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Church’s view on gays, lesbians adjusted to emphasize ‘compassion’

Oct. 17, 2012
Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
Edwin Manuel Garcia/ANN

The Seventh-day Adventist Church on Wednesday reaffirmed its stance against homosexual activity and same-sex marriage, but also softened the denomination’s position statement to offer compassion toward gays and lesbians.

The half-page policy statement on homosexuality was approved overwhelmingly by a hand vote of more than 200 pastors, lay people and other denominational workers attending the final Executive Committee business session of the 2012 Annual Council at the denomination’s world headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.

Church leaders said the original position statement drafted in 1999 was clear and based on biblical teachings. They chose to update the document to relay the message that the church doesn’t accept homosexual practice but must recognize the need to minister with compassion to gays, said Vice President Pardon Mwansa, who chaired the policy committee that recommended the change.

“We felt we needed to close this statement with a
Ian Sweeney, president of the British Union Conference addresses the chair during the discussion.

Biblical Research Institute Deputy Director Ekkehardt Mueller addressed the committee during the discussion.

phrase that shows that the church is willing to show a Christ-like compassionate spirit to those who practice homosexuality,” Mwansa told attendees who represented church leaders in six continents.

The statement – which does not define compassion nor explain how the church should treat homosexuals – also was re-edited to show in a stronger stance than before that the church intends to remain faithful to scripture.

The final sentence of the three-paragraph document now reads: “As His disciples, Seventh-day Adventists endeavor to follow the Lord’s instruction and example, living a life of Christ-like compassion and faithfulness.”

None of the delegates in the auditorium spoke on the issue before voting.

But a more controversial agenda item, the revised position statement dealing with same-sex marriage, prompted a more passionate response, sometimes focused on the issue itself, and at other times on the grammatical nuances involved in the group-editing of a controversial paper.

The committee leaders said they elected to revise the same-sex union statement to reflect societal trends, such as acknowledging that some governments have given legal standing to same-sex unions.

“The institutions of marriage and family are under attack,” declared Willie Oliver, policy committee member and co-director of Family Ministries for the global church, quoting from a line that is now part of the new statement.

The statement also deleted the word “disorder” – calling it outdated – and replaced it with “disturbance” to describe homosexuality. That line in the five-paragraph document now reads: “Homosexuality is a manifestation of the disturbance and brokenness in human inclinations and relations caused by the entrance of sin into the world.”

And like the statement on homosexuality, the statement on same-sex marriage attempts to extend compassion.

The previous version stated: “We hold that all people, no matter what their sexual orientation, are children of God.” The new version says, “We hold that all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, are loved by God.”
One delegate from Europe attempted to amend the statement to delete the line about homosexuality being a “disturbance,” suggesting the church be more sensitive.

His proposal was rejected by North American Division lay member Gina Brown, and eventually the entire body. “Though many of us have family members who are homosexual, we understand the thought process, we still embrace them, we still love them, we still care for them,” Brown said. “However, as a church, we must take a stand for what is right.”

Ekkehardt Mueller, deputy director of the Biblical Research Institute, praised the committee for including a phrase in the line that was proposed for amendment that links homosexuality to the “entrance of sin” into the world.

“We feel that this is necessary in this context, especially since homosexuals today would deny any notion of sin and would say ‘this is how we are created, God has created us this way, and therefore we have the right and duty to this lifestyle,’ so I would be opposed to the amendment,” Mueller said.

The theme of homosexuality, and transgender issues, prompted one delegate, the president of the British Union Conference, to ask church leaders for guidance with a situation his region recently experienced.

“We have had a brother who two weeks ago came back to church as a sister. Legally, in British Law, he is now sister, he has had the operations. I have never encountered anything like this in my ministry,” Ian Sweeney said in an address to the policy committee members. “We would need some help on that one.”

Sweeney didn’t get the answer he was probably hoping for, but it became obvious the church will grapple with the issue again in the future.

“We have received requests from other parts of the world field about situations in their church. The church manual does not have a lot to say – in fact, very little to say – on this subject, so these are subjects that we’re having to address now in the church body,” replied Adventist Church Vice President Ben Schoun, vice chairman of the policy committee.

“Perhaps the committee will bring forth suggestions or guidance,” Schoun said.

Training helps delegates drill down leadership principles

Oct. 18, 2012
Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
Edwin Manuel Garcia/ANN

A pastor with an animated personality took to the platform at the 2012 Annual Council and told what sounded like an unbelievable story: He recalled how he dropped to his knees to pray beside two young men who had died – and after saying amen, the dead men had resurrected.

“I don’t know about you, friends, but that’s what I call a miracle. And it reminds me, it reminds me, brothers and sisters, that we really never know which breath will be our last!” stated the pastor,
money unscrupulously for the “Warm-Up 2015 campaign.” Nearby, Shelley Nolan-Freesland plays the role of an editor.

If the resurrection anecdote sounded too good to be true, there’s a good reason for that. The fictional story was actually part of a skit produced by Seventh-day Adventist Church officials in a training program called Leadership Education and Development, or LEAD.

The purpose of the LEAD Conference, held on October 11 and 12, the opening days of Annual Council, was to teach important leadership principles to the 350 members of the Executive Committee.

This year’s theme was policy compliance, or the importance of denominational employees adhering to policies. “If we play by the rules,” said world church Secretary G. T. Ng, “there be peace in the family.”

In the skit featuring the prevaricating pastor named Ima Climber (played by Clifford Goldstein, who in real life is the editor of the Adult Sabbath School Guide), church officials sought to show how to handle a renegade employee.

The skit revealed how a district pastor in the fictitious Antarctic Field called the prevaricating pastor’s supervisor, the executive secretary, to complain about the pastor.

