

UPDATE

Canadian Church Body Reaffirms Gay Ordination

The inevitable splintering of Canada's largest Protestant denomination—over the issue of the ordination of practicing homosexuals—should be handled like a marital breakdown, according to the new moderator of the United Church of Canada (UCC).

But the leader of Community of Concern (COC), representing the church's



MATHEW MCCARTHY/LONDON FREE PRESS

Dissenting votes: Ross (left) and an ally sported black bands of protest.

evangelical and moderate wings, believes the church hierarchy is forcing them either to conform or get out.

The United Church of Canada's General Council, the denomination's highest court, meeting in London, Ontario, voted 302 to 74 on August 21 to reaffirm a 1988 decision to open the door to ordaining openly practicing homosexuals. The affirmation conceded that the church "is not of one mind" on the human sexuality issue, and that "further struggle, dialogue and prayer are necessary to discern fully where God is calling us as a church."

For incoming moderator Walter Farquharson, 54, a long-time rural Saskatchewan pastor and hymnwriter, a major goal for his two-year tenure is to promote "the greatest possible respect for one another and the honoring of each other's integrity."

But for Gordon Ross, executive secretary of the COC, the fight is almost over. And, he maintains, the people who want to use gay ordination to change the United Church's 65-year-old Basis of Union have won the battle. The COC will, in fact, meet September 15 to decide its future. On the agenda will be at

least two options: the forming of an association of dissenting congregations within the UCC and the possibility of churches leaving the denomination to affiliate with, for example, the Reformed Church of Canada.

The rapport between COC and UCC's head office has been rocky at best since the dissident group was formed two years ago to fight both the gay-ordination issue and the church's clear drift toward theological radicalism. The rancor peaked earlier this year when general council secretary Howard Mills described COC as "seemingly demonic" in a letter to a UCC member. Ross sued Mills for libel, asking \$2 million in damages. Some weeks later, Mills withdrew the comment, and Ross cancelled his suit.

But to Ross, the structures at the denomination's head office, located in midtown Toronto, not far from one of Canada's largest gay communities, have been captured by the homosexual lobby.

Indeed, the emerging scenario since the 1988 general council has been that the COC position against ordaining practicing homosexuals—according to several surveys—had strong support at the grassroots level, but the gay lobby had the political skills to organize the general council vote.

Since the 1988 general council, some 10,000 of the 829,000-member denomination have left the church over the gay-ordination issue, most of them in about 60 congregations that subsequently affiliated with the tiny Congregational Christian Churches of Canada

(CCCC). But leaders on both sides of the issue had expected the major fallout to come this fall, based on the apparent withdrawal of some 60,000 identifiable donors to the UCC's Mission and Service Fund over the past two years.

Now, predictions are that anywhere from 50,000 to 100,000 members will leave, and, says Betty Saito of the evangelical United Church Renewal Fellowship, "they are the pillars of the church: the Sunday school teachers, the elders, the women's group executives."

When the 1988 exit occurred, it appeared that the CCCC was the only place to go. But increasingly, the Reformed Church of Canada (RCC, affiliated with the Reformed Church of America) has become an attractive alternative.

RCC executive secretary Jonathan Gerstner cites three reasons: "We are ecumenically related to the United Church through the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, we have accepted the United Church's Basis of Union as the vehicle by which we will accept incoming ministers, and we have an unambiguous statement [critical of] homosexual practice."

By Lloyd Mackey.



Rallying for reform: Conservatives demonstrated their dissatisfaction.

Canada's United Church Largest Church In Canada Endorses Same-Sex Marriage

Lawrence Morahan - Senior Staff Writer

(CNSNews.com) - Weeks after Canadian high courts ruled to allow same-sex marriage in two provinces, delegates from Canada's largest Protestant community passed a motion calling on the federal government to endorse same-sex marriage throughout the country.

The 38th General Council of the United Church of Canada, representing Methodists, Presbyterians and the Congregational Union of Canada, passed the motion after just 45 minutes of debate at its annual conference in Nova Scotia last week.

Conservatives warned the motion could have implications for churches in the United States and elsewhere. Linda Harvey, president of Mission: America, a conservative public policy group, said the Canadian church's decision likely will impact churches in the United States.

"I don't think it's inevitable that we will follow suit in this country, but I do believe that there will be mainline large denominations in this country, possibly the United Methodists, possibly others, that will endorse same-sex marriage in the near future," Harvey said.

Harvey predicted that if U.S. churches follow suit, they will likely notice a drop in membership.

"They may have some other people join their churches to replace them, but I think the net result will be a loss of membership," Harvey said.

