

No. 9925

**REPORT FROM THE DISCERNMENT COMMITTEE
ON THE ITEM FOR RESEARCH AND REFLECTION
No. 9719
THE PARTICIPATION OF GAY AND LESBIAN PERSONS
IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH**

RECEIVED by the General Assembly

Background Information:

In response to an action of the Administrative Committee, a Discernment Committee on the Participation of Gay and Lesbian Persons in the Life of the Church was appointed in 1998. The Committee includes people of diverse perspectives on the issue as well as cultural and racial diversity. The first meeting of the Committee was held in Louisville, February 18-20, 1999, and will meet again in Chicago, September 8-11, 1999.

Report

The Committee is charged with two basic tasks:

First, the Committee is to frame and clarify the issues that confront the church and its members. What is at stake practically, functionally and theologically for the church? Are the main concerns leadership issues such as ordination? Are there concerns about church membership, the nature of Christian community, Disciples polity?

What are the various perspectives held by people in the church? What are the Biblical, theological, psychological, scientific, and cultural perspectives? What other issues will emerge as the Committee does its work?

Second, the Committee is to design a discernment process that regions and congregations can use that breaks the silence on the issue, allows people to explore the disciplines of faith in relation to this issue, and provides opportunities to reflect with other Christians about the nature of their community of faith and their perspectives on the questions identified.

The fundamental work of the Committee is to help churches, regions, and other groups discern the will of God on this question in their context. It is not the purpose of the Committee to take a position, but it is to assist the church in the discernment process.

Thirteen of the fifteen members of the Committee were present at the first meeting. In addition, Richard Hamm, our General Minister and President, and Lori Adams, Minister for Transformation attended.

At the first session Dr. Hamm explained the purpose of the committee and how it fits into the larger goals of the church. He described a faithful church as one characterized by deep Christian spirituality, true community, and a passion for justice. He defined two major needs of the church as spiritual and organizational renewal. The primary purpose of the committee, he said, was to help the church discern the will of God on the issue of gay and lesbian participation in the church. The committee is not to draw a line and force people to choose sides, nor is it expected to take a particular stand. Rather, it is to enable and empower local churches and regions to discern the will of God.

Our three-day meeting involved worshipping together, a Bible study on Acts 15, and getting to know the perspectives of each member. In the Bible study we were interested in the process used at the Jerusalem conference to discern the will of God on the question of whether Gentile converts to Christianity were or were not obligated to obey Jewish law.

Our three days together were very productive as we came to understand each other better. It became clear that the membership of the committee was not quite as diverse as we had expected it to be, and we asked Dr. Hamm to appoint two additional people to make us more broadly representative of the church. We want our committee to represent the variety of viewpoints that exist in the church as fully as possible.

We all realize that we have a long way to go in sorting out the issues and discerning what God wants. We think we have made a good beginning and there was a strong sense that the Holy Spirit was working among us in the meeting. However, there is still much study, prayer, listening, and discerning to be done. Much testing of opinions, commitments, and understandings will be required, but we are all committed to seeing the process through, however long it takes. We all pray that our work may be useful to the church in addressing a difficult and highly emotional issue, and we ask for the prayers of the church as we continue our work.