



Reconciling United Methodists and Friends of North Carolina

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Ephesians 2:16: Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.

Voices Crying Out in the Wilderness: Saying Yes to the Spirit Conference Report

About 80 people attended the Second *Voices Crying Out in the Wilderness Conference: Saying Yes to the Spirit* at the new educational building of Dilworth UMC in Charlotte on Saturday, June 5. The conference was sponsored by Reconciling United Methodists and Friends of North Carolina and hosted by the clergy and volunteers of Dilworth UMC.

The conference began with a plenary session address by Rev. Dr. Karen Oliveto, minister of Bethany UMC, San Francisco, who described her experiences and emotions at the recent General Conference and her work as a pastor to many GLBT parishioners. She acknowledged feeling anger at the refusal of the conference to accept the fact that the church is not of one mind on the issue of sexual orientation nor has there been any progress in making the Methodist Church more openly accepting of the GLBT community. She also experienced a great feeling of spirituality among individuals at the conference who have moved beyond official doctrinaire point of view that a heterosexual orientation is the only concept of family acceptable to God and that there can be no variations similar to those found in nature. Oliveto revealed that she is in discussions with her bishop regarding possible charges for performing same-sex ceremonies for people who recently received legal marriage licenses in San Francisco. She didn't go into the technicalities, but the recent changes at General Conference specifically prohibit such services.

The conference then broke into five workshops which were also repeated in afternoon sessions so that people had a option to chose at least two of the workshops. Four of these workshops were presented at the first conference at Duke last fall and were made available to the Western North Carolina Conference participants, some of whom came from as far as South Carolina and Tennessee.

The Rev. Laurie Hays Coffman, pastor of Calvary UMC in Durham, talked about the issue of "What does the Bible say about homosexuality?" To frame the conversation in a less emotional and threatening manner she started with another theoretical question: "What does the Bible say about driving a SUV on Sunday?" With this approach she established the difficulty of trying to interpret current cultural issues in the context of a 2,000 year-old collection of books even if they all were inspired by God. She listed several topics on the blackboard and proceed to address each of them: homosexuality, gay marriage, gay lifestyle, homosexual acts, abominations, our concept of grace, the Jewish concept of what is clean or unclean, and the Christian approach to salvation. Rev. Coffman then proceeded with a discussion of each of the relevant citations in scripture. She concluded that homosexuality ranks right up there with eating pork.

Dr. Youtha Hardman-Cromwell, from Wesley Seminary, Washington, DC, summarized the history of the Central Jurisdiction of the Methodist Church and the long pattern of segregation both with individual congregations and with the official church body even though the Methodist Church in the United States originally was fully integrated. She paralleled the organizational development along with the idea that slavery was justified in scripture because of the assumption that blacks were naturally inferior. In fact, she said that race is more of a sociological or cultural concept than a question of biology. Although Wesley called slavery the "scandal of religion in 1773" the issue brought about a separation of the black church into three segments: the American Methodist Episcopal, the American Methodist Episcopal Zion, and the Colored Methodist Episcopal churches, each of which had organizational differences. The question was not settled in 1939 with the reunion of the two divisions of the white branches of the

church that split during the Civil War. The analogy with the civil rights of blacks and the GLBT community follows the evolving concept of what constitutes heresy in the church, or theological error. Church leaders proof-texted the Bible to justify segregation of the races, and now they do the same to justify segregation of the GLBT community as second-class Christians.

“What About Our Youth?” was addressed by a panel of six teenagers and young adults from Time Out Youth, a support and advocacy organization for LGBT youth ages 13-23. Rovaughna Andrades, a board member for the Charlotte-based TOY, moderated the discussion. The panelists discussed their various experiences with their families, schools and churches. Several were raised in religious communities which would now reject them because of their sexuality. Many panelists had been surprised when they found that churches were allowing the Time Out Youth groups to meet on their premises, and all were enthusiastic about addressing clergy and lay leaders at this conference. Time Out Youth has volunteered to speak with individual congregations. Contact TOY by phone at (704)344-8335, on line at info@timeoutyouth.org or www.timeoutyouth.org, or at 1900 The Plaza, Charlotte, NC 28205.

“Interested in Making a Difference in Your Annual Conference?” Sam Isley, Helen King, Stephen Daughtry and Dr. Jean E. Aycock discussed specific methods for providing support, worship and fellowship opportunities for LGBT persons and their families, as well as how to help move the Annual Conference in the direction of full inclusion. Sam Isley gave a brief history of Reconciling United Methodists and Friends of NC, and also outlined such strategies as open communication with the bishop, encouraging conference dialog and education through AC resolutions, and promoting progressive delegates for General Conference. Dr. Aycock described such Annual Conference activities as table ministry, which includes offering information and handouts from the science community, personal conversation, and the Cokesbury materials for the United Methodist “The Church Studies Homosexuality”; and also providing an inclusive worship service and lunch. Stephen Daughtry talked about the organizational structure of RUMNC and on-line activities, and Helen King discussed visuals used by RUM at Annual Conference to make our presence known, such as silhouettes, table cover, backdrop, rainbow crosses and stoles, and banners. Contact RUMNC for more information at <http://rumnc.tripod.com>.

The conference concluded with a worship service in Terry Chapel with the Rev. Ron Moss and Rev Joe Tarpley providing the music, Dr. Duke Ison as the liturgist, Rev. Veranita Alvord as the communion celebrant, and Rev. Shelly Webb as the preacher. Rev. Webb challenged us to address our fears and used the text of the visit of the angels to Lott in Sodom. Only when we reach beyond our fears to embrace the challenges that God puts upon us are we able to grow in our faith and understanding of what it means to become wholly Christian.