

Methodist General Conference to discuss sexuality, divestment

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#)

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CHICAGO (RNS) “It’s time,” said A. Wendy Witt during Sunday services at First United Methodist Church at the Chicago Temple.

Time to open the doors of the church to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, that is.

First United Methodist is one of the more than 750 congregations within the United Methodist Church that form the Reconciling Ministries Network, dedicated to including LGBT people in a denomination that bars them from ordination and does not allow its ministers to officiate same-sex weddings.

The network has organized the It’s Time campaign to push the denomination—which has more than 12 million members worldwide, including 7 million in the U.S.—to address the issue during its May 10–20 General Conference, a quadrennial meeting of global Methodists.

More than 100 petitions relating to human sexuality have been submitted to the church’s top governing body. The denomination’s 864 elected delegates will consider them when they meet in Portland, Oregon.

Also up for consideration are four resolutions prepared by the United Methodist Kairos Response that ask the Methodist denomination to divest from Caterpillar, Motorola Solutions, and Hewlett-Packard—companies that profit from Israel’s occupation of Palestinian lands—and end any other investments that relate to illegal settlements. The church already opposes the occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Kairos Response isn’t the only group encouraging divestment; an advocacy group called Fossil Free UMC is calling on the church to divest from fossil fuel companies as

well.

Issues regarding sexuality have been discussed at every conference since the 1972 General Conference added language to the Book of Discipline: “The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.”

“It’s the perennial issue that will not go away, and for better or for worse, it’s the main battle flag issue between the liberal side of the church and the conservative side of the church,” said Mark Tooley, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Institute on Religion & Democracy.

Those discussions have been characterized by “lots of anguish and emotion and demonstration and disruption and sometimes police involvement,” according to Tooley.

But this year is different, said Gil Caldwell, who was arrested at the General Conference 16 years ago while protesting the adoption of the sexuality provisions.

“The fact that same-sex marriage is now legal in the U.S.A.,” Caldwell said, “certainly ought to have an impact at a General Conference meeting.”

Church research shows 46 percent of U.S. members agree with the church’s ban on same-sex marriage.

But crucially, the denomination is growing overseas and particularly in Africa, where homosexuality is banned in many countries. More than 40 percent of delegates will come to the General Conference from outside the U.S.

“There’s almost no doubt that if the United Methodist Church were a U.S.-only denomination, it would be where the other U.S.-only mainline Protestant denominations are on this issue,” Tooley said.

Tooley’s ecumenical Institute on Religion & Democracy, which describes itself as a voice for “Christian orthodoxy,” does not support a change, and he said he expects the General Conference to reaffirm its policies, possibly even strengthen them.

Still others—such as Peg Isaacson, chair of First United Methodist’s Reconciling Task Force—would be happy if the denomination simply allowed individual congregations to choose for themselves how to welcome gays.

All three positions are represented in the petitions delegates will consider at the General Conference, which will begin with a debate on how to debate the issue. The commission that oversees the gathering has proposed a group discernment process, nicknamed “Rule 44,” that would allow delegates to discuss contentious issues in small groups.

That way, Isaacson said, “people are looking at each other and talking to each other, rather than just testifying at a legislative committee.”

Among the plans to streamline all the legislation regarding sexuality is “The Simple Plan” supported by the Reconciling Ministries Network. That would change six paragraphs in the denomination’s Book of Discipline.

As the General Conference approached, the It’s Time campaign was one of several drawing attention to what’s at stake in the debate.

Two weeks ago, Val Rosenquist and retired Bishop Melvin Talbert co-officiated the wedding of a same-sex couple in North Carolina.

And this week, 15 clergy and clergy candidates in the New York Annual Conference came out in an open letter, saying, “We are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer clergy and candidates.” In another open letter, the chairs of the Baltimore-Washington Conference and New York Conference boards of ordained ministry called on other Methodist conferences to join them in no longer asking candidates about their sexual orientation.

On It’s Time Sunday, First United Methodist spent time in prayer for the bishops, delegates, staff and volunteers at the General Conference, as well as for “civility.” After the service, clergy, and congregants posed for photos inside a blue frame painted with the words, “Dear church ... it’s time.”

John Barker, church council chair, smiled alongside his wife, Kathy, and their 12-year-old daughter, Sophie. It was important to him for his family to take a stand, he said, echoing the theme of the day, “because it’s time for the church to change.”

“We support inclusion efforts and trust that the delegates to General Conference will hear God’s call to eliminate language that discriminates and live into God’s call that all means all,” he said.

Adelle M. Banks contributed to this report