The executive secretary explained that he would need to meet with the prevaricating pastor, then other field officials, as part of the routine procedure to look into the complaint.

The executive secretary then met the pastor to confirm the details of the complaint. Afterward, the executive secretary briefed the field president, who in turn summoned the pastor and fired him. Only one problem: The pastor was fired without the knowledge and permission of the executive committee, which, according to policy, is the committee that can discipline an elected official.

Following the skit, delegates huddled in breakout groups to discuss principles of governance and leadership within the Adventist Church. Case studies allowed new Executive Committee members to learn from more seasoned administrators, Ng said.

“The expectation is to help train leadership in leadership principles, and every year we are going to have a new theme,” he said.

Annual Council’s final day promotes community, outreach initiatives

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Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
ANN staff

During the final day of the 2012 Annual Council, delegates approved new outreach initiatives, learned about plans for the denomination’s 150th anniversary, and received updates on other business session items.

Among the initiatives announced Wednesday is a new ministry called Team PK – the acronym for Pastor’s Kid – that seeks to support the unique needs of pastoral families so their children remain...
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pastors. He is joined on the platform by Jerry and Janet Page of the Ministerial Association, as well as other pastors’ kids. [photos by Ansel Oliver]

Adventist Risk Management President Robert E. Kyte introduces to Annual Council delegates The Seven Campaign, an initiative to end child abuse.

Annual Council Delegate Dedrick Blue, right, prays for the leadership of the Adventist Church in Burundi Association. The Executive Committee had just voted to change church structure in the Western African nation to become the Burundi Union Mission, recognizing growth in membership and leadership.

The initiative offers a toolkit of programs and services that are similar to efforts already offered in different parts of the world.

“Many PK’s are alienated from God and his church,” said Janet Page, head of GC Shepherdess, a ministry for pastors’ wives. “As we travel around the world, we are seeing that we are losing some of our kids, and we know you have that same burden.”

Team PK is supported by various departments, such as Family Ministries, the Ministerial Association, Sabbath School and Personal Ministries, Children’s Ministries and Youth Ministries.

Page praised similar initiatives that exist in other places, particularly in the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division. “We know that it’s been going on for a number of years in many divisions; our hope is that it can get even more intense.”

The global initiative will foster pastors’ children with their Christian growth and spiritual support through resources, training and networking. The toolkit, which includes a video and PowerPoint presentation, teaches church leaders how to start a PK ministry in their own conference.

“With fervent faith, prayer, and wise, gentle judgment,” Page said, “this disengagement can be reversed.”

Also on Wednesday, an initiative released this year, The Seven Campaign, was promoted by Adventist Risk Management to raise awareness about child abuse and help end it.

Harrowing statistics displayed through a video presentation announcing the initiative stated that a child is abused every 10 seconds, the average age of a victim is nine years old, and a quarter of girls are abused. Worldwide, 40 million children will be abused this year, and one in seven children will be bullied or be bullies themselves, according to the video.

“This is not just about Adventist Risk Management – we simply are the catalyst, the organization, that has chosen to help get this launched,” said ARM President Robert E. Kyte.

He encouraged the Annual Council audience to “make a positive difference for children in the world today – we want to invite you individually and as your organization to be a partner in the campaign.”

Officials at the business meeting also announced Day of Hope, an initiative that seeks to bring 10

million visitors to churches on April 5, 2014.

Day of Hope will offer resources such as sermons to local churches in preparation for the event. Every Adventist is being requested to invite at least one person to church on that day, which falls during Easter week, when church leaders said community members are already likely to attend church.

“We want this to be an expression to the world of the hope that we have,” said Mike Ryan, a world church general vice president.

Also, it was voted that the Burundi Association will become the Burundi Union Mission, a step that demonstrates the growth of the church in the West African nation. Church leaders in the country report a membership of approximately 130,000.

Delegates also heard updates from the church’s recently-formed Special Needs Ministries. The ministry is reaching out to those with disabilities.

Delegates also learned about technological updates from Nebraska-based Christian Record Services for the Blind, which served 20,000 people last year, including people of other faiths and beliefs.

Christian Record is also making progress in distributing hundreds of Braille Bibles (at $350 each), producing audio recordings of the Spanish-language magazine El Centinela, and making products available for children and military veterans.

In another report, Jim Nix of the White Estate and David Trim of the office of Archives, Statistics and Research, outlined plans for the 150th anniversary of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They called for churches around the world to set aside May 18 for prayer and recommitment. They also announced a traveling exhibition on church heritage, including historical artifacts and photos.

Separately this week, the committee also voted to change the name of the Euro-Africa Division, based in Berne, Switzerland, to the Inter-European Division. Last year, the division’s territory in Africa was aligned with the newly-created Greater Middle East Union. This week, the committee also renamed that union the Middle East and North Africa Union with an acronym of MENA. “MENA,” as an acronym to describe the region, is in common use by businesses and non-governmental organizations, said Homer Trecartin, regional church president.

Delegates also received an update on The Great Hope project, an initiative to distribute millions of copies the book “The Great Controversy,” written by church co-founder Ellen G. White. Since the launch of the project in May of 2011, more than 75 million copies of the book have been distributed, and another 75 million copies have been downloaded.

Additionally, church leaders announced the funding of The Record Keeper project, a movie depicting themes of the book, “The Great Controversy.” Leaders said they hope the movie can be used to attract younger audiences unfamiliar with Adventist beliefs.

The ANN news bulletin is a weekly recap of news and information from the Communication department of the Seventh-day Adventist world church headquarters and is distributed by Adventist News Network.

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