

UMC bishops warned of clergy planning to bless gay unions

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 18, 2011](#) issue

A United Methodist group of large-church pastors, joined by hundreds of petition-signing clergy and laity, are urging the denomination's bishops to issue a collective warning to some 900 "defiant" clergy who have declared their intention to bless same-sex unions or marriages.

The Council of Bishops, which opens a four-day meeting October 31 in North Carolina, was asked by the pastors group to issue a public statement affirming the decades-old restrictions. The UMC says the "practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching" and bars Methodist churches from hosting or officiating at "ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions."

Pastor Ed Robb III, senior pastor of the 9,200-member Woodlands United Methodist Church near Houston, and four other Bible Belt pastors wrote the letter to the bishops after discussing the idea early in September at a gathering of senior pastors from the 100 largest U.S. Methodist congregations, reported United Methodist News Service. The four original signers were joined in the statement by 54 more clergy.

As of September 26, the online clergy letter to the bishops (faithfulumc.com) had 1,523 signers, and a letter from lay Methodists urging strong penalties for offenders had 4,388 signatures.

The United Methodist Church in the U.S. has about 7.8 million members and nearly 17,000 active ordained clergy, according to Lovett Weems Jr. of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership at Wesley Theological Seminary.

The clergy movement to offer church blessings or marriage to any couple, including same-sex pairs, began in Minnesota this spring when 70 ministers stated their willingness to risk penalties. Clergy in at least four other regions subsequently signed similar statements.

The General Conference, the highest legislative body of the UMC, has debated gay issues every four years since 1972. Chances are slim, most analysts say, that the 2012 General Conference April 24-May 4 will be open to same-sex blessings. Delegates generally opposed to a change are growing higher in ratio—a steady trend because of the booming growth in churches abroad that are strongly opposed to any changes.

Some advocates of change have looked to UMC judicial decisions for remedies. The laity letter to the bishops complained that present law "gives juries in church trials a great deal of discretion in determining penalties, including defrocking, suspension or a lesser penalty." But decisions by church courts on clergy accused of violating Methodist rules on gay-related issues have had mixed results for progressive advocates.

The risk-taking steps were sparked by Bruce Robbins, pastor of Hennepin Avenue UMC in Minneapolis. Robbins told United Methodist News Service that faithful ministers sympathetic to committed same-sex partners are caught in a dilemma between two covenants.

The Methodist Book of Discipline, or law book, "calls us for inclusiveness and recognizing the sacred worth of all persons, and then places prohibitions that we deeply believe are prejudicial and unjust," said Robbins, a former top executive of the Methodists' Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns. He noted that the denomination has corrected its moral course "when people have been excluded before, such as women in ordination and the permissiveness on slavery."

But the clergy appeal to the Council of Bishops countered that "this group of defiant clergy" will lead many church members to decide that it is "time for them to find another church."

"What Dr. Robbins and others are proposing will lead to anarchy," the letter concluded. It further suggested that if "massive acts of ecclesiastical disobedience" occur, the advocates may be hoping that the UMC "will not possess the resources or the resolve to enforce the church's position."

Bishop Larry M. Goodpaster, president of the Council of Bishops, said the council's executive committee will meet first to decide if the full council should make a full response.