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CONGREGATIONS AND HOMOSEXUALITY

PROBLEM

Homosexuality is an increasingly divisive issue for congregations and denominations.

SOLUTION

Through dialogue, some congregations are trying to better understand—and reconcile, if possible—the polarized positions.

First Baptist Church of Cumberland is a congregation of the American Baptist Churches USA, a denomination that takes pride in its history of defending human rights. In the mid-19th century, northern and southern Baptist churches parted company over the issue of slavery. The northern Baptist churches, which eventually organized as the American Baptist denomination, were a voice in the crusade against that institution. More recently, American Baptists played a crucial part in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. They can claim Martin Luther King, Jr., among many other leaders and participants in the movement, as one of their own.

First Baptist was organized in 1832, less than two years after the town of Cumberland was founded a few miles east of Indianapolis, and more than a decade before slavery divided Baptists into northern and southern camps. First Baptist survived that controversy. But recently, it has been confronted with an issue as rancorous as the old struggles over slavery and civil rights. How will it respond to the question of homosexuality—especially in the wake of a divisive internal conflict over the issue?

First Baptist is not the first congregation to confront this hard question. Similar struggles over the question have been going on for years, across a spectrum of denominations.



**The Polis
Center**

*We bring things
into perspective.™*

Once, opposition to
homosexuality was simply
taken for granted.

HOMOSEXUALITY BECOMES AN ISSUE

In 1972, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church declared homosexuality to be “incompatible with Christian teaching.” The Conference’s move to articulate its opposition suggested—ironically—that homosexuality was emerging as a debatable question. Before the 1970s, opposition to the practice was simply taken for granted.

Recent sessions of the General Conference have featured much debate on the issue, but dissenters have never succeeded in changing the statement passed in 1972. In the meantime, other denominations have struggled with the issue and have published their own positions. The General Board of the American Baptists adopted a resolution similar to the UMC’s “incompatibility” stance. The Evangelical Lutheran Churches of America has described homosexuality as “a departure from the heterosexual structure of God’s creation.” Alone among the mainline Protestant denominations, the United Church of Christ approves of same-sex unions and permits the ordination of sexually active gay and lesbian clergy.

Within most of these denominations—and among Disciples, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians as well—there are strong voices of dissent. Changing the status quo has become at least a possibility—enough so to encourage vigorous debate. The same is not true for other denominations. Roman Catholic teaching declares that homosexuality is immoral. The Vatican has never wavered from this position, and is disinclined to discuss it. Among conservative Protestant denominations as well, there is little room for debate. In 1987, the largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, declared that homosexuality is “a manifestation of a depraved nature and a perversion of divine standards.”

A similar divide is evident within the Jewish community—some branches of Judaism condemn homosexuality; others do not. Because the Jewish community is relatively small, however, the divisions are thrown into sharper relief than those among Christians. Reform and Reconstructionist congregations are generally more liberal in their attitudes about homosexuality, and are known as welcoming of gays and lesbians. Rabbi Eric Bram of Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation describes this as “kind of an unspoken agreement” within the congregation.

“We’re very proud of the efforts we’ve made to make gay and lesbian people feel welcome,” Bram said of his Reform congregation. “We’d like to invite the Jewish gay and lesbian community to be closer to us. We’re clear about that.”

For many Protestant congregations, though, such clarity is elusive. Whatever consensus exists is often built and maintained on silence. Chris Rice, a researcher at Boston University’s Institute on Race and Social Division, wrote in *Sojourners* recently that “the debate is dominated by two

voices: unqualified condemnation and unqualified acceptance. Many other voices remain fearfully silent. I have learned that even to voice honest questions invites disdain. What gray areas are there with something so obviously wrong (or right)?"

THE BEGINNINGS OF A DIALOGUE

Following are two accounts of congregations that have moved beyond silence. The first account involves two churches that disagree strongly on the issue of homosexuality, yet have agreed to hear the other side out. The second account is the more complex story of First Baptist Church of Cumberland, where the disagreement has been within the church itself, and where dialogue has become critical to the church's future.

High School Road Church of Christ Jesus Metropolitan Community Church

Recently, High School Road Church of Christ and Jesus Metropolitan Community Church sponsored a debate about what the Bible says regarding homosexuality. The event grew out of dialogue between a staff member of High School Road Church of Christ and a member of Jesus Metropolitan Community Church. The two "met" through an Internet discussion group centered on religion, and they approached the subject of homosexuality from radically different perspectives.

