

Statement from the United Methodist Renewal and Reform Coalition

In early February 2011, a group of retired United Methodist bishops issued “A Statement of Counsel to the Church—2011” in which they called upon The United Methodist Church to remove statements in ¶ 304.3 of *The Book of Discipline* that declare “The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” and instruct that “self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”

The decision on our church’s doctrine and polity on these matters is reserved solely to the delegates to General Conference, and this group of retired bishops has neither voice nor vote in such deliberations. We are dismayed that bishops who have agreed to live within the covenant defined by our *Book of Discipline* and who are charged in the *Book of Discipline* “to uphold the discipline and order of the Church” are undercutting that very discipline and order, encouraging dissension and disunity, and advocating on behalf of positions which have been repeatedly rejected by our General Conference after focused prayer, study, and holy conferencing.

The retired bishops who have joined in the statement are a minority of the active and retired bishops who are part of the Council of Bishops. We call upon the Council of Bishops as a whole to defend the church’s belief and discipline, and to hold one another accountable for such defense.

After ten General Conferences (1972-2008), numerous dialogues, at least two General Church study commissions, official study resources, dozens of convocations, a plethora of books, demonstrations and disruptions of the General Conference business, and extended impassioned debate, our denomination has consistently affirmed a holistic position that is pastoral and biblical, compassionate and redemptive.

The denomination’s statement on the practice of homosexuality is a balanced position that affirms the “sacred worth” of all persons, even while acknowledging that as Christians we cannot affirm every expression of human sexuality. Clearly, there are certain sexual practices that contradict biblical standards, and as faithful disciples we must be willing to declare them to be incompatible with Christian teachings. The United Methodist position does this with mercy and grace.

The retired bishops’ statement is woefully inadequate in its failure to address the clear pronouncements of Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments and almost 2,000 years of Christian history. The teaching of The United Methodist Church on human sexuality is consistent with the teaching of the Church universal.

In essence, the retired bishops’ statement is a plea for the church to accommodate to the world and compromise with the relativism of our age. Scripture and Christian history steadfastly warn against such accommodation and compromise.

To a watching world, the position of The United Methodist Church is a necessary and reasonable statement of ethical clarity in an age of murky morality. It is a statement of theological honesty in an age of religious ambiguity. It is a prophetic statement to a world that offers no boundaries to sexual expression.

As recognized in our *Book of Discipline*, faithful followers of Jesus Christ are called to celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage. The Scriptures and almost 2000 years of Christian theology have permitted sexual activity only within the boundary of marriage. The Church universal in its orthodox expressions has defined marriage as the

covenantal relationship of supreme love between a man and a woman. The United Methodist position is and must remain consistent with this understanding. The retired bishops' statement provides no rationale for deviating from this position, except for arguments based in convenience—convenience for those who find difficulty administering the church's position rightly and for those who choose to persist in engaging in sinful practices. Maintaining our position keeps faith with the supremacy of Scripture and accords with tradition, experience and reason.

The position of The United Methodist Church is a prophetic message of life to a broken and hurting world. The biblically prophetic message has always been more interested in truth and transformation than in consensus and conformity to the propositions advanced by the world. What the world often finds excusable and acceptable, the church does not and cannot. Even though our debates have historically focused exclusively on homosexuality, The United Methodist Church must learn how to provide effective and compassionate ministry to **all** persons who struggle to live lives of sexual purity. All persons, whatever their sexual temptations or inclinations, are welcome in The United Methodist Church, but sexual relationships outside the biblically and historically defined boundary of Christian marriage between a man and a woman must be named for what they are—sin. The Gospel also includes God's gracious promise that those who confess and repent will be given the power for new life and transformation.

We live in a hypersexualized culture—as evidenced by the more than 40-year-obsession of those who would change our sexual ethics. United Methodism must deal seriously—and here we are speaking to conservatives as well as liberals and moderates—with the crippling spiritual devastation that sexual brokenness brings into our local congregations. Many who sit next to us in our pews have been victimized by sexual abuse or by an unfaithful spouse. Others in our congregations struggle with promiscuity, are addicted to pornography, suffer with sexually transmitted diseases, are confused about their sexual identity, or wrestle with same-sex attractions. All such persons need to know that The United Methodist Church is prepared to minister to their needs while uncompromisingly standing for biblical truth and the transformative power of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The path urged by the retired bishops, if adopted, will leave The United Methodist Church barely distinguishable from the culture, particularly in the Christian West. All this would be done for the sake of expediency and convenience, a desire for “relevance,” and a misapplied sense of social justice. In reality, the retired bishops' position is in a distinct minority across the Church universal and has only resulted in dissension, schism, and the weakening of the Church where it has been adopted. We urge our brothers and sisters in Christ in The United Methodist Church to reject the counsel of these retired episcopal leaders.

Endorsed by the Renewal and Reform Coalition:

The Confessing Movement within The United Methodist Church
Good News
Lifewatch
RENEW
Transforming Congregations
United Methodist Action

February 16, 2011