

Peter Browning

Homosexuality, Ordination, and Polity

What impact does a gay or lesbian Christian's membership in a denomination have on his or her efforts to be ordained? How are the struggles different for gay and lesbian Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, United Methodists, or Disciples of Christ?

Choosing two mainline Protestant denominations, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Methodist Church, I wish to sketch the role that denominational identities play in shaping decisions about the ordination of homosexuals. Much discussion of gay and lesbian ordination focuses on ethical arguments for or against homosexuality. Certainly, such discussion is important; however, more attention should be given to the influence of different ordination traditions and church structures on this controversy.

The case of the United Methodists and Disciples of Christ provides an illustration of denominational practices which are as important as attitudes toward homosexuality in determining whether gays and lesbians are ordained. In a recent survey of members in twenty-four Christian denominations, Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney asked respondents to indicate agreement or disagreement with the following statement: "Homosexuality is not always wrong." Twenty-three percent of United Methodists polled agree while only 18 percent of the Disciples concur.¹

A reasonable interpretation of the data suggests that more Disciples of Christ believe that homosexuality is wrong than do United Methodists by a margin of 5 percent. If this belief were the

Peter Browning is Chaplain and Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Drury College, Springfield, Missouri.

determinative factor for the ordination of homosexuals in these denominations, then one could assume that opportunities for the ordination of gays and lesbians within the United Methodist Church would be slightly greater than such opportunities within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Yet, as most are aware, that assumption would not be correct. The United Methodists do not permit "practicing self-avowed homosexuals" to be ordained, while there is the possibility, however small, of such ordination within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

What accounts for this difference? While there are many factors which could be considered, this essay proposes to examine three: ordination theologies, denominational politics, and church ethical decision-making structures.

To set the stage for this analysis, let us briefly review the two denominations' discussion of homosexuality and ordination.

The United Methodist Church

The UMC has debated the issue of homosexuality and ordination for over twenty years. In 1972 the General Conference voted to include a statement in *The Book of Discipline* which affirmed homosexuals as "persons of sacred worth" but condemned homosexuality as "incompatible with Christian teaching."² Four years later, the General Conference delegates banned funding for any organization advocating on behalf of gays and lesbians.³ In 1982 a test of denominational practice occurred when Bishop Melvin Wheatley appointed an openly gay minister in Denver to serve as a director of Christian education.⁴ This episcopal decision was challenged and brought before the Judicial Council, where it was eventually upheld with a judgment stating that *The Discipline*, as it stood at that time, did not prohibit the ordination or appointment of practicing homosexuals.⁵ The technical loophole was closed at the General Conference in 1984, when *The Discipline* was changed to block the appointment of anyone who was a "self-avowed practicing homosexual."⁶

Four years later the 1988 General Conference created a committee for the study of homosexuality under the auspices of the General Council on Ministries; in 1992, the committee made its report with majority and minority recommendations. The majority concluded that

there was not enough information available at this time to reject homosexuality as inconsistent with a Christian lifestyle. The minority took such lack of conclusive information as a sign that official denominational disapproval of homosexuality should not be withdrawn.⁷ However, neither recommendation was approved for modification of *The Discipline*, and the committee's study materials were referred to local congregations for discussion over the next four years.⁸

Throughout this debate, various groups emerged favoring and rejecting gay/lesbian ordination. Chief among the supporters were the Methodist Federation for Social Action and Reconciling Congregations, an unofficial United Methodist gay and lesbian advocacy network with seventy-one participating local churches.⁹ Leaders in the opposition movement were two evangelical organizations, "Transforming Congregations," created in response to the "Reconciling Congregations," and "Good News," a theologically and politically conservative group which publishes a journal by the same name.¹⁰

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) resolutions about homosexuality began to appear in the mid-seventies at the General Assemblies, which meet every two years. A Task Force was established to study homosexuality in 1975 with a mandate to report back to the 1977 General Assembly.¹¹ The report, which was approved, suggested that biblical condemnations of homosexuality were problematic in light of modern biblical insights and new evidence about sexuality within the fields of biology, sociology, and psychology.¹²

In 1979 the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) recommended that decisions about homosexual candidates for the ordained ministry continue to be resolved through the individual regional Commissions on Ministry. Some gay and lesbian candidates for ministry were approved throughout the 1980s, although only one of the thirty-five regions went on record as not excluding "practicing" homosexuals from consideration for ordination.¹³ In October 1991, the homosexuality and ordination issue was confronted dramatically when the nominee for General Minister and President of the Christian

Church (Disciples of Christ) failed to receive the two-thirds vote required to obtain office, in part, because of his membership in Gay and Lesbian Affirming Disciples (GLAD).¹⁴ While the nominee did not offer an opinion on gay and lesbian ordination, his very association with the group contributed to a conservative backlash which resulted in his defeat.