The denomination of which Jesus Metropolitan is a part, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, was founded in the 1960s as a refuge for homosexual Christians rejected by their churches. Jesus Metropolitan was organized in 1990. In addition to welcoming gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transgendered people, it serves as a vocal advocate for them in the local civic and political arena.

High School Road Church of Christ, by contrast, is a conservative congregation that believes homosexuality is clearly condemned in scripture. Rev. John Welch, pastor of High School Road, says

he agreed to move the debate from an informal discussion to a public event because "I think that their people have never heard an intelligent discussion of the issues."

For the pastor of Jesus Metropolitan, Rev. Jeff Miner, "It was a chance to share an approach to scripture that people at High School Road Church of Christ might never hear otherwise. They were confident that the truth would prevail, and of course that was exactly my attitude."

The debate extended over four evenings in late October and early November 2000. Each session lasted two hours, attracting about 200 people. If it accomplished nothing else, the debate put members of two churches widely separated by theology into close proximity for several hours. Neither party was able to claim any converts, but none were expected. Changes of heart, if any do result from the debate, will likely take time.

"I really believe that, if nothing else, this will make it possible for them to see us very differently," said Miner, who experienced a slow conversion on the issue himself. He grew up in a conservative religious home, attended fundamentalist Bob Jones University, and didn't "out" himself as a homosexual until his mid-20s.

Regarding the congregants from High School Road, Miner said: "Their children saw 70 gay and transgendered people who were just like them—normal people nothing like the negative stereotype that I, as a fundamentalist, grew up with,"

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Miner said. “Just meeting someone and seeing that they’re normal, and seeing how seriously we take scripture, and that our position is not that scripture doesn’t matter but that we see scripture differently than they do—all of that enables them to come a step closer to someday accepting that we ought to be a part of the church.”

For his part, Welch said, “We didn’t go into it hoping to convert people. We wanted to do some educating. There are a lot of people on the fence, and you get this political correctness bombarding you, and you don’t know what to say anymore.” Welch said that the homosexual community has used the work of sympathetic scholars to legitimate itself. “They don’t think people outside of their community are scholarly in their approach,” he said. “They need to see that the Bible does hold up under scrutiny and that it does condemn the practice.”

First Baptist Church of Cumberland

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Last summer, Kevin D. Rose, minister of Christian education at First Baptist Church of Cumberland, told the church’s board of deacons that he is gay. Rose’s coming out was the immediate cause of conflict within the church, but his action was closely tied to the church’s recent history.

In the fall of 1999, First Baptist had started a series of classes and workshops designed to clarify and sharpen its identity as a church. The first classes focused on what it means to be Baptist. Those classes were followed by a series called “Heart Matters: Core Values, Beliefs, and Mission.” The purpose was to give the congregation an opportunity to determine the kind of character it wanted to build as a church.

“Out of that, we began to feel an emerging consensus that we would be an open church, an accepting church,” says Robert Sanders, who has been the church’s interim pastor since the fall of 1999. “We finished those studies, and some of us felt that the process had an unfinished feel to it, so we began working on a mission statement.”

First Baptist’s proposed mission statement, completed in the summer of 2000, said in part that “we are an accepting and reconciling church of people who recognize no circles of exclusion, no boundaries that can’t be crossed, and no loyalties above those which we owe to God.”

This statement is both remarkable for its generosity of spirit—and unremarkable, precisely because most congregations claim to be open to all. Rose, who had not yet come out publicly before the church, wondered what would happen if the statement were tested.

“I was leery of the fact that everyone was saying, ‘We love this mission statement. We want to be an open place,’” he said. “How many

churches out there say they're a friendly church where everyone is welcome? Everyone says that."

Rose gave First Baptist an opportunity to live up to its stated ideal. In August 2000, he delivered a prepared statement to the church's deacon board expressing support for the church's mission statement. In addition to theological and pastoral reasons, he cited a personal reason for affirming it: "It has taken me the majority of my forty years to come to grips with and finally acknowledge to myself, and reluctantly to others, that I am a gay Christian man," said Rose. He had been on the church's staff for more than 11 years.

Over the next few weeks, some of the church's leaders encouraged Rose to resign.

Rose submitted his resignation. But then, at a business meeting in September, a large majority of church members voted in favor of a motion that Rose withdraw his resignation, remain on the church's staff, and take a leave of absence. Meantime, the church would study the situation further. Rose agreed to stay.

