

All in the family: United Methodists reaffirm gay ban

by [John Dart](#) in the [June 1, 2004](#) issue

On the persistent question of whether churches should tolerate same-sex intimacy by any of its ministers, opponents won a series of victories in May as United Methodists met in Pittsburgh. If anything, the second-largest U.S. Protestant denomination strengthened its resolve against ordaining openly gay ministers.

Seeking a small concession, gay rights activists had hoped delegates would officially acknowledge three decades of differences by formally agreeing on this point: “We recognize that Christians disagree on the compatibility of homosexual practice with Christian teaching.” The proposal failed 572-423.

On the same day, May 4, delegates defeated by a 2-to-1 margin a resolution that would have allowed regional Methodist bodies to decide for themselves whether gay or lesbian ministers could be ordained. Another vote (674-262) restated a ban on any clergyperson who is found to be a “self-avowed practicing homosexual.”

However, delegates also rejected soundly the idea of working toward an “amicable” denominational split—a proposal that arose after a surprise trial balloon was floated by retired megachurch pastor Bill Hinson, president of the conservative Confessing Movement, near the end of the 11-day quadrennial General Conference. Delegates on May 7 approved by 869 to 41 a one-sentence resolution: “As United Methodists we remain in covenant with one another, even in the midst of disagreement, and reaffirm our commitment to work together for our common mission of making disciples throughout the world.”

In talking to reporters, Hinson framed his idea as a gesture to gay rights advocates who are “hurting.” “Who are we to step on their dreams? We don’t wish to fight anymore,” said Hinson, whose First United Methodist Church of Houston was the largest UMC congregation for 17 of the 18 years he was pastor. Hinson’s verdict of “irreconcilable differences” in the church was echoed by Jim Heidinger, publisher of the conservative *Good News* magazine. But several leading bishops and liberal

activists rejected the notion of divorce, denominational style.

So did moderate Methodists. Just before the unity resolution vote, Bill McAlilly, a minister from Tupelo, Mississippi, drew enthusiastic applause from fellow delegates when he said that “the Methodist middle” needed to be heard. “We teach Sunday school. We serve in food pantries. . . . We build Habitat for Humanity houses,” McAlilly said. Too often moderates have been silent, perhaps out of fear that “if we speak we will be labeled as the opposition.” Finally, he said, “If those of us in the middle can contain those on both sides of the equation, we might be able to find the unity for which we seek.”

Those who toil at either ideological pole on gay issues might themselves have stayed part of the broad Methodist middle had they not been spurred to activism by a family member’s “coming out.” The Century talked to two couples who fit the description.

Both sets of parents said they responded with love to a son when he announced he was gay. Both couples also engage in volunteer ministries to parents, gays and lesbians—though from different viewpoints. Both couples are heartland Americans with generally conservative views.

Bob and Betty Dorr of Omaha, Nebraska, participated in the peaceful demonstration for gay rights on the convention floor and in vigils outside the Pittsburgh meeting hall. Betty has twice been arrested for the cause, once in Nebraska and once at the 2000 United Methodist General Conference in Cleveland.

Bob and Betty each have one sibling—brothers who acknowledged their homosexuality years ago. “All four of us know we didn’t choose our sexuality, and we were all raised the same way by loving parents,” Bob said. The Dorrns have three grown sons, including one working in Chicago who at age 27 told his parents that he is gay.

By the next year, 1994, Betty had become active in the Omaha chapter of Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and had gone to the national convention of the United Methodist–related Reconciling Ministries Network. The Dorrns have been members of the Omaha First United Methodist Church for 44 years. The once-large congregation, experiencing declining membership, had internal disputes in the mid-’90s when a vision statement was crafted to welcome all people regardless of age, color, ethnicity, disability or or sexual orientation.

The Dorrs are active in Methodist-related programs as well as Soulforce protests. “We wore great big tags around our necks at this convention with a picture of our son and the words ‘Our children are of sacred worth,’” said Betty. Bob said their core message concerns safety for gay and lesbian young people. “Recently at the end of a PFLAG panel at a college, one of the students handed me this note: ‘Thank you! My cousin was gay and committed suicide because he knew the family would not accept him.’”