GLAD's role is similar to the gay/lesbian advocacy role played by the United Methodist group "Reconciling Congregations."¹⁵ The counterpart to "Good News" and "Transforming Congregations" within the Disciples of Christ denomination is "Disciple Renewal." A group which began in the mid-eighties, it is committed to renewal of the church through a perceived return to biblical roots.¹⁶

This review of two denominations' struggles with homosexuality and ordination demonstrates similarities and differences. Both mainline Protestant churches have a two-decade history of debate; both are largely restrictive in their views of homosexuality; both have organizations actively fighting for or against gay and lesbian participation in the ordained ministry.

Yet they each possess different mechanisms and traditions which shape their debates and lead to different outcomes: the United Methodists blocking ordination and the Disciples of Christ theoretically permitting it. The differences become more understandable when greater attention is paid to the denominations' distinctive understandings of ordination, church structure, and ethical decision-making.

Ordination: Opportunities and Obstacles

On a superficial level, there is an obvious distinction between ordination within the United Methodist Church and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The UMC has an explicit statement in *The 1988 Book of Discipline* which requires ordained ministers "to maintain the highest standards represented by the practice of fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness" and which prohibits "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" from being "accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church."¹⁷ The Disciples of Christ include no such direct prohibition of homosexuality or the ordination of gays and lesbians on the general level, although many regions have such a statement.

Certainly, this fundamental distinction explains much of the difference between the two churches on ordination. Yet an analysis of the churches' understandings of ordination demonstrates other influences which shape the debate. Two are especially critical: first, the different levels of authority attributed to ordination, and second, the different expectations for the ordained to model a particular moral pattern.

Ordination and Authority. Within the United Methodist Church, ordination is for those Christians who are "called of God and set apart by the church for the specialized ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order."¹⁸ As Methodist theologian Dennis Campbell argues in his 1988 study of United Methodist ordination, *The Yoke of Obedience*, "Ordination is the way Methodism sets some apart for sacramental ministries."¹⁹ "The Wesleys never wavered . . . from church teaching that only ordained ministers administer the sacraments."²⁰

This authority is not mirrored in the Disciples of Christ tradition. As Disciple church historian Newell Williams contends, the Disciple heritage, especially as seen in the writing of the founder, Alexander Campbell, displays a deep suspicion of the ordained minister's exclusive authority over sacramental ministry. For Alexander Campbell, the functional distinction between ordained and laity is modest. Any Christian "may of right preach, baptize, and dispense the supper . . ."²¹ While most contemporary Disciples churches have the sacraments administered by ordained clergy, it is common for lay elders to participate in the administration of the Lord's Supper and to preside in the absence of an ordained minister.

The question of the distinctive authority of the minister and the church is a perennial one in the life of the Disciples of Christ communion. In his 1983 study, *What is Our Authority?* Disciples New Testament scholar William Baird claims

Within the congregationally governed churches, a crisis exists in regard to the authority of the ordained minister. Frustrated by a lack of authority, many move out of ministry or into denominations where the lines of authority appear, bewitchingly, to be more clearly drawn. This exodus represents a failure to understand how authority functions in the divine-human relationship.²²

For Baird, the minister's authority is grounded "in his or her expertise

in interpreting the scripture and tradition which witness to God's revelation in Christ."²³ However, he admits that such authority is more ambiguous than the authority which comes from a more hierarchical ecclesiastical tradition.

Contrasting the Disciples and United Methodists, one can argue that the lines between ordained and laity are sharper for the United Methodists. While both bodies affirm the "priesthood of all believers" tradition which militates against clericalism, there is a deeper awareness of the ordained minister's status as a person "set apart" within United Methodism.

The consequence for the discussion of homosexuality and ordination is indirect but significant. Both denominations recognize the "sacred worth" or inherent dignity of gays and lesbians; both welcome them into the congregational life of the church. As Disciples Regional Minister Nathan Smith notes in a letter to the 211 churches in his region:

Several congregations in our Region do have "openly" gay and lesbian members. Several serve as elders and/or members of the diaconate. Pastors of these congregations have often reported to me of the faithfulness and commitment of these members. This does not weaken or threaten the congregation's strong affirmation of the heterosexual family as the primary unit of the congregation, but it affirms that there is more diversity in the human family than most of us realize.²⁴

If it is the case that homosexual Christians are welcome into the congregational life, and even given leadership roles, then a theology of ordination which does not distinguish as sharply between ordained and laity will have a more difficult task in explaining why gays and lesbians may become church members or church leaders but not be considered for ordination. Since such an ordination theology is more characteristic of the Disciples of Christ than the United Methodists, it is reasonable to contend that the Disciples tradition of ordination and ministry creates a context in which gay and lesbian ordination becomes more difficult to reject than is the case with United Methodism.

