

UMC bishops dispute church court ruling on gay membership: Bishops say homosexuality "not a barrier"

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The bishops of the United Methodist Church have unanimously proclaimed that homosexuality is "not a barrier" to church membership, despite a recent church court ruling that allowed a Virginia pastor to keep an openly gay man from joining his congregation.

The Council of Bishops, meeting in North Carolina early this month, criticized the ruling by the church's Judicial Council, which raised concerns that pastors might also be able to discriminate based on race, marital status or theological beliefs.

Such concerns had been raised, for instance, by Kathryn Johnson, executive director of the Methodist Federation for Social Action. That group's statement said the court ruling was "chilling in its implications." Asked Johnson: "Where will each pastor draw the line? Can a person be refused membership based on a person's race or their immigration status? What of the person who is divorced and remarried?"

The court ruled in favor of Ed Johnson, the pastor of South Hill (Virginia) United Methodist Church, who denied membership to a man who was involved in a gay relationship. The court's ruling overturned Johnson's suspension and said clergy may exercise "pastoral judgment in determining who may be received into the membership of a local church."

In a pointed pastoral letter to the denomination, the bishops said, "We call upon all United Methodist pastors and laity to make every congregation a community of hospitality." They quoted from the church's constitution, which implores "families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends."

The bishops did not, however, say whether they will try to overturn the ruling.

"I don't think it's going too far to say the council is of one mind that gay and lesbian people can be members of the United Methodist Church," Bishop Janice Riggle Huie of Texas told United Methodist News Service. Huie, 58, who at the same meeting was elected new president of the bishops for two years, effective in May, headed the writing team for the pastoral letter.

The announcement of the court's ruling caused "considerable conversation within the council [of bishops]," said Huie. Many bishops received calls and e-mail from pastors and laypeople who were "greatly troubled" and asking for clarification, she said.

In their letter, the bishops also expressed concern that the ruling violates their authority to supervise clergy. They said they "affirm" the church's tradition that makes pastors accountable to bishops, local superintendents and other clergy.

Bishop John Schol of Baltimore-Washington, who was outspokenly critical of the ruling, said the church may be divided over homosexuality but "the Council of Bishops is of one mind: gay and lesbian people are not to be excluded from church membership."

"While pastors have the responsibility to discern readiness for membership, homosexuality is not a barrier," the bishops said in their letter.

Huie, who succeeds Bishop Peter D. Weaver of the Boston area as president of the bishops, will take office in a year when the 11-million-member denomination marks the 50th anniversary of full clergy rights for women. That observance puts "an additional dimension to this office," she said. "I find myself grateful for the women who went before me that paved the way for me to receive this gift and responsibility," she said. -*United Methodist News Service*