Are the Dorrs behind legal marriage for gays? “A year ago, I would have said, ‘No,’ but now I see it as yet another civil right,” said Bob. But not their gay son. “He isn’t a gay rights activist, nor does he have a committed partner whom he might marry if he had the opportunity.”

John and Pat Beadle of Jewett, Ohio, were at the convention to help a Methodist-related group called Transforming Congregations. The group offers testimonies about change by self-proclaimed ex-gays and ex-lesbians. The couple joined an early morning protest by Transforming Congregations outside the convention center in which members held banners reading “Love Transforms” and “Support Freedom to Change.”

Thirteen years ago, when the couple belonged to a Wesleyan Methodist Church, Pat said, one son, then 21 and just out of the air force, came home, saying, “Mom, there’s something I need to tell you.” Pat said, “I began seeking help in God’s word, first looking for loopholes.” She concluded that a solution was available akin to her own religious turnaround years ago.

“Though we told him we loved him unconditionally, he was not open to our advice that he didn’t have to live this way,” she said. Pat had found testimonies asserting that “the Lord loved me out of homosexuality” from Exodus International, a group based in Orlando. The Beadles’ son still resists the parental appeals. But Pat said he plans to accompany her to the Exodus national conference in July at Azusa Pacific University in California—despite the fact that “he has been in a relationship for several years with another fellow.” He’s going “to do his homework and see what his mother is involved in,” according to Pat.

She said the matter “is something that is truly between him and God,” but that her exposure to Exodus “gave me compassion for other sons and daughters [to tell them] that there is a way out.” When the Beadles moved eight years ago, they

joined a United Methodist Church and connected with members who dealt with homosexuality as a church issue.

John Beadle lets his wife do most of the talking, but he says that he joins her in “mostly talking to fathers on a one-to-one basis.” Young gays and lesbians “need to know we love them—but to be honest, not just saying everything’s OK,” said Pat. “If we can’t stand on God’s word, what can we stand on?”

The Dorrs and Beadles, despite their differences, agree on wanting the denomination to stay together.

The suggestion of an “amicable separation”—never formally proposed at the convention—was outlined by Hinson at an evangelical-sponsored breakfast on May 6 and was quickly picked up by news media and delegates. The idea was startling because conservatives were flushed with success, and odds favor their making gains in the future.

Methodists from overseas, who number nearly 2 million, also send delegates to the General Conference. African Methodists, like African Anglicans and Lutherans, regard homosexual practices as unmistakably sinful. Foreign Methodists gained 32 seats for the 2004 General Conference and presumably will gain more in 2008 given the May 7 decision to admit into full membership the large Protestant Methodist Church of Côte d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast). In the U.S., evangelical congregations in the South tend to exhibit the strongest growth.

“There has not yet been the complete ‘Southern Baptistification’ of the United Methodist Church, but we are still on that path,” wrote Ken Rowe, co-leader of Affirmation, in the gay caucus’s newsletter. He noted that no radical change is expected in the rank of bishops and that moderate-progressive candidates dominated elections to the Judicial Council.

Denver Bishop Warner Brown, among other bishops talking to reporters, said, “We share a church that’s a moderate church, that’s pretty centrist in this country.” On controversies that resurface at every convention, Bishop William Oden of Dallas said, “Whatever is happening out there in the world is going to be on the agenda of the General Conference . . . one way or another. That’s who we are.” Asked about talk of schism in the Episcopal Church over gay issues, Oden said he saw few parallels to the UMC. “And the Episcopal Church has not divided and they are a long way from that,” he said.

Why would conservative Methodists want a split, Bishop Ruediger Minor of Moscow, the outgoing Council of Bishops president, asked rhetorically. “If they left the church, these people would just ‘shoot themselves in the foot,’ because they would lose their forum, and their possibility to influence a mainline church.”

Conservative leader Maxie Dunnam, president of Asbury Theological Seminary, said he personally did not want Methodists to talk about separation. “That’s not a game where our energy needs to be focused.”

A similar sentiment came from Kathryn Johnson, executive director of the independent Methodist Federation for Social Action: “Any talk of divorce is premature at this point—we haven’t even had counseling.”