Moral Representation. The significant role of differing ordination practices becomes even more apparent when the second factor of moral representation is considered. For the United Methodist Church

there is a deep tradition of concern over the moral behavior of clergy. As Dennis Campbell argues, "Wesley believed that the moral lives of pastors should be exemplary."²⁵ A review of the Wesleyan questions for ordination in *The Discipline* reinforces such a concern. Wesley's historic examination asks persons seeking admission into full connection as an ordained minister: "Are you going on to perfection?" and then offers a detailed list of questions about behavior requiring assent before ordination will be granted.²⁶ This examination is explicit in declaring expectations of a Methodist minister. It continues a long-standing tradition relating back to the foundation of the "United Societies," when Wesley gave precise rules for moral behavior to all participants.²⁷

Certainly, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) tradition also places great importance on the moral character of the candidates for ordination. Local congregations which recommend candidates are expected to judge the moral standards of those Christians. However, the tradition of precisely defined expectations so characteristic of John Wesley's historic questions for ordination and his United Societies does not exist to the same degree within the Christian Church.

The Disciples' criteria for ordination include a short description of "personal fitness": "mental and physical capacities, emotional stability and maturity, and standards of morality."²⁸ Given its concern for congregational autonomy, the denomination intentionally avoids defined statements of morality. Disciples church historian Ronald Osborn, a central figure in the restructuring of the denomination in 1968 and a leading interpreter of the tradition, both argues against ordination of homosexuals and adamantly rejects the effort by some to mandate such a policy for the whole church.

Such actions single out a particular form of conduct and seek to deal with it by enacting a law. This is contrary to the genius of the church and the spirit of the Disciples of Christ. By leaving the commission [on ministry] free to exercise its responsible judgment in individual cases, the church maintains a stance of openness and an opportunity to deal with candidates for ordination on an individual basis.²⁹

The willingness of United Methodists to articulate particular features of moral behavior and the unwillingness of the Disciples of Christ to do so create a situation which makes pluralism over moral questions

more possible within the latter denomination than the former. Disciples regions are given some more freedom in interpreting the ordination criteria than United Methodist conferences.³⁰ Consequently, gay and lesbian Disciples benefit from greater ecclesiological openness on moral questions.

Polity

The ordination of gays and lesbians is also influenced by the church structures of the respective denominations. Two factors deserve special attention in this category as well: first, the pattern by which ordained ministers are chosen to serve in particular ministries; and second, the structures which oversee the practices of the ministry.

The Call and Appointment Systems. One of the essential differences between United Methodist and Disciples of Christ ministers is the pattern of selection for ministerial service. Members of the United Methodist ordained ministry are appointed by their bishops to serve in particular ministerial settings.³¹ Disciples of Christ ordained ministers must be called by a local congregation.

As ministers are fully aware, there are blessings and curses associated with each option. United Methodist ministers often complain of the modest power they have in determining their destiny.³² In particular, they are unhappy about the dramatic disruptions which often occur when a bishop requires them to move to a new parish, even when they would prefer not to move.³³ Disciples of Christ pastors frequently complain of the opposite situation. In a call system ministers are beholden to their congregations, which may behave sensitively or insensitively, democratically or autocratically.

The appointment and call systems have distinctive influences on the efforts of gays and lesbians to be ordained and to serve in ministry. The appointment system is often used as a vehicle for the restriction of homosexual Christians in the ministry. Pragmatically, full membership in an Annual Conference entails an appointment, yet a very limited number of congregations would be willing to accept an openly gay or lesbian minister. Thus, it is argued, it would be unworkable to accept into the Annual Conference a person with a lifestyle condemned by the vast majority of church members. Why ordain a person who is unappointable?

A similar argument could be made by authorities within the

Disciples of Christ, but the power dynamics are very different. Gay and lesbian candidates for ministry may be ordained in a few regions, but they have no guarantee that they will be called to serve. The fundamental difference is the lack of denominational obligation to provide ordained pastors with congregations. While a denominational office is available to help with placement, the minister is finally responsible for obtaining a congregational call. It is the local congregation which calls the pastor, and no congregation is under a mandate to accept anyone.

One of the consequences of this pattern is a reduced level of congregational self-interest in rejecting ordination candidates the congregation itself would not call. While a United Methodist congregation not wishing to have a gay or lesbian pastor would have an immediate stake in a policy which barred homosexuals from ordination, an anti-homosexual Disciples of Christ congregation can simply reject homosexual candidates who seek a call from the church. That distinction plays an important role in allowing some gay and lesbian Christians to be ordained by the Disciples in spite of the fact that the denomination's members are quite conservative about homosexuality.

