

The Internet, gay sex and the surgeon general nominee: A new litmus test?

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [July 24, 2007](#) issue

Surgeon general appointees are often controversial, usually for reasons having to do with sex. Conservatives fumed when C. Everett Koop praised the virtues of the condom and when Jocelyn Elders extolled the virtues of masturbation.

Now it's the left that's in a tizzy. President Bush has nominated James Holsinger, former health secretary in Kentucky and ex-chancellor of the University of Kentucky's medical center. It's not a surprising nomination for Bush: Holsinger is a medical doctor with some conservative credentials and a retired general in the army reserve, and he is on record as an opponent of gay sex.

But he has also advocated expanding stem cell research and pushed for higher taxes on tobacco in a major leaf-growing state, and he organized a conference on lesbian health in 2002, despite conservative political opposition. The White House stated that Holsinger's immediate goal would be to educate the public about the epidemic of obesity among children—a worthy goal from either side of the political aisle.

In ecclesial circles, Holsinger is known as president of the United Methodist Church's supreme court, the Judicial Council, which has been in the news ever since a slight majority of the council voted against reinstating a defrocked lesbian pastor to her church in Philadelphia in 2004. Last year conservatives on the council supported a Virginia pastor's authority to decide that a gay man couldn't be received into his church. These positions mark Holsinger as a conservative but not as a fanatic: his vote to uphold the stance against the blessing of same-sex relationships reflects the present state of the question in the church's legislative body. He has been a "strict constructionist," in other words.

Initial Associated Press reports of his nomination included factual errors: he was said to have helped found Hope Springs Community Church in Lexington, when in reality he is just a member. The *Nation* called him “a Bible-thumping reverend” (he’s not ordained) and proclaimed him the “founder” of his congregation. Such mistakes matter. Critics allude to his church’s “ex-gay ministry,” others call it a broader “healing ministry.”

The AP quoted opponents of the nomination who said Holsinger has “a pretty clear bias” against gays and lesbians, and “rejects science and promotes ideology.” His writings on homosexuality make up “one twisted piece of work.” The story included a few timid defenses of Holsinger from medical colleagues who suggested that he’s nicer and more professional than his opponents say he is. Unfortunately, Holsinger declined to comment.

The attacks in the blogosphere were much worse. Web sites insinuated that Holsinger was behind the murder of six patients in a Chicago veterans hospital. Buzzflash.com reported that he embezzled \$20 million from the Kentucky Annual Conference of the UMC (if that conference has \$20 million to embezzle, then I’m joining it). This sort of smear makes many question the value of the democratizing effect of the Internet—it may only be unleashing ethics-free hacks.

There may be good reason to oppose Holsinger, including his part in a 1991 report to the church that went on at length about the dangers of anal sex. That was a common conservative argument then and is still widely held now, even if its supporters keep their heads down in public. In retrospect, it looks like a case of a medical doctor throwing his professional weight around to keep the church’s conservative position entrenched. He will have to answer whether that is still his position on the matter.

Holsinger will get a thorough working over. But his position on homosexuality is still congruent with the bulk of the mainline denominations in America. Opposition to him looks remarkably like the imposition of a religious litmus test on a political candidate: go against your church on the gay issue, or say goodbye to any political future.