

To: Sam Hodges, Reporter, United Methodist News Service

RE: The request from Sam Hodges of the United Methodist News Service requesting an interview regarding the origins of the language "we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching" and how this language came to appear in the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church

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Homosexuality and the 1972 Social Principles: Did the conflict begin with "the language"?

By Don Hand

I vividly recall the first annual conference I attended. It was in 1970, and I served as a member representing Highland Terrace UMC. That year, the Southwest Texas Annual Conference convened at Travis Park UMC, located in downtown San Antonio, Texas. This experience provided my first glimpse of disruptive and disrespectful behavior by a clergy member.

At the first session of this conference, a young pastor who had been charged with heterosexual misconduct, tried and convicted, resulting in the revocation of his ministerial credentials was in attendance. This pastor appeared at the back of the sanctuary and shouted: "Bishop, here are my credentials!" He promptly set them ablaze, marched down the aisle, and handed them to the bishop who smiled and calmly said, "Thank you, Will," and dropped the fiery remains into a metal trash can provided by someone close to the action. I was about six feet away and marveled at the coolness of Bishop Slater, one of the kindest, most gentle persons I have known. As a neophyte in church matters at this level, I was amazed at the rudeness and display of contempt exhibited by a man of the cloth.

The next year, 1971, an ordained minister whose credentials had been revoked on the basis of homosexual behavior, came to the annual conference to protest his discontinuance as an ordained minister. He brought with him a large group of males attired in white robes that crowded into the assembly. They disrupted the meeting creating stress and disorder, leading to the early adjournment of that session.

In an evening service, two males sitting near the front of the section on the left side of the sanctuary stood up and berated Bishop Slater when he started a worship service. They continued to harass him regarding the disciplinary action taken against the homosexual pastor. I was seated across the sanctuary near the front on the right hand side. I looked around the sanctuary and saw that no one was engaged in an effort to quell the disturbance. I thought, "This is ridiculous!" I got up, walked to the side aisle, down that aisle to the front of the church, across the front to the aisle on the left side to where the males stood. I told them that they were violating state law by disrupting a church service and could be prosecuted. They would not sit down. I told them that I, and others in the gathering wanted to hear the bishop speak. This also was ineffective. So I moved quite near the two and in a low voice suggested it would be well if they would be seated and quiet. They agreed and were seated. I returned to my seat by way of the route by which I came.

Election of delegates to the 1972 General Conference was taking place. I didn't know much about the election process and was not interested in the election - but I was elected as a delegate. There didn't seem to be any noticeable campaigning in those days. I am confident that I was elected out of concern with outsiders disrupting conference business, and with approval for my simple effort to bring better order after a third disruption.

Each of these disruptions, the first regarding heterosexual misconduct, and the latter two regarding homosexual misconduct, were expressions of entitlement by pastors and supporters who were unwilling to abide by centuries-old standards of Christian morality and had been found by the clergy session to be unacceptable for ministry.

Before the commencement of the General Conference in the Spring of 1972 in Atlanta, Georgia, I received reams of paper dealing with issues to be considered there. The greatest attention was placed on a substantial proposal arising from the Social Principles Study Commission created by the 1968 General Conference.

The Commission was charged with the task of bringing to the 1972 General Conference a recommendation for a Statement on Social Principles. Most of the attention to the document focused on paragraph 72(c) labeled "Human Sexuality." The original proposal is included below:

Human Sexuality. - We recognize that sexuality is a good gift of God, and we believe persons may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the church, and society. We call all persons to disciplines that lead to the fulfillment of themselves, others, and society in the stewardship of this gift. Medical, theological, and humanistic disciplines should combine in a determined effort to understand human sexuality more completely.

Although men and women are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sex between a man and a woman is to be clearly affirmed only in the marriage bond. Sex may become exploitive within as well as outside marriage. We reject all sexual expressions which damage or destroy the humanity God has given us as birthright, and we affirm only that sexual expression which enhances that same humanity, in the midst of diverse opinion as to what constitutes that enhancement. Homosexuals no less than heterosexuals are persons of sacred worth, who need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Further we insist that all persons are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured.