If the United Methodist Church ever changes its moral evaluation of homosexuality and thus permits certain "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" to be ordained, the appointment system may work in precisely the opposite manner. That is, some churches which might otherwise reject gay or lesbian leadership could be encouraged through bishops and district superintendents to accept such persons for appointment.

As United Methodist ethicist Tex Sample argues, the call system typically allows more gays and lesbians to be ordained, but it does not help them serve. The appointment system frequently blocks ordination but has greater potential for gay and lesbian integration into the ministry when cultural mores change.³⁴

Ecclesiastical Structures of Authority. Another crucial polity influence lies in the ecclesiastical structures of authority for ordination within each denomination. Decisions about ordained ministry within the two denominations are made by similar groups which function in very different ways. For the United Methodists they are the boards of ordained ministry within annual conferences and for the Disciples of Christ, the commissions of ministry within regions.³⁵

The major difference lies in the fact that regions have more freedom than annual conferences to determine ordination practices. One can see this distinction when one observes the activities of annual conferences and regions sympathetic to the gay and lesbian community. There are four United Methodist conferences and boards of ordained ministry which are on record as affirming of gay and lesbian Christians. They are the Annual Conferences of Northern Illinois, New York, Troy, and Nevada.³⁶ Some of the chairs of the boards of ordained ministry within these conferences are especially influential in their efforts to open doors for gay and lesbian ordained ministry; however, the power of those individuals is limited by an obligation to obey *The Discipline*.

When Disciples of Christ regions and commissions on ministry choose to permit gay and lesbian candidates to be considered for ordination, they are not as controlled by the ecclesiastical structure. For instance, the Region of Northern California-Nevada has a formal statement which indirectly welcomes gay and lesbian participation in the ordained ministry. As the region's ministry statement proclaims, "In all of its procedures concerning the Order of Ministry, the church affirms a policy which singles out no particular human condition as an absolute barrier to ordination."³⁷ While no congregations are forced to accept gay and lesbian pastors, opportunities for ordination are greater.

It is important to remember, however, that the Northern California-Nevada Region is an exception. In other regions where gay and lesbian persons have sought consideration for ordination, they generally have met with resistance and rejection.³⁸ Some commissions on Ministry simply do not raise questions about sexual orientation when interviewing ordination candidates but reject candidates when their homosexual identity is mentioned. Other commissions do ask about sexuality and are particularly concerned that no homosexual candidates be permitted ordination. Much of the diversity is dependent on the members of the commissions and the cultural patterns of the region.³⁹ It is no accident that more open practices are to be found on the east and west coasts, where general attitudes toward homosexuality are more favorable.

The argument that greater freedom is available with the Disciples of Christ should not be interpreted to suggest that there are no structures within the United Methodist episcopal system which could provide opportunities for gay and lesbian ordained ministry. The influence of particular individuals within the ecclesiastical hierarchy cannot be

dismissed. Perhaps the most famous case is that of Bishop Melvin Wheatley, who in 1982 appointed Julian Rush to serve a congregation in the Rocky Mountain Conference.

Mark Bowman, director of Reconciling Congregations, the unofficial UMC network of congregations welcoming lesbian and gay persons, suggests that various bishops and chairs of boards are being helpful in the effort to place gay and lesbian candidates. Their actions are not public, yet they are having an impact. Since the language of "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" is open to interpretation, there is still freedom within the conferences for persons to engage in ministry as long as they continue to function ecclesiastically "within the closet" although they may unofficially have a fairly open lifestyle.

The openness of interpretation, however, does not always work in favor of gay/lesbian ordination. For instance, in June of 1990 the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference passed a statement in closed sessions which defined "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" as persons "who verbally acknowledge themselves, to the (conference) Board of Ordained Ministry to be emotionally, mentally, spiritually or physically practicing as a homosexual." This definition would mean that even celibate gays or lesbians could not be ordained ministers.⁴⁰

In spite of the genuine authority granted to United Methodist annual conferences, it is clear that Disciples regions have greater flexibility in determining qualifications for ordination. Thus, Disciples authority structures permit greater opportunity for exceptions to the majority's condemnation of gay and lesbian ordination.

Structures of Ethical Decision-Making

The final dynamic for consideration involves the structures of ethical decision-making. In this study, a distinction shall be made between official and unofficial structures. Both play significant roles.

Formal Ethical Decision-Making Structures. For the United Methodists, the center of the formal decision-making structure is *The Book of Discipline*, an ecclesial document which is amended at every General Conference and which requires obedience from all ordained UM pastors.