This decision in favor of a year-long "cooling off" period provoked the immediate departure of several members, who believed Rose should not remain on the church's staff. Average attendance on Sunday mornings fell by 25 percent.

In spite of the setbacks it sustained, First Baptist moved ahead with a series of dialogues focused on different aspects of homosexuality and the Christian faith. The series began in January 2001 with a dialogue called "What's the Story," in which members of the church shared stories about how the issue has touched their lives. Subsequent dialogues were devoted to reviewing scientific evidence about the causes of homosexuality and a videotaped discussion between two American Baptist scholars over "what the Bible actually says" about it. The dialogues were led by members of the church, and by a retired American Baptist pastor and his wife.

Those formal dialogues recently concluded, but their implications for the future of the church is an open question. All along, Sanders said, the dialogues were really about more than homosexuality. They were a continuation of the soul-searching that began in 1999 about what kind of church First Baptist wants to be. And that process is far from over. First Baptist is edging its way toward an uncertain future, with a faith that open, honest dialogue will renew its life as a congregation.

"Soon, I will have been ordained for 49 years," Sanders said. "Beginning in 1957, I've struggled with the church to claim its best understanding of itself as an inclusive community of followers of Jesus Christ. I've been at that all my life. This is the first time I've ever been with a congregation where they take it seriously enough to stake their life on it."

AGREEING TO DISAGREE

The United Methodist Church, the second-largest Protestant denomination, is theologically and geographically diverse.

Congregations that deal with the controversy successfully use every opportunity to remind one another of what binds them together.

Included among its congregations are those of conservative, moderate, and liberal persuasions. Its members are distributed across the nation. The UMC is in many ways a representative mainline Protestant denomination. As such, it may be a good barometer of movement in the Protestant community on the issue of homosexuality.

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For the moment, at least, the Methodists are stalemated. When delegates to the UMC General Conference were surveyed on the issue in 1996, 54 percent rejected the statement that homosexuality is a sin; but only 30 percent agreed that the UMC should permit homosexual marriages.

These figures are consistent with the nation at large. A Gallup poll in 1996 found that 50 percent of Americans considered homosexuality “an acceptable alternative lifestyle,” but only 27 percent believed homosexual marriages should be recognized as legally valid.

James Wood, professor emeritus of sociology at Indiana University, has written a book about the controversy among United Methodists. Himself a United Methodist, Wood said the results of the 2000 General Conference were mildly surprising. He thought a softening of the statement that homosexuality is “incompatible with Scripture” was a possibility—but “it turns out that the delegates were in a different mood.” The statement stood unaltered.

Wood writes in his book, *Where the Spirit Leads*, that he foresees United Methodists someday agreeing to disagree. “I see us . . . acknowledging that, while we do agree on homosexuals’ worth and on their rights, we simply do not agree on whether there might be some homosexual practice that is compatible with biblical teaching.”

But this peace may be costly if it involves amending the UMC’s basic stance. About one-fourth of the delegates to the 1996 UMC General Conference said they felt strongly enough about the issue to leave the denomination over it. Most of these were conservative delegates who strongly opposed any softening of the UMC’s 1972 statement. They believe, Wood writes, that “the Bible leaves them no options on the issue of homosexuality.”

For those of a liberal bent, the conflict over homosexuality is just another in a long line of struggles for human rights and equality. “The tensions are much broader and deeper than homosexuality,” said Richard Hamilton, retired pastor of North UMC. “They have to do with the radical inclusiveness of the Gospel.” Like Wood, Hamilton believes that the United Methodist Church “will not divide in a significant way” over the issue, though it may lose a number of congregations.

“We had divisions in the 19th century over the inclusion of laity, over how to interpret the Bible, and whether the church should start a university—there was opposition to that idea,” Hamilton said. “Controversies are nothing new. But the church survives.”

This long historical perspective may be of little comfort to congregations struggling to make peace with the issue in the present. The good news is that, nearly three decades after homosexuality began emerging as a controversy, there are many congregations that have confronted it, survived, and have a story to tell.

Journalist Keith Hartman captures some of these stories in *Congregations in Conflict*, a study of several churches in the Raleigh-Durham region of North Carolina. As it turns out, the model adopted by First Baptist Church of Cumberland is an excellent one.

According to Hartman, congregations that deal with the controversy successfully—meaning only, in some cases, that they agree to disagree—use every possible opportunity to remind one another of what binds them together as a community of faith. That way, he writes, “No matter what happens, those on both sides of the conflict will still have a place in the church when it is done.”

