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Methodist leaders defeat 2 gay measures

Decision pending on union ceremonies for same-sex couples

By RICHARD N. OSTLING
Associated Press

CLEVELAND — United Methodist Church leaders delivered two defeats yesterday to the denomination's persistent gay-rights faction, voting to uphold stands against same-sex behavior and gay and lesbian clergy.

Delegates to the church's General Conference began debating and voting yesterday on a series of contentious resolutions at the policy-making meeting, which is held every four years and ends today.

Still pending was a decision on whether to continue the church's ban on union ceremonies to bless same-sex couples. Hundreds of liberal clergy have vowed to conduct such rituals no matter what church law says.

Representatives of the nation's third-largest denomination, with 8.4 million U.S. members and 1.2 million overseas, voted 628-337 to maintain

its doctrine that homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching."

They then voted 640-317 to maintain the policy requiring clergy to be faithful in heterosexual marriage or celibate if they are unmarried heterosexuals or homosexuals.

After the first vote was taken, 50 demonstrators filed forward in silent protest, demanding a moratorium on further legislation. Half remained despite the presiding bishop's pleas to depart, but the conference decided to allow them to remain without being arrested.

Nearly 200 protesters were arrested Wednesday for blocking a driveway to the convention center where the meeting was taking place.

Lay delegates have the voting power at Methodist general conferences, but Louisville Area Bishop Robert Morgan sought to set the tone for the event with an opening speech last week urging peace between factions within the denomination.

"Christ would not draw a line in the sand," Morgan, who is ending a year-long term as president of the Council of Bishops, told delegates.

"The crucified Christ paid the highest cost to draw a circle around us."

In a later statement, he added that despite disagreements over homosexuality, "there has never been a question among United Methodists regarding God's love for gays and lesbians and our love for them."

He lamented that issues concerning homosexuality had gained the most attention when in fact much of the convention focused on increasing the denomination's missions budget and improving the racial diversity of the church.

The opening ceremonies featured the worship traditions of several foreign Methodist churches.

"We're a world church and it was all present that day," he said in a telephone interview with The Courier-Journal. "There's a great spirit out there."

Hundreds of clergy members have publicly committed to defying the same-sex ceremony ban, and three church trials since 1998 for clergy who have flouted it have had mixed results.

A related ruling from the church's Judicial Council stated that local Methodist units may not "legally ne-

gate, ignore or violate" policy of the national denomination, even on grounds of conscience.

The impact of the ruling is unclear because Methodist rules still give local units full control of clergy discipline. Conservatives are furious that clergy in California were able to break the same-sex ban with impunity.

At a news conference, Bishop Kenneth Carder of Nashville, Tenn., said all bishops have agreed to uphold denominational discipline but simultaneously have the right to speak against church policies they think should change.

"We have a role, individually and corporately, and while they may seem in conflict we are free to express our individual conscience," he said.

Debates over homosexuality have sharply divided many mainline religious denominations. The Louisville-based Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will debate the question of same-sex unions at its annual General Assembly in late June in Long Beach, Calif.

Staff writer Peter Smith contributed to this story.