Thousands of petitions are heard at any given General Conference, and the resulting votes regularly create modification in *The Discipline*.

Although United Methodist studies of homosexuality shape decision-making within the wider church, and the Board of Church and Society has a critical role to play, it is ultimately the judgments approved by vote at the General and Annual Conferences which dictate the policy and practice of the denomination.

When controversies over interpretation of *The Discipline* emerge, the final arbiter is the Judicial Council. Over the history of the debate on homosexuality and ordination, there have been several related Judicial Council rulings.⁴¹ The most visible occurred in 1984 and was responsible for confirming the acceptability of an exclusion for "self-avowed practicing homosexual" candidates seeking ordination and/or appointment.

Since all ministers, from local pastors to bishops, are obliged to follow *The Discipline's* guidelines or risk loss of good standing, *The Discipline* looms large whenever any ethical controversy emerges. When ministers violate this church legislation, they make themselves vulnerable to ecclesiastical trial.

In 1987, three years after the formal General Conference decision against "self-avowed practicing homosexuals," Rose Mary Denman, an ordained minister in New Hampshire, tested the ruling by openly declaring her lesbian identity. In April of that year, Bishop George Bashore informed Denman that her Board of Ordained Ministry had chosen not to extend her another appointment on the grounds that her lesbian partnership was inconsistent with United Methodist ordination requirements. Before Denman could transfer her ordination to another denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association, she received a formal complaint asking that her ordination be rescinded. Denman requested an ecclesiastical trial.

At that trial theologians Virginia Ramsey Mollenkott, Marvin Ellison, and Burton Throckmorton spoke on her behalf. In spite of this support she lost her case and received a suspension of ministry until the 1988 General Conference.⁴²

Within the Disciples of Christ denomination, regional commissions on ministry do have the right to terminate ministerial standing, but there is no judicial structure for a formal trial. In general, the authoritative structures within the Disciples of Christ are much less powerful. Regional ministers operate without authority to appoint ministers or to require funding from local churches. The Regional and General Assemblies, comparable to Annual and General Conferences, function as bodies which enact policies but intentionally avoid

requiring obedience on most controversial ethical issues. Resolutions related to ethical matters which are passed at Disciples assemblies have a symbolic and community value, but they do not have the authority which emerges out of *The Book of Discipline*. They are understood as statements which reflect the views of the assembled, not as legislative judgments requiring uniform obedience.⁴³

Informal Ethical Decision-Making Structures. While judicial councils, episcopal authorities, conference petitions, assembly resolutions, and offices of church and society play important roles in shaping decisions about controversial ethical issues, there are powerful forces which exist outside of the official dialogue and create tremendous pressures. One of the most important indirect factors is financial.

Both denominations are seeing a decrease in funding to their central offices. For the smaller Disciples of Christ communion, this reduction in support of the general church is having a devastating effect.⁴⁴ But the same pattern is occurring among United Methodists.

The result of this budgetary problem is an increase in informal authority given to those congregations which send more money to the denominational general offices, either in mandated apportionments (UMC) or in voluntary contributions (Disciples). It is noteworthy that both Disciples and United Methodist churches which are "open and affirming" or "reconciling" tend not to be large. Thus, their financial clout in the denomination remains modest.

Given the legislative authority available within the United Methodist Church, it is likely that large, wealthy congregations will continue to play a critical role in shaping policy. For the Disciples, this role will be played by large suburban churches and by smaller, often rural, congregations which align themselves with Disciples Renewal. The Disciples of Christ are very nervous about these small, conservative, rural congregations which are debating whether the general office is still worthy of financial support. Unlike the United Methodists, whose churches could not simply continue to exist as a part of the denomination if they refused to pay into the national office, Disciples churches can continue to be Disciple without offering any money to the central denominational fund.

The budgetary issue may become even more crucial to decisions about homosexuality and ordination in the future. When denominations must work to keep the the majority of congregations

satisfied, they often choose to avoid or downplay controversial moral commitments.

Conclusion

As this brief sketch of two denominations suggests, there is reason to see the debate over homosexuality and ordination in a denominational context. Homosexual Christians seeking ordination do so in particular denominations, and the contours of those denominations create opportunities and obstacles.

For United Methodists, ordination, polity, and ethical decision-making structures lead to greater caution. Ordination carries greater authority sacramentally and morally; thus, qualifications for ordination are scrutinized more carefully. Polity is connectional and episcopal. With a practical guarantee of appointment for full conference members, the ordination of controversial individuals is more problematic since it is harder to place them. Finally, the role of *The Discipline* in ethical decision-making creates a legislative pattern which requires church consensus and ministerial obedience. Currently, that consensus works against gays and lesbians; but, at a later time with a different set of cultural assumptions, it could function in a more supportive manner.

