

# Methodists refuse to ease anti-homosexuality stand

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — The United Methodist Church, second-largest Protestant body in the country, overwhelmingly rejected efforts to soften its stand against homosexual practices Saturday.

Such practices are "incompatible with Christian teaching," declared delegates to the denomination's governing conference. They swept aside by a vote of 728-225 a move to delete that phrase from the church's Book of Discipline.

## Not just Methodists

The action came in the course of about three hours of debate on an issue that has smoldered throughout most major churches, Protestant and Roman Catholic.

"The atmosphere has been poisoned and inflamed," declared the Rev. Lee Moorehead of First United Methodist Church, 203 Wisconsin Ave., Madison, Wis. He said, "vicious and vile attitudes" have been fostered about homosexuals, sometimes turning the gospel's "good news" into "bad news."

"I hope pastors will not be intimidated and will remain pastors of all human souls," whether homosexual or heterosexual, he said.

Still to be considered was a proposal that would bar avowed homosexuals from the ministry. That issue has been aggravated by the reappointment in 1978 of an avowed homosexual, the Rev. Paul Abels, to the pastorate of Manhattan's Washington Square Methodist Church.

The 9.6 million-member denomination, holding its once-in-four years governing conference, also authorized a delegation to meet with President Carter to urge "restraint, peace and reconciliation" regarding Iran and its holding of U.S. hostages.

Carter recently has spoken of possible military action as a last resort in the hostage situation.

## Appeal to Khomeini

The conference was also expected to appeal directly to Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini. This would be the first American church to take such an action.

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Rev. Lee Moorehead

tween two persons of the same sex is not marriage.

The conference opted instead for a positive statement of marriage as a bond of mutual support and fidelity between "a man and a woman." Seamands wanted it to specify "and only a man and a woman" but this was turned down.

The Rev. Norman Lawson of Wenatchee, Wash., said he was "outraged" that with all the issues facing the human family and the church, it was more preoccupied with homosexuality than anything else. "It is a grotesque distortion of the gospel," he said.

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It was the emotional debate over homosexuality, however, that dominated the church's legislative session, the first of the 10-day conference. Four previous days were devoted to formalities and committee meetings.

Half the 1,000 delegates are clergy and half laity from the church's 38,576 congregations across the country, forming a representative body that functions much like the U.S. Congress.

The denomination is second in size among Protestants only to the 13 million-member Southern Baptist Convention.

## Policy opponent

The Rev. William Walker of Portland, Ore., led the effort to remove the condemnation of homosexual practices, saying it makes homosexuals "feel they cannot be part of the household of faith without a sense of condemnation."

"We are dealing with brothers and sisters seeking the forgiveness of God," he said, adding that it "comes close to idolatry" to single out this "one sin among all sins as if this particular activity is not covered by God's grace."

But the Rev. David Seamands, of Willmore, Ky., said a vast demand has arisen to retain the church's anti-homosexual stand. "The voice of the grass roots is very clear on this issue," he said.

On the other side, the Rev. Arthur Melius of Schenectady, N.Y., argued that "we need to be prophetic at a time when it's unpopular to do so. The truth, scientifically and theologically, is that there is no consensus on homosexuality."

The approved disciplinary section says that "homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are persons of sacred worth," needing the church's ministry and entitled to full civil and human rights.

But "we do not condone the practice of homosexuality," the church said, calling it incompatible with Christianity.

The delegates did, however, eliminate a phrase saying a relationship be-

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