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Theologians back homosexual agenda

Declaration blessing same-sex couples signed by 850 clergy, religious workers

By Julie Foster

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Homosexual activists' political agenda gained some religious support this week when 850 clergy and other religious workers endorsed a [declaration on sexual morality](#) calling upon all faiths to bless same-sex couples and allow the ordination of homosexuals. But mainstream religious leaders say it is only a "very vocal minority" in church leadership positions that are participating in the declaration.

Sponsored by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, the one-page declaration affirms the signers' belief that sexuality is God-given and its commitment to "lifelong, age-appropriate sexuality education in schools ..."

Signers declare, "Our culture needs a sexuality ethic focused on personal relationships and social justice, rather than particular sexual acts," and also that "[this ethic] accepts no

double standards and applies to all persons, without regard to sex, gender, color, age, bodily condition, marital status, or sexual orientation."

"In a culture that often seeks to exploit or repress our sexuality, it is critical for people of faith to offer an alternative vision that places sexuality in the context of divine holiness and moral integrity," says declaration endorser Rev. John H. Thomas, president of the United Church of Christ, one of the driving forces behind the declaration.

"The religious community has largely ceded the ground to those who distort our tradition," he added.

Debra Haffner, president of the council, said, "For too long, the only voices in the public square on religion and sexuality have been the anti-sexuality pronouncements of the religious right."

The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States was formed in 1964 by three professional educators, a lawyer, a physician, and one clergyman with the expressed goal of assuring that all people have "the right to affirm that sexuality is a natural and healthy part of their lives."

SEICUS' public policy advocacy arm is the National Coalition to Support Sexuality Education which is supported by "more than 100 national nonprofit organizations, many of which are noted role models and initiators in promoting health, education, and social justice for our nation's youth."

However, notable members of the coalition include the National Abortion Federation, the professional association of abortion providers; Zero Population Growth, an organization which "recommends that Congress ensure universal accessibility to family planning and abortion services in the United States," and

"recommends that states remove the existing legal restrictions on contraceptive availability for teenagers," as well as the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Other members include the National Association of Counties and the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

SEICUS also advocates a "faith-based commitment to sexual and reproductive rights, including access to voluntary contraception, abortion, and HIV/STD prevention and treatment."

While SEICUS boasts the morality statement supporting homosexuality "was developed by more than 20 theologians from diverse traditions" and signed by members of 25 denominations, nearly half the signatories are officials and clergy from the United Church, the Unitarian Universalist Association and Judaism's liberal Reform and Reconstructionist branches.

Unitarian Universalism calls itself "a liberal religion born of the Jewish and Christian traditions" that believes "personal experience, conscience, and reason should be the final authorities in religion. In the end, religious authority lies not in a book, person, or institution, but in ourselves. We put religious insights to the test of our hearts and minds."

The religion's belief statement claims, "We seek to act as a moral force in the world, believing that ethical living is the supreme witness of religion," but also notes the church "will not be bound by a statement of belief."

Equating efforts that promote the homosexual agenda with worldwide racial civil rights movements and religious persecution, United Church of Christ's former president, Rev. Paul H. Sherry, has written that his church is "gifted by gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons who have found love in the physical, emotional, and spiritual embrace of another, and are living in committed covenantal relationships of

fidelity and trust which they yearn for the church to bless and the society to respect and protect."

"We have had to re-examine long-held assumptions about those few passages of Scripture that appear to speak about homosexuality in the light of transforming interpretations from widely respected Bible scholars and teachers, and we have begun to recognize how our fears of those who are different, and our society's deeply entrenched bias against homosexual persons has often distorted and nearly silenced the Bible's liberating and inclusive voice," said Sherry.

The paper received slim backing from Roman Catholics -- two nuns, no priests and a handful of lay activists -- and no major Evangelical, black Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Mormon, Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim organizations supported SEICUS' proclamation. There were, however, a few mainstream denomination members who came on board.

Rev. Larry Greenfield, a former seminary president in the American Baptist Churches, said the paper carries this message on sex by unwed teens: "The most effective ethic is one that is not rule-based, but relationship-based."