It is important to note that the last sentence of the *proposed* paragraph 72 (C) ended with the word "ensured" followed by a period.

Several sessions of the General Conference were completed before this proposal from the Social Principles Study Commission was presented for debate. There had been a growing sense of uneasiness and despair among the delegates regarding the statement on human sexuality due to its ambiguity and inconsistency with traditional Christian doctrine. For example, the proposal states that "sex between a man and a woman is to be clearly affirmed only in the marriage bond," yet provides no statement governing any other form of non exploitive sexual activity between other persons other than to assert that "we affirm only that sexual expression which enhances that same humanity, in the midst of diverse opinion as to what constitutes

that enhancement." This language reflects the ideology of the sexual revolution of the late 1960's and early 1970's in its embrace of recreational sexual intercourse as a means of personal gratification and a civil right. As such, it was a serious departure from the teachings of the Christian tradition that risked conforming the moral standards of the Church to the licentious behavior of the world.

Many delegates were fearful that the adoption of the proposed statement would result in the immediate division of the four-year-old denomination.

The proposal came to the floor on a morning when Bishop Eugene Slater was presiding. There had been about two hours of debate over the merits of the proposed paragraph 72 (c) with no consensus. I listened and studied every aspect of this proposal with no major constructive thought crossing my mind. My attention kept returning to the last sentence and I concluded that this might be the only place that would afford opportunity to resolve the issue.

Suddenly, a proposal complete with punctuation hit me: "Change the period to a comma. Add the words 'though we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian doctrine.'" I wrote this idea down as required for presentation to the presiding officer, showed it to my friend Tom Reavley, then a Justice on the Supreme Court of Texas, and asked him what he thought about it. Justice Reavley, like many members of the assembly, was not very confident that anything presented would get us out of the deadlock.

He said, "I think it will provide the language needed to bring acceptance to the matter before us, but I doubt it will pass. But maybe you should try it." I said, "I will," went to a microphone, waved the large orange cardboard square which all delegates were provided for getting attention within the assembly of 1000 delegates, and asked for recognition. The bishop granted my request, and I read the amendment and the new sentence that would be constructed if the amendment were adopted

I shared the anxiety felt by many delegates that our denomination would lose its ability to influence society with respect to moral matters if a clear statement governing sexual activity were not adopted.

There was no anger that I could detect in the entire discussion of the issue that morning. I did not speak in anger. My emotions consisted of concern for the viability of the United Methodist Church as a Christian denomination in a rapidly changing world. A friendly amendment altering the word "doctrine" to "teaching" was offered, and I accepted it.

The amendment, as amended, passed by a clear majority of the vote.

After that, a District Superintendent from Pennsylvania commented that the amendment would "save 12 churches in my district."

Why does this conflict persist 42 years later?

Since that time, ten General Conferences have witnessed efforts to remove the language adopted in 1972. There have been acrimonious debates and displays of contempt toward the church in each of those gatherings. Our denomination has suffered greatly with many strong feelings surrounding the discussion of these issues. Several episcopal leaders now openly tolerate and affirm behavior that is proscribed in our Book of Discipline.

Some have suggested that an agreed separation of the contending factions would be agreeable to all sides. Such a separation would result in the loss of friends and common endeavor, and that is always sorrowful. Should it occur, it might make some people happy. As with all proposals, care, consideration, and courtesy should govern the conduct of discussions.

With or without a formal division, however, any connectional church must address issues of antagonistic dissent and disobedience against its ruling authority by its episcopacy, clergy, and laity. For the United Methodist Church, that ruling authority is the General Conference.

Our current system locates the accountability process for bishops within the College of Bishops in each Jurisdiction. This begs the question as to what would take place if an entire Jurisdiction opposed the General Conference, or if bishops in that Jurisdiction decided to protect one another. The Constitution of the UMC provides the General Conference with the *direct* authority to "provide for the discontinuance of a bishop because of inefficiency or unacceptability." Several bishops have indicated that they find the General Conference unacceptable. It seems appropriate, therefore, that the resolution of any conflict between a bishop and the General Conference take place at the General Conference rather than at the more regional Jurisdictional level. Such accountability would make tremendous progress in restoring order and unity to our beloved denomination.