The United Church is seen as one of the most liberal churches in Canada. In 1988, it became the first major church to ordain open homosexuals, a move that caused a large number of members to leave. In 1992, it created a liturgy for blessing same-sex unions.

The motion calls on the church to lobby the Canadian Justice Department in favor of same-sex marriage. The difference between last week's motion and previous church statements in support of same-sex marriage is this motion actually uses the word marriage, church officials told reporters.

The United Church leaves it up to the more than 3,000 congregations in Canada and Bermuda to decide if they will marry same-sex couples.

Groups pushing for same-sex marriage welcomed the move. Peggy Hayes, a member of the board of directors of DignityUSA, an advocacy group calling for recognition of same-sex marriage in the Catholic Church, said homosexuals who form healthy, committed relationships should have the option of marriage.

"We also are working towards the day when our church, the Roman Catholic Church, in both the United States and around the world, will bless and honor those unions the way they do of our heterosexual brothers and sisters," Hayes said.

The vote threatens to heat up the battle for votes in Parliament over same-sex marriage legislation.

Since Canadian provinces legalized same-sex marriage, there has been a conservative backlash in the churches and in the legislatures, similar to the effect that recent pro-homosexual rulings had in the United States, Harvey noted.

Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien submitted a bill before Parliament to legalize same-sex marriages nationwide, at the same time vowing that he will not compel churches, synagogues and mosques to bless these unions.

Last month, a Catholic archbishop warned Chretien that if he continues to support same-sex marriage, he could be denied the sacraments.

A recent poll of Canada's 170 Liberal Party members showed that 48 opposed same-sex marriage and 60 were in favor. Others were undecided or did not respond.

The Vatican recently called on Catholic lawmakers to vote against same-sex marriage legislation and issued a statement condemning the endorsement of same-sex unions as "gravely immoral."

A clear shift in public opinion on same-sex issues appears to be emerging. A recent Washington Post poll showed that 60 percent of Americans disapproved of the Episcopal Church's decision to recognize the blessing of same-sex unions.

Fewer than four in 10 - or 37 percent - said they would support allowing same-sex couples to form civil unions. This reflected a 12-point drop in support found in a Gallup poll conducted before the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a Texas law against sodomy.

"There has been quite an awakening in Canada since the legalization in Ontario of same-sex marriage, among the conservatives in the churches, so I think that the same thing is happening here," Harvey said.

"Hopefully, we will be able to stop it from being legalized in this country, but in the meantime, I think there will be denominations that will follow suit with the Canadian denomination," Harvey added.

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When a Church Supports a Lesbian Seminarian

Carbondale, Illinois

WHEN A CHILD grows up and becomes independent and continues to affirm the family values, that family feels proud and happy. But if a child rejects the family ethos, both parties can feel pain and alienation.

The Church of the Good Shepherd in Carbondale, Illinois, has experienced this pain. Organized by the United Church of Christ in 1958 to provide a progressive church presence in a Bible Belt university town, this small congregation received strong financial and moral support from the UCC's Illinois South Conference during its early years. Conference support was especially crucial to the congregation's survival when a conflict over its life and mission came to a head in 1978. At the heart of the debate was the validity of its various peace and justice concerns, the pastor's participation in a prison visitation program, and a theological point of view increasingly informed and molded by the give-and-take of a weekly study group wrestling with issues of alienation, domination and oppression, as seen from a prophetic perspective.

The conflict caused a split, in which a number of dissidents, after failing to dislodge the pastor, pulled out with their considerable financial resources. This had two immediate results: the congregation could be more in-

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE

tentional about peace and justice concerns, and it began to change from a neighborhood church based on geographical ties to a community church centered on mission.

Meanwhile, the weekly theological study was profoundly affecting the congregation's self-consciousness and perspective. Impressed by how the good news of Jesus' words and deeds was expressed in a radical inclusiveness, Good Shepherd sought to become a good-news congregation—a proleptic church trying to live out the good news of God's future. It welcomed into fellowship people not only from varying racial, national and class backgrounds but of different sexual orientations. We found this to be an enriching experience, one that helped us understand God's Word as inclusive, liberating, healthful and saving.

This was especially true regarding the issue of homosexuality. Like most congregations, Good Shepherd had its share of closeted gay and lesbian sons and daughters. But the fellowship began drawing lesbian and gay couples into membership in 1984. This made a few members apprehensive, but it turned out to be a fortunate development, enabling us to see the issue concretely and openly through the lives, hurts, hopes and gifts of valued members who happened to be homosexual.