For the Disciples of Christ, ordination, polity, and ethical decision-making structures suggest greater opportunity for the ordination of persons, such as gays and lesbians, who may be controversial in the eyes of the denomination. Ordination theology does not stress a separation between the ministry of the ordained and the laity. Moral requirements for ministers are intentionally defined in a vague manner. A modified congregationalist polity encourages greater diversity for ministers, regions, and local congregations. Finally, the advisory approach of the general and regional assemblies makes ethical decision-making structures less authoritative, and thus more open to pluralism.

As gay and lesbian Christians continue to seek ordination, it will be important for future discussion to focus on both the ethical questions associated with homosexuality and the ecclesiological questions associated with ordination and church practice.

Notes

1. Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 211. See Table 6-5: "Religious Group Members View Moral and Sexual Issues."

2. *Daily Christian Advocate* (April 28, 1972): 712-713, Calendar Item 44, Petition A-5753. For a study that attempts to provide theological justification for the United Methodist stance, see Paul A. Mickey, *Of Sacred Worth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991). Mickey wishes to combat homophobia while suggesting that homosexual behavior is not fully consistent with a Christian lifestyle.

3. According to the "Report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality," there were three separate reports adopted at the 1976 General Conference. "The first ordered 'that no board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall give United Methodist funds to any "gay" caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality.' The second mandated the use of resources and funds by boards and agencies 'only in support of those programs consistent with the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church.' The third prohibited 'funds for projects favoring homosexual practices.' "

4. See "Methodists Rule on Homosexuality in the Ministry," *Christianity Today* (July 16, 1982): 26:44; "Wheatleys Honored with Ball Award," *Social Questions Bulletin*, Vol. 74., No. 3 (May-June 1984): 3.

5. Judicial Council Decision No. 542 (May 10, 1984), 622.

6. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 1984*, Paragraph 402.2, p. 189. For commentary on this decision, see John B. Cobb, Jr., "Is the church ready to legislate on sex?" *Christianity and Crisis* (May 14, 1984): 182-85; and "The Homosexual Decision: Conferences Have the Last Word," *Social Questions Bulletin*, 74, nos. 5/6 (September-October, 1983): 2.

7. *Report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality*, pp. 32-33. The majority opinion states: "The present state of knowledge and insight in the biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological and sociological fields does not provide a satisfactory basis upon which the church can responsibly maintain the condemnation of all homosexual practice." The minority opinion counters: "The present state of knowledge and insight in the biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological and sociological fields does not provide a satisfactory basis upon which the church can responsibly alter its previously held position that we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching." Seventeen members supported the majority report; four backed the minority report.

8. "Recommendations of the Report on the Study of Homosexuality as Amended and Adopted by 1992 General Conference, The United Methodist Church, May 11, 1992." Information sheet from the General Board of Church and Society. For a review of the committee's findings, see Nancy S. Yamasaki, "The Committee to Study Homosexuality Offers the Church . . . Its Report, Its Conclusions, Its Recommendations!" *Circuit Rider* (December 1991/January 1992): 4-7.

9. For information about "Reconciling Congregations," see *Open Hands: Reconciling Ministries with Lesbians and Gay Men* 9, no. 3 (Winter 1994): 30-32. Support of gays and lesbians within Methodist Federation for Social Action may be found in their newsletter, *Social Questions Bulletin*. See *SQB*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (May-June 1984).

10. For a brief statement about "Transforming Congregations," see Jane Hull Harvey, "Struggle for Recognition of Personal Worth: General Conference commends materials on homosexuality for church study but maintain *Discipline* statements," *Christian Social Action*, Vol. 5/No. 6 (June 1992): 11. For a Good News analysis of the homosexuality debate at the 1984 General Conference, see "Ordination of Homosexuals Barred at Baltimore," *Good News*, Vol. 17 (May-June 1984): 34-37.

11. For a partial history of the General Assembly Resolutions dealing with homosexuality in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), see John P. Marcum, "Family, Birth Control, and Sexuality in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): 1880-1980," *Encounter*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Spring 1991): 122-24.

12. *Reports of the Church*, 1977, General Assembly Business Item No. 7750, "A Study Document on Homosexuality and the Church," pp. 236-46.

13. See Regional Assembly decision of Northern California-Nevada.

14. For an articulation of the GLAD stance, see the organization's newsletter, *Crossbeams*, edited by Alan Harris, associate minister at Park Avenue Christian Church in New York City. Also see the editor's statement, "Why Churches Should Be Open and Affirming of Lesbian and Gay Persons," in *Disciples Renewal*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (March 1991): 1, 15.