The identity classes that First Baptist of Cumberland conducted take on new significance in this light. Those sessions, and the resulting mission statement, sparked the controversy by prompting a staff member to test the church’s commitment to its ideals. Yet the sessions also prepared the church for the conflict, by emphasizing common bonds and getting members into the habit of talking things over.

Another successful strategy used by the congregations in Hartman’s study—and used by First Baptist as well—is to use dialogue as “a search for truth” rather than posing it as debate. “Debates must have winners, and therefore losers,” Hartman writes. “A search, in contrast, is something a group of people do together to arrive at a common goal.”

“We are not ideological about this,” said First Baptist’s Sanders, referring to the church’s recent dialogues. “We are not trying to persuade people. We want understanding and not conversion. That’s what we’re after.”

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Homosexuality emerged as a controversial issue for Christian denominations in the early 1970s. Many denominations and individual congregations have experienced intense, sometimes destructive conflicts over it.
- Theological conservatives condemn homosexuality, while liberals accept it. The majority of people appear to be ambivalent on the subject. Among mainline denominations, only the United Church of Christ allows the ordination of sexually active gay and lesbian clergy. Jewish denominations exhibit a similar split.
- Since 1972, the United Methodist Church’s official position has been that homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching.” One-fourth of delegates to the UMC General Conference say they would leave the UMC if the denomination softens its stance.
- Congregations that survive conflicts over homosexuality tend to emphasize the history and beliefs that bind them together. They cast their discussions as a collective search for truth rather than as polarizing debates.

Debates produce winners, and therefore losers.

CONTACTS & RESOURCES

Congregations mentioned in this issue:

First Baptist Church of Cumberland
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(317) 894-2645

High School Road Church of Christ
3103 N. High School Rd.
Indianapolis, IN 46224
(317) 299-5600

Jesus Metropolitan Community Church
5805 E. 56th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46226
(317) 894-5110
www.jesumcc.org

Books and articles:

Though there are far too many books and articles devoted to this subject to offer an exhaustive list, the following are recommended:

David Atkinson, *Homosexuals in the Christian Fellowship*. Eerdmans, 1981.

Beth Ann Gaede, ed., *Congregations Talking about Homosexuality*. Alban Institute, 1998.

Keith Hartman, *Congregations in Conflict. The Battle over Homosexuality*. Rutgers University, 1996.

(continued on page 8)

CONTACTS & RESOURCES

(continued from page 7)

Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*. Almo/Squire, 2000.

Eric Marcus, *Is It a Choice? Answers to 300 of the Most Frequently Asked Questions about Gay and Lesbian People*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1999.

Chris Rice, "What I Learned When I Opened My Mouth About Gay Rights," *Sojourners*, May 2000.

"Proceeding with gay unions," *Christian Century*, August 16, 2000.

Tex Sample and Amy DeLong, eds., *The Loyal Opposition. Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality*. Abingdon Press, 2000.
Jeffery Sheler, "An American reformation," *U.S. News and World Report*, July 19, 1999

Jeffrey Siker, *Homosexuality and the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

Walter Wink, ed., *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*. Fortress Press, 1999.

James Wood, *Where the Spirit Leads. The Evolving Views of United Methodists on Homosexuality*. Abingdon Press, 2000.

Internet:

<http://religioustolerance.org/homosexu.htm>
The Religious Tolerance Web site features articles related to homosexuality, including scientific literature, reviews of legislative proposals, and personal essays. The site includes a section devoted to the various denominational statements on homosexuality.

www.dignityusa.org

Dignity is the organization that represents gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Catholics.

www.hoosierfamily.org

For resources on homosexuality from a conservative Christian perspective, go to this site's "links" page.

www.theotherside.org/resources/gay

The Other Side provides extensive resources from an "open and affirming" perspective.

If you are interested in learning more about Congregations and Homosexuality, you are invited to attend an informal session where local experts will answer questions and exchange ideas.

For more information, call Kevin Armstrong at (317)630-1667.

A session will be held March 27, 2001, at this Indianapolis location:

1:30 p.m. North United Methodist Church
3808 N. Meridian St.
(317) 924-2612

Please use the west entrance to the building.

This issue represents the last in our series of *Responsive Communities: Faith at Work in Indianapolis*. For a listing of all issues and on-line, full text versions of this series, please visit our Web site at www.thepoliscenter.iupui.edu.

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