

**2005 PNW ANNUAL CONFERENCE ACTION
INITIATED BY RMN
II**

Petition to the PNW Annual Conference, 2005 (as printed in Pre-Conference Handbook):

Petition #1-11

**“IMPLEMENTING THE CALL OF THE SOCIAL PRINCIPLES:
MINISTERING WITH AND FOR HOMOSEXUAL PERSONS”**

Resolved: That each congregation of the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference actively engage in a study of the document, *Implementing the Call*, prepared by the Council of the PNW Reconciling Ministries Network (text below) during the present quadrennium, and develop a specific plan of action for their own implementation of the General Conference call for intentional ministry with and for homosexual persons consistent with the Social Principles;

Further Resolved: That the resources prepared by the General Church and by the Reconciling Ministries Network of this Annual Conference be made available for this local church study and planning;

And Further Resolved: That progress in this study and planning be an agenda item of the Charge Conferences of the congregations during this quadrennium.

IMPLEMENTING THE CALL:

**Ministering to Homosexual Persons According to the Call of the
Social Principles of The United Methodist Church**

**A Challenge to All United Methodists from the Reconciling Ministries Network
of the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference**

From the Social Principles (excerpts from 161.G) *Human Sexuality*, The Book of Discipline, 2004)

We recognize that sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons. We believe that persons may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the church, and society. We call all persons to the disciplined, responsible fulfillment of themselves, others, and society in the stewardship of this gift. We also recognize our limited understanding of this complex gift and encourage the medical, theological, and social science disciplines to combine in a determined effort to understand human sexuality more completely. We call the Church to take the leadership role in bringing together these disciplines to address this most complex issue. Further, within the context of our understanding of this gift of God, we recognize that God challenges us to find responsible, committed, and loving forms of expression.

Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are only clearly affirmed in the marriage bond. Sex may become exploitative within as well as outside marriage. We reject all sexual expressions that damage or destroy the humanity God has given us as birthright, and we affirm only that sexual expression that enhances that same humanity. We believe that sexual relations where one or both partners are exploitative, abusive, or promiscuous are beyond the parameters of

acceptable Christian behavior and are ultimately destructive to individuals, families, and the social order. . . .

Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons 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 that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all, and we seek to live together in Christian community. We implore families and church not to reject and condemn their lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.

What does it mean for a congregation faithfully to live out and fully express the call embodied in this declaration with regard to human sexuality and its expression? The following points are offered for guidance and reflection.

Guidelines for Responsible Ministry

1. Ministry with regard to human sexuality and its expression must incorporate a balanced emphasis upon the *whole* of what our church has said on the matter, not merely some portion of it.
2. While other portions of The Book of Discipline address matters regarding homosexual persons and homosexual practice, the central and underlying principles for shaping attitude and ministry lie in the stated Social Principles.
3. The "official position" of The United Methodist Church thereby asserts the following
 - a. Sexuality is God's good gift to all persons.
 - b. Full and general acknowledgment and affirmation of the gift is essential for persons to be fully human (i.e., denial or repression of one's actual sexual nature and experience is both dehumanizing and an affront to God).
 - c. Disciplined, responsible stewardship of the gift is equally essential to full, genuine humanness which honors God.
 - d. The present limited understanding of this complex gift not only calls for a wide range of careful research to continue, with the Church called to take significant leadership; it also implies the importance and urgency of a *humble and teachable attitude* with regard to all aspects of human sexuality (i.e., *no one* has sufficient information at this time to make *absolute and final judgments*).
 - e. The challenge to all persons is to identify and establish responsible, committed and loving forms of sexual expression, and to avoid with greatest care those forms which are exploitative or abusive.
 - f. Homosexual persons exist.
 - g. Homosexual persons are of equal sacred worth; there is no ranking of worth among sexualities in the eyes of God; nor is God's grace measured out differently for heterosexual and homosexual persons.
 - h. Homosexual persons, like all others, need the ministry, guidance, and fellowship of the church "in their struggles for human fulfillment."