15. For an analysis of a church's decision to become a part of the GLAD organization, see Debra Peevey, "Becoming Open and Affirming of Gay and Lesbian Christians—One Church's Story," *Chicago Theological Seminary* (Spring 1991): 32-38.

16. Disciples Renewal publishes a newsletter by the same name and is a critical force in organizing disenfranchised evangelical churches within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It has suffered great controversy and alienation from the wider church because many denominational leaders believe that the organization is recommending to its members that they not support the financial arm of the denomination, Basic Mission Finance (BMF). As BMF monies decline, the general office of the church, located in Indianapolis, loses the funding it needs to carry on the ministries of the church. Disciple Renewal organized a campaign against the nomination of Michael Kinnamon to be General Minister and President. Their efforts were largely successful in keeping Dr. Kinnamon from winning office.

17. *The 1988 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, pp. 402, p. 207.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Dennis Campbell, *The Yoke of Obedience: The Meaning of Ordination in Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 82.

20. *Ibid.*, 51-52.

21. Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System*, 5th ed. Standard Publishing Co., 901, ch. 25, par. 3. Quotation given in D. Newell Williams, *Ministry among Disciples: Past, Present, and Future* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1985), 14.

22. William Baird, *What Is Our Authority?* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1983), 29.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Nathan S. "Pete" Smith, "Letter to the Elders," in regard to the nomination of Michael Kinnamon (May 23, 1991), 2.

25. Dennis Campbell, *The Yoke of Obedience*, 54. In making this statement Campbell quotes from John Wesley, "They (pastors) are supposed to go before the

flock (as in the manner of the eastern shepherds to this day) and to guide them in all the ways of truth and holiness . . ." ["A Caution Against Bigotry," *Works*, Bicentennial Edition, vol. 2, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 74].

26. *The Discipline*, 1988, p. 232. For an explanation of the doctrine of sanctification which is so representative of the Wesleyan tradition, see John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: The Epworth Press, 1952).

27. See John Wesley, "The Rules of the United Societies," in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 178-79. "It is therefore expected of all who continue therein, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation: First, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind; especially that which is most generally practised. Such is the taking the name of God in vain; the profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work thereon, or by buying or selling; drunkenness, buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity; fighting, quarreling, brawling; going to law; returning evil for evil; or railing for railing; the using many words in buying or selling; the buying or selling uncustomed goods; the giving or taking of things on usury; uncharitable or unprofitable conversation . . ."

28. "Policies and Criteria for The Order of Ministry, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Department of Ministry, Division of Homeland Ministries, 1988, p. 2

29. Ronald E. Osborn, "Ordination for Homosexuals? A Negative Answer Qualified by Some Reflections," *Encounter* (Spring 1978): 261. For an exploration of the often selective questions asked by Disciples of Christ commissions on ministry when interviewing candidates for ordination, see another article in this edition of *Encounter*; "Ordination for Homosexuals? Yes," by David Ray Griffin, 265-72. Griffin is especially helpful in showing the inconsistency of selecting homosexuality for rejection when there are so many other "sinful" behaviors which the commissions ignore when interviewing candidates. (See especially p. 267).

30. As Ronald E. Osborn notes in *The Faith We Affirm: Basic Beliefs of Disciples of Christ* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication Press, 1979), 91, this commitment to diversity and noncoercion is so strong that the Disciples were unwilling to modify the "Provisional Design" to require all congregations not to discriminate on the basis of race, although the vast majority of the church leadership was deeply committed to the civil rights movement. The final compromise in the "Design" encourages churches "to voluntarily demonstrate their concern for the mission and witness of the whole church [and] . . . to grow in understanding that the church is a universal fellowship, transcending all barriers within the human family such as race and culture."

31. For a history of the activities of United Methodist bishops, see Roy H. Short, *The Episcopal Leadership Role in United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985).

32. R. Sheldon Duecker, *Tensions in the Connection* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 43. One of the major problems is the growing conflict of married ministers who cannot simply move without greater family disruption. "The female spouse role, as redefined by society, has had a sobering effect on the appointive system. Currently more than half of the married women in American society work." Thus, the old pattern of a married male pastor with family ready to move when asked is anachronistic.

33. For a review of the itinerancy, see Alfred T. Bamsey, "Our Way of Appointing Clergy: Delivery System or Obsolete Artifact," *Circuit Rider*, Vol. 12, No. 9 (Nov. 1988): 6-8.

34. This judgment was shared with me while I was visiting the Saint Paul School of Theology in October 1992.

35. For information about the workings of the board of ordained ministry, see Jack Tuell, *The Organization of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985). For information about the commissions on ministry, see "Policies and Criteria for the Order of Ministry, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)."