But Rev. William Merrell, a spokesman of the conservative Southern Baptist Convention, responded: "This is not new ground for liberal religious leaders. There has been a history of radical departure from the teachings of the Scriptures on these topics. I do not believe that the moral confusion and the moral incoherence that characterizes the time is relieved by such statements. Rather it is made worse," Merrell said.

Seven seminary professors of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the larger and less conservative branch of the Presbyterianism, also supported the statement.

One of America's mainstream denominations, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will make landmark decisions this year in its highest court regarding the church's policies on homosexuals -- decisions which conservatives in the church say are being made on "technicalities."

The church initially was organized in the United States with the help of 19 signers of the Declaration of Independence who were Presbyterians. Their influence shaped the civic-type structure of the church.

The denomination's 12 synods, comprised of regionally grouped congregations, meet annually as the "General Assembly," a phrase used in reference to both the body of attendees and the meeting itself. Attendees, which may include pastors and elders elected to the General Assembly by local congregations, have the opportunity to introduce proposals, which are debated and voted on by members at the annual meeting.

The church also has a court called "Judicial Commissions" which operates by a form of jury system. It is that court which will hear appeals to rulings already made on homosexual questions.

Pastor Greg Roth of Centerville Presbyterian Church in Fremont, Calif., is a leader in the denomination -- he has been nominated to attend the General Assembly this summer -- and self-proclaimed member of the conservative "resistance force" opposed to the ordination and union of homosexuals.

The Bay Area minister explained, "I don't want to say 'you're not a Christian,'" to a homosexual, and he also acknowledges that other denominations have the right to ordain and bless the union of homosexuals. "Just not in my church," he said.

Roth told WorldNetDaily the Judicial Commission once heard cases on theological matters, making findings of heresy such as "not believing in the Holy Spirit." However, the court has reduced itself to procedural matters such as determining who is eligible for certain positions in the church.

Eligibility for ordination in the Presbyterian Church, explained Roth, is automatic for seminary students. Church laws state that homosexuals may not be ordained, thereby excluding homosexuals from seminary positions since that confers automatic eligibility for ordination.

The court ruled that eligibility for ordination is not technically a violation of church law, and so homosexuals should be allowed to attend and hold leadership positions in seminary.

In the same way, the court ruled that blessing a homosexual "union" does not violate church law prohibiting same-sex marriages, since a "union" is not technically a "marriage."

A three-year suspension on debate to challenge church policy about homosexual issues is scheduled to end in July, though Roth noted the moratorium has not held. Challenges to both rulings are ongoing and are scheduled to be taken up again by the court this year.

"We do not recognize [homosexual unions] as being valid or binding marriage," said Rev. Bill Giles, executive director of the Presbyterian Coalition. "There is no express prohibition against this in our constitution. That does not mean, however, that we find them acceptable."

The Presbyterian Coalition was formed in 1993 in response to debate on homosexual issues in the Presbyterian Church. According to Giles, it is an organization seeking to "uphold Biblical standards on sexuality and lifestyle," though the group has now expanded its efforts to

include other issues such as worship and education.

"It's a matter of semantics," continued Giles. "We believe [homosexual unions] are not Biblical nor Biblically-based. The huge majority of Presbyterians would be opposed to these as very irregular and certainly not to be equated with Christian marriage."

The Alabama-based ministry leader said that approximately 85 percent of Presbyterian members oppose the ordination of homosexuals, though a "very vocal minority" in the leadership of the church pushes for their inclusion.

"Frankly, I'm not surprised that some of our Presbyterian seminary professors have signed," said Giles.

Certain seminaries in the denomination, including Austin Theological Seminary and Louisville Seminary, have become more liberal as secular culture increasingly tolerates and even approves of homosexual behavior.

The Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church also have members who signed the declaration, most of them seminary professors.

The declaration will appear late January in The New York Times as a full-page advertisement and in other news publications after that.

Julie Foster is a staff reporter for WorldNetDaily.

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