

The religious right uses words very well, which makes it difficult to respond to a whole piece or presentation. It is helpful to go slowly through their material to see what is being said and the tone with which it is said. I hope this model will help you read their restrictive language and then respond from an affirmation of your own experience of life and faith and an expansive and expanding Love (G\*D's everyday name).

**The Renewal and Reform Coalition responds to the statement from 33 retired United Methodist bishops**

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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.

**Response to a Response**

*Wesley White - February 18, 2011*

Yes, this is true. You can read the whole of the *Bishop's Counsel* at <http://www.rmnetwork.org/counsel-statement-to-church/>. It is important to read the whole statement for yourself to prepare for the the partial reporting by the "Renewal and Reform Coalition" and their attempt at a positive spin to cover a negative judgment. It is difficult to peer behind their holy words that claim all truth.

The appeal here is that Bishops only be mechanistic implementers of language about some people being "incompatible". Of course, they also want Bishops to lead, but only if they lead in the direction the coalition desires. It is hard to have it both ways.

One of the realities of our *Book of Discipline* is that the rules and regulations are petitioned every four years, in the thousands of petitions, to change small and large portions of the *Discipline*. We have kept many restrictive positions for many decades and then changed them. We have gone through advocacies and dissensions before, coming out stronger, deeper in understanding and wider in evangelism.

The coalition may not remember when it felt like a minority and organized to influence the *Discipline*. There is nothing inherently wrong or evil in being in the minority at a given time. The divine right of a majority is not infallible.

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

After dividing over slavery and the Civil War, The Methodist Church was reorganized by southern and northern churches in 1939. However they kept Black churches in one national conference, diluting their presence. It took until 1968 to dissolve this restrictive legislation. The newly formed United Methodist Church eventually repented their taking so long to change. Time doesn't make something holy.

The Discipline has multiple and contradictory statements regarding gay and lesbian Christians. "Balanced" news is poor news, giving too loud a voice to uninformed or very biased points of view. Biblical standards of fidelity, kindness, love, and fairness can be upheld in any style of government or sexual orientation. Violence and lying about others is incompatible with Christian teaching. Legislation regarding incompatibility cannot be done with mercy and grace. To attempt it will reveal hypocrisy at some point.

The Coalition fails to note a single "clear pronouncement". The *Bishop's Counsel* included "prayerful, thoughtful consideration of our Holy Bible, our Wesleyan heritage, reflection on our experience of the church and world, and our conviction of God's intention for a world transformed." The coalition is not unique in their appreciation of Scripture or its power to guide.

The *Bishop's Counsel* speaks of what is "detrimental to the mission of a Church of Jesus Christ." This is not accommodation or relativism. Christian history reminds us of the changes the church has gone through to remain faithful.

Christian ethics clarify choices before individuals and institutions that they might better choose that which helps us reveal the Biblical standards of fidelity, kindness, love, and fairness. Our situations are ambiguous but our response to them can remain solid. Restricted boundaries are not prophetic, simply rigid.

Idealistic thoughts and perfect solutions to messy, difficult, human situations, are appealing. The coalition may want to return to their Bible

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

and church history. Of particular concern are serial marriages and divorce statistics regarding fidelity. George Barna reports, "While it may be alarming to discover that born again Christians are more likely than others to experience a divorce, that pattern has been in place for quite some time. Even more disturbing, perhaps, is that when those individuals experience a divorce many of them feel their community of faith provides rejection rather than support and healing. But the research also raises questions regarding the effectiveness of how churches minister to families. The ultimate responsibility for a marriage belongs to the husband and wife, but the high incidence of divorce within the Christian community challenges the idea that churches provide truly practical and life-changing support for marriages."

Prophecy that does not connect with reality is another mechanism by which those in current power continue the status quo. There were court prophets, like the Coalition, that pooh-poohed prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. In the end the claim of prophecy must be confirmed by events. At stake is not some untrue "truth" about homosexuals, but the lives and souls of gay and lesbian Christians currently within the church and gays and lesbians who would benefit from our teachings of 1) a Community of Christ; 2) Love of God and Neighbor; 3) do no harm, do good, stay in love with God; and 4) connecting scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

Sexual responsibility is far more difficult and meaningful than an ideal sexual purity. Our fear of learning more about our sexual gift from God has brought funding restrictions leaving us only with "Don't". Our lack of church teaching about spiritual disciplines of sexuality is sinful. We have left our own members and next generations without guidance, only unworldly rules.

We live in a culture where the church has been particularly absent - honest reflection and participation in conversation about God's good gift of sexuality. As a result our culture has coarsened. However, prohibition does not work with alcohol or with sexuality. We need to renew

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.

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a conversation about sexuality with one another before we can provide a viable witness to others. The hypervigilance we have focused on being pure regarding sexual orientation has kept us from dealing with God’s good gift everywhere. This is a direct consequence of the restrictive work of the Coalition over these 40 years.

We are in agreement that The United Methodist Church has a responsibility to teach and redeem a gift gone astray. We are not in agreement that presenting an uncompromising position unreflective of our own struggles and questions will aid anyone in drawing near to Jesus, whose life redeems lost souls.

The *Bishop’s Counsel* asks us to return to our focus on mission, to model the love of Christ in a world in need of being better. We have gotten so far out of balance with our desire to restrict gays and lesbians that anything we have to say about anything is thrown into question. My current *Bishop, Linda Lee, says it well*, “Being in denial is not a position of spiritual strength. And I believe we have been in denial. The truth is that there knowingly have been and continue to be self-avowed, practicing homosexual persons both ordained and appointed in the United Methodist Church, at every level I believe. And for me, the reality is that it is not possible to legislate, berate, abuse, ostracize or exclude this reality away. Nor do I believe it is what Christ calls us to be about.”

The Coalition continues to deny the movement of a God filled to overflowing with an expansive and expanding love that beckons us out of dividing up the Scriptures and into a new heaven and a new earth, a new way of dealing with our differences, and of a Jesus who continually challenges us with , “but I say to you . . . .”

To see where our current legislation leads and why it needs to change, I invite you to the website, [LoveOnTrial.org](http://LoveOnTrial.org). It is example of why the *Bishop’s Counsel* is needed.