- i. It is of utmost importance that both families and congregations *do not reject or condemn* those among their members and friends who are lesbian or gay, either by their attitudes or by their actions; and to deny or ignore their presence, or to fail to minister deliberately and compassionately to them as much as to others, is tacit if not blatant rejection and condemnation
 - j. The declaration that the “practice” of homosexuality is not condoned and is considered to be incompatible with Christian teaching, which has been sustained over thirty years of debate at General Conferences, remains the “official” position of the denomination, although a substantial minority has always disagreed with it. That disagreement and the stress it puts upon the unity of the church is tacitly acknowledged by the addition, in 2004, of the phrase “and we will seek to live together in Christian unity.”
4. Certain internal contradictions among the statements in the Social Principles need to be fully recognized in the process of shaping an adequate ministry for and with homosexual persons; among these are the following:
 - a. The expression (i.e., “practice”) of one’s sexuality in responsible, committed and loving forms is asserted to be essential to full humanness and the thankful recognition of God’s loving gift of sexuality; yet such expression by homosexual persons is not condoned and is “considered” to be incompatible with Christian teaching. Does this not consign the homosexual person (whose existence and sacred worth is acknowledged) to fall short of the full humanness affirmed for all others by forbidding the responsible expression of sexuality allowed and encouraged for those others?
 - b. Although “gay marriage” has not yet been officially addressed by a General Conference, the Social Principles assertion that “sexual relations are only clearly affirmed in the marriage bond” stands directly opposed to the declaration that the “practice” of homosexuality (which can surely mean only “sexual relations”) is incompatible with Christian teaching, which would rule out responsible sexual expression for homosexuals within the marriage bond, were such marriage permitted.
 - c. The whole weight of the full paragraph concerning homosexual persons, with the exception of a portion of one sentence, falls upon *compassionate, supportive, and deliberate* ministry for and with gay and lesbian members and friends; surely the one sentence must not be allowed to dominate and shape a congregation’s ministry at the expense of all the rest that is said.
5. The addition (in 2000) of the sentence beginning, “We implore,” makes very clear that the General Conference understood the potential for the one negative statement preceding it to “trump” all the rest which had been carefully said; therefore a congregation’s ministry needs to be centrally founded upon the whole declaration while the issue of “condoning” and “considering the practice . . . to be incompatible with Christian teaching” continues to be debated.
6. It is only elsewhere in the Discipline that *financial* support for the *promotion* of sexuality is forbidden; in whatever way that restriction is to be understood, it can in no way be construed to forbid the specific and thorough implementation of the Social Principles themselves!

7. The assertion, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching” (the beginning of the sentence altered in 2004), which has been sustained for three decades by a substantial majority in the General Conferences, over against vigorous dissent, needs to be recognized for its careful limitations, even as it stands in tension with the great bulk of what Methodists declare about human sexuality. Specifically, it is to be noted that:
 - a. The word “consider” infers an *opinion* and is a far cry from a declaration that “we know with absolute certainty.” It acknowledges, if only indirectly and subtly, that opinions can differ and change, thus recognizing and supporting the earlier assertion of the need for more careful research with regard to “this most complex issue” of “God’s good gift” of human sexuality.
 - b. The resistance of the General Conference of 2004 to a formal “confession” of our own differences of opinion on this “issue,” the very vote in opposition tacitly admitting the very thing which is not stated, needs to be fully recognized: the General Conference seems to acknowledge the lack of any absolute certainty (i.e., only “opinion”) on the one hand, while rejecting, on the other hand, the acknowledgement that there is no unanimous opinion on the matter, the persistent split votes making that abundantly obvious.
 - c. Further, to assert that the “practice of homosexuality” is “incompatible with Christian *teaching*” is a far cry from a declaration that it is incompatible with the *will of God*; the former statement is factually correct with regard to the way Scripture and Tradition has been understood and applied across the centuries, but long-standing Christian teaching, well-based in Scripture, has been proven to be wrong before (e.g., with reference to cosmology, slavery, the role of women in church and society), and this traditional view of homosexual practice may well fall, in time, in response to the very “determined effort to understand human sexuality more completely” for which the Social Principles call and commit the Church to support.
8. In all areas where Christians strongly differ, it is radically important to avoid *divisive contentiousness*, and especially to avoid *judging* the spiritual and moral integrity of those with whom one differs; as seen in many of the contentious debates among the first Christians (e.g., with regard to the admission of Gentiles to the Church), it is critically important to acknowledge those with whom one is in conflict as brothers and sisters in Christ, to remain respectfully open to their differing experiences and convictions, and to leave all judgment to God, for anything less is to *dishonor* God by taking to oneself that which belongs rightly to God alone (i.e., the determining of who is or is not a member of the Body of Christ, who is or is not in spiritual or moral error).

Subsequent Action: This petition was reported to the plenary session with a recommendation for concurrence by a vote of 81 out of 99, 15 negative and 3 abstaining. The plenary session adopted the resolution without any major debate. The 2006 session reaffirmed the petition, adding that the Board of Church and Society be assigned primary for implementing the resolution.