36. For a regular listing of the growing group of Reconciling Congregations, regions, and church bodies, see *Open Hands*.

37. This quotation from a 1975 Regional Assembly statement has been incorporated into the regional assembly's own "criteria and policies for ordained ministry." The information was provided to me in a telephone conversation with the Regional Office.

38. Until recently, an exception to this pattern was the Northeastern Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In a telephone interview with the Regional Minister, the Rev. Charles Lamb, I was informed that the region has ordained openly gay ministers over the past decade and that one openly gay man is serving as the associate minister of a large Disciples of Christ church in New York City. He also reported, however, that a resolution sponsored by the Hispanic Disciples Convention of the Northeast, which barred the ordination of openly homosexual candidates, was passed at the June 1992 Regional Assembly. Controversy arose in the past year because of a decision on the part of the Northeastern Region's Commission on Ministry in 1990 to ordain an openly gay man. Significantly, at the time of the June 1992 Regional Assembly, an openly gay ordination candidate had just been given permission by the Region to be ordained. In spite of the passing of the resolution, he was allowed to be ordained. As the Rev. Lamb indicated, this pastor will join a number of other pastors who are gay, but who have chosen not to share their identity with regional leaders in spite of the fact that most of their congregational members are fully aware of their sexual orientations.

39. The interview with Northeastern Regional Minister Charles Lamb indicated that other regions were asked to accept resolutions condemning the ordination of openly gay or lesbian Disciples of Christ in the last month, but that they had chosen not to do so. On October 15-17, 1992, the Pacific Southwest Region defeated a measure asking the body to "not knowingly ordain gay and lesbian candidates." Not only was the resolution rejected, but another resolution passed which discouraged litmus tests of candidates for ordination. On October 16-18 the Southwest Regional Assembly (largely in Texas) committed for additional study a resolution which requested the denial of licensing or ordination to homosexuals. Finally, Mr. Lamb noted that the Louisiana Region recently said no to a similar resolution.

40. *Christian Social Action* (Feb. 1991): 34.

41. See *The Proceedings of the Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church*, No. 490 (Request of General Conference for a Ruling on the Constitutionality of a Study Document on Human Sexuality), No. 491 (Right of an Annual Conference to Create a Task Force to Study Homophobia), No. 513 (Legality of Ordination of Probationer of Same-Sex Preference), No. 542 (Whether Ordination and Appointment of Self-avowed and Practicing Homosexuals is Precluded by Amendment of Pars. 404, 414, 420, 423, and 431 of the Discipline), and No. 597 (Right of the General Conference to Direct a Study of Homosexuality to Be conducted by the General Council on Ministries and Funded within the Budget of That Council).

42. Gail Hovey, "In the Matter of Rose Mary Denman: Life and Times of a

Minister, *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 47, No. 16 (Nov. 9, 1987). In the same issue, also see Burton H. Throckmorton, "One summer day in New Hampshire"; Marvin M. Ellison, "Faithfulness, morality, and vision"; and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, "Human rights and the Golden Rule," 380-85.

43. In the "Special Rules of Procedure for the General Assembly," *Business Docket and Program, General Assembly Christian Church (Disciples of Christ, 1987)*, 399, approved resolutions are considered as "expressions of the General Assembly" which "are developed for the guidance of the Christian Church in its program operation, for the consideration of the congregation and members of the Christian Church, and for a Christian witness to the world." Resolutions are not seen as binding judgments requiring obedience.

44. For the year 1992 receipts from Basic Mission Finance, the central funding source for the Christian Church, indicates a decline of 3.6 percent. See "BMF down 3.6 percent," *The Disciple* (November 1992): 35.

What Does the Lord Require of Us? Ministries to and with Gays and Lesbians

In May 1974, I was appointed to my first charge, a small church in rural Maryland. I soon discovered that most of my congregation were uncomfortable with language that affirmed lesbians and gay men, only in hushed and disparaging whispers did they utter the word *homosexual*. When the lectionary prescribed Colossians 3:11-22, I took the opportunity to seek to raise the consciousness of my congregation. My sermon, entitled "All in the Family," began as follows:

Who travels out in the family of God? Most of you are probably thinking, "Why everyone of course!" But are you aware that a community is raising a different question: Who is *not* welcome in the family of God? The issue of the family of the deity is a better language and may speak in broader manners. In the United Methodist Church, too, it is not just the UMC that is denigrating the issue, but the other main stream denominations, as well. The question is ongoing: Who is *not* welcome in the family of God?

From *Living with a Loving Methodist: Gay Women in the Baltimore-Washington Area*.