threaten the church unity. “It has always been part of my understanding of our DNA that we as United Methodists are willing to ask the hard questions... and to do this with respect, grace and compassion.”

### How the panels came to be

The 59-member Connectional Table coordinates mission, ministry and resources, acting as a sort of church council for the denomination.

It began holding panels on sexuality in 2014 at a time when debate over the church's stance has intensified as more states in the U.S. and more countries around the world have legalized same-gender civil marriage. At the same time, the body is looking at proposing possible changes to church law regarding the denomination's stance.

For more than 40 years, the Book of Discipline — the church’s book of law and doctrine — has asserted that all people are of sacred worth but the practice of homosexuality “is incompatible with Christian teaching.”

The book prohibits United Methodist churches from hosting and clergy from performing “ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions.” It also bans the ordination of “self-avowed practicing” gay clergy.

The Connectional Table’s human sexuality task force invited the Feb. 10 speakers on the recommendation of members from the central conferences.

Bondo is an elder in the Democratic Republic of Congo’s North Katanga Conference and teaches practical theology and Christian ethics at Africa University in Mutare, Zimbabwe.

Alvaran has served in pastoral ministry in his native Philippines. But he is now under appointment in San Francisco as the western regional organizer for Reconciling Ministries Network, an unofficial United Methodist group that advocates for greater inclusion of LGBTQ individuals within the denomination. The initials stand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning.

Alsted leads an area that includes seven countries, including three that legally recognize same-gender marriage.

Kongolo Chijika, dean of theology at Katanga Methodist University in the Democratic Republic of Congo, had planned to be the fourth speaker but needed to bow out at the last minute.

What would happen if the church changed its teachings?

One question Connectional Table members pressed on the speakers is what would happen in their contexts if the church changed its stance on homosexuality.

Bondo said if the denomination approves “the practice of homosexuality, it would cease to be a church but would become a club.”

Alvaran, in contrast, said “taking out the discriminatory language in the Book of Discipline aligns it with the gospel of Jesus Christ.” He noted that LGBTQ children and adults around the world still endure harassment and worse. Changing the church’s stance “would sever the church’s direct relationship with violence, prejudice and inequalities that LGBTQ people face.”

Alsted said some churches would welcome the development while he is sure others “would consider leaving the connection.”

Both Bondo and Alsted expressed a certain weariness with the church’s longtime debate over homosexuality, which surfaces at every four years at General Conference.

Bondo suggested the denomination's Social Principles, which contain the denomination's teachings on marriage and sexuality, be subject to the same restrictive rules as the denomination's doctrinal statements on such matters as the divinity and resurrection of Christ. Such a move would make them impossible to amend at General Conference.

Alsted, however, has a different take. Personally, he said, his position on human sexuality is in line with the Book of Discipline.

"However, it is a mystery for me that this one issue has become such a dominant issue within our denomination and in our society, and that presents a problem," he said.

"The issue of human sexuality, in particular homosexuality, is an important issue. But it does not have the significance or importance to split us as a church. And if we go in that direction, I wonder what we will think of our past in 50 years."

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To WATCH the panel discussion

The Connectional Table's last panel on human sexuality, Wesleyan identity and the life of the church will be available for online streaming on Friday, Feb. 13 at [umc.org/connectional-table-webcast](http://umc.org/connectional-table-webcast) Viewers can also watch the two earlier panels on this site.

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