

UMC General Conferences 1972-2019 Debate Timeline

It was April 1972 in Atlanta, Georgia, when Russell Kibler, a delegate to the United Methodist General Conference from South Indiana, stepped to the microphone with a question.

The denomination's top lawmaking body was going over a report from a four-year committee that had studied the Social Principles and recommended changes to the church's position on homosexuality as well as other issues.

Before the body was this statement: "Homosexuals no less than heterosexuals are persons of sacred worth, who need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others and with self. Further, we insist that all persons are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured."

Kibler wanted to know what was meant by "homosexuals would have their human and civil rights ensured." His question led to the first public debate on homosexuality in the denomination and ended with the addition to [The Book of Discipline](#): "The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching."

Forty-eight years later, the 2020 United Methodist Church's top legislative body is still debating those words.

1972 - Atlanta, Georgia

When the 1972 General Conference adopted the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church, the first public debate on homosexuality began. The words, "We do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider it incompatible with Christian teaching," were added to the phrase "persons of homosexual orientation are persons of sacred worth."

It was also the first time same-sex unions were noted: "We do not recommend marriage between two persons of the same sex."

1976 - Portland, Oregon

Efforts at the 1976 General Conference to rescind the official condemnation of homosexual practice failed. Delegates added three statements banning the use of church funds to promote homosexuality. The 1976 delegates also revised the language in the Social Principles related to same-sex unions: "We do not recognize a relationship between two persons of the same sex as constituting marriage."

1980 - Indianapolis, Indiana

Much of the debate at the 1980 conference centered on ordination. An unsuccessful effort was made to add the phrase "no self-avowed practicing homosexual therefore shall be ordained or appointed in The United Methodist Church." A variety of other proposals on homosexuality also failed, leaving the 1972 and 1976 positions intact.

Specific reference to homosexual unions was removed from the Social Principles, but a statement was included that said, in part, "We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant, which is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman."

1984 - Baltimore, Maryland

Adopted, as a standard for ordained clergy, commitment to "fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness" and the following language on homosexuality: "Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in the United Methodist Church."

1988 - St. Louis, Missouri

The 1988 General Conference made one change in the Social Principles statement. "Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons."

Delegates instructed the General Council on Ministries to conduct a study of homosexuality and report to the 1992 General Conference.

1992 - Louisville, Kentucky

Delegates to the 1992 conference voted 710-238 to retain the church's stand in the Social Principles that homosexual practice is "incompatible with Christian teaching" and left in place the ban and on ordination, the prohibition of church funding to "promote the acceptance of homosexuality."

1996 - Denver, Colorado

The 1996 General Conference added a definition of "self-avowed practicing homosexual," and a declaration that ceremonies to celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by United Methodist clergy or in United Methodist churches.

An attempt to replace the "incompatibility" clause with one acknowledging that United Methodists are "unable to arrive at a common mind" failed to pass by a 577-378 vote.

2000 - Cleveland, Ohio

The 2000 General Conference added to the Social Principles: "We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn their lesbian and gay members and friends." The delegates also passed a resolution directing the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns to engage the church in a continued dialogue about homosexuality.

Delegates rejected a proposal that would have required all pastors to sign a statement professing that homosexuality is not God's will.

Soulforce, an ecumenical group, led demonstrations outside the hall, and 191 people were arrested on May 10 for blocking an exit outside the convention center. The next day, a protest was held on the conference floor following the vote to retain the church's stance on homosexuality. Disruptions during that protest resulted in the arrest of 30 individuals, including two bishops.

2004 - Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

After 10 days of debates and demonstrations, petitions and prayers, delegates to the 2004 General Conference firmly committed themselves to the unity of the church. The nearly 1,000 delegates joined hands and overwhelmingly agreed that, "As United Methodists, we remain in covenant with one another, even in the midst of disagreement, and affirm our commitment to work together for the common mission of making disciples throughout the world."

Delegates reaffirmed the denomination's positions on homosexuality. Their action was backed by Judicial Council decisions announced during the conference.

Paragraph 2702 in the Book of Discipline was amended to clarify language and add to a list of chargeable offenses that could result in a church trial. Chargeable offenses now include "being a self-avowed practicing homosexual" or "conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions, or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies."

2008 - Fort Worth, Texas

Delegates to the 2008 General Conference on April 30 rejected changes to the United Methodist Social Principles that would have acknowledged that church members disagree on homosexuality.

Delegates also approved a new resolution to oppose homophobia and heterosexism, saying the church opposes "all forms of violence or discrimination based on gender, gender identity, sexual practice or sexual orientation."

2012 - Tampa, Florida

Two items stating Christians have different opinions about homosexuality were not approved by the 2012 General Conference, leaving the current language in The Book of Discipline intact.

2016 - Portland, Oregon

General Conference delegates hit the pause button on the denomination's quadrennial debates related to homosexuality. Delegates voted by 428-405 to accept the recommendation of the Council of Bishops to delay a debate on homosexuality at this gathering of the denomination's top legislative assembly and let a proposed commission study church policies.

2019 - St. Louis, Missouri

By a vote of 438-384, General Conference supported the Traditional Plan that reinforces the teaching that the practice of homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching" and strengthens enforcement of church restrictions related to homosexuality.

Changes include a more specific definition of "self-avowed practicing homosexual," to say it includes people "living in a same-sex marriage, domestic partnership or civil union or is a person who publicly states she or he is a practicing homosexual." The plan also adds a minimum penalty for clergy found guilty of performing a same-sex wedding — one year's suspension without pay for the first offense and loss of credentials for the second.

2020 - Minneapolis, Minnesota

TBD

Source: <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/gc2016-tackling-44-year-stance-on-homosexuality>