

Methodist bishops table proposed new gay stance: Advancing recommendation deemed divisive

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A proposed change in the United Methodist Church's 25-year-old stance on homosexual behavior that would condone same-sex marriage "where legally possible" was tabled by a committee at the Council of Bishops meeting this month near Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

The denomination's Book of Discipline says the church "does not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider[s] this practice incompatible with Christian teaching." The stance of the worldwide, 11-million-member church has withstood many challenges in past conventions, but the issue is expected to arise again next year.

A council subcommittee had recommended replacing the 1972 language with wording saying the church does not condone sexual relationships between people of heterosexual or homosexual orientation "outside the bonds of a faithful, loving and committed relationship between two persons; marriage, where legally possible."

The proposed change also declared that the present stance "is based on highly questionable theology and biblical understanding and causes profound hurt to thousands of loyal United Methodist members and potential members."

But the bishops' administrative committee voted May 1 to table the recommendation, and the measure never formally went before the Council of Bishops, according to the United Methodist News Service.

Had the council approved the recommendation, it would have gone to a committee of the 2008 General Conference for action by 1,000 delegates at the quadrennial meeting in Fort Worth, Texas. Bishops do not have a vote at the General Conference, but they may propose legislation for delegates to consider.

Retired bishop Jack Tuell, a former lawyer and onetime president of the Council of Bishops, commented after the tabling action that “almost any thoughtful plan of leadership would be superior to prudent silence.” While saying he understood the committee’s rejection, Tuell contended that there should be “a better way to express the mind of our United Methodist Church” than the statement’s incompatibility clause.

An informed source told the Century that Tuell had submitted the proposal to fellow bishops. Another point in the tabled recommendation emphasized that the change would make it clear “that we disapprove of all promiscuous premarital or extramarital sexual relationships, whether practiced by heterosexual persons or homosexual persons.”

In defending the proposal’s shelving, Oklahoma bishop Robert Hayes said that advancing the recommendation would have “proven to be divisive and counterproductive to the unity that currently exists” among the bishops and in the church. Forwarding the recommendation would not advance “the betterment of the church at this time,” he added.

After the United Methodist News Service on May 8 reported the proposal’s tabling, Troy Plummer, executive director of the pro-gay rights Reconciling Ministries Network, commented, “Silence kills. Too many lives are at stake for the bishops to take an ostrich position. The way to unity is justice, not avoidance.”