

## A RECONCILING CLERGY CELEBRATION

By Jerry O. Cook

Can you imagine it? United Methodist pastors performing civil unions for gay and lesbian couples? United Methodist pastors officiating at same-sex marriages? “When?” you might ask. Next year? In another decade? By the year 2525?

Actually these things are happening right now. And they have been for years---within the boundaries of the New England Conference of The United Methodist Church---and elsewhere. The group responsible for these actions in New England is the Reconciling Retired Clergy of the New England Conference (RRCNEC), an organization of retired United Methodist pastors who began a year of 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations with a luncheon held on Saturday, November 15, 2008, at the Sudbury United Methodist Church in Sudbury, Massachusetts.

During the luncheon, the group reaffirmed its Covenant in support of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons (LGBT), remembered and honored deceased members of the group, and expressed special recognition of pastors in the Conference who have helped their churches become *Reconciling Congregations* (often called “Open and Affirming” in other denominations). Such congregations accept with intentionality all people regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation.

In the words of the Rev. Dr. Richard E. Harding, honored at the luncheon for his years of exceptional leadership in social justice and as founder of the RRCNEC, “In September, 1998, I wrote to the presiding Bishop of the New England Conference, informing her of my decision to officiate at same-gender holy union services and to invite other retired clergy persons in the Conference to join in this endeavor. The Bishop responded that it would be her responsibility to follow the dictates of the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* in dealing with any issues that might arise from that decision.”

By the beginning of 1999, a group of 17 retired pastors signed a Covenant signifying their willingness to officiate at holy unions. One of the group’s first actions was to sign on as “co-officiants in absentia” with 68 clergy members of the California-Nevada Annual Conference who blessed a holy union of two women at St. Mark’s United Methodist Church in Sacramento, California. Charges brought against these 68 clergypersons were eventually dropped. No complaints were filed against the New England pastors.

Following the California case, other United Methodist pastors across the country were disciplined for their actions in opposition to The United Methodist Church’s official position on homosexuality. In March 1999, the Rev. Gregory Dell was suspended for one year from the pastoral office for officiating at the holy union of a gay couple at his church, Broadway UMC in Chicago. He was then re-appointed to the same church following his suspension. In November 1999, the Rev. Jimmy Creech of the Nebraska Annual Conference suffered permanent revocation of his ministerial credentials for officiating at a gay holy union service. When the jury announced its decision in the Creech case, Bishop William Boyd Grove, who had presided at the trial, with tears in his eyes, said, “This is a sad day for our Church.” Outrage over the Dell and Creech trials led many more pastors to join the RRCNEC.

One of the key events energizing the group was the December 2004 trial of the Rev. Beth Stroud. A pastor on the staff of the Germantown UMC in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she was living in a committed lesbian relationship. She was tried, found guilty, and defrocked by a jury of her peers in a 7 to 6 vote.

Beth Stroud's trial was especially distressing for the RRCNEC since it mirrored an earlier trial in the N.E. Area, the 1987 trial of the Rev. Rose Mary Denman of the former New Hampshire Annual Conference. Her ministerial credentials were revoked because she was living in a committed lesbian relationship. Hers was the first such trial of a United Methodist clergyperson. Memory of the Stroud trial and conviction raised questions within the RRCNEC when it learned a short while later that the Bishop who had filed the charges against Stroud would become the Bishop of the New England Conference.

The new Bishop's approach to statements in the *Book of Discipline* regarding homosexuality became especially relevant because in 2003 the RRCNEC revised its Covenant to include same gender *marriages* when the Commonwealth of Massachusetts legalized such marriages in May of that year. Since then, several members of the RRCNEC have officiated at either same-gender marriages in Massachusetts or at holy or civil unions in other states\* within the New England Annual Conference. Among those who have officiated at such services are William Alberts, Carole Calhoun, William C. Coleman, Richard E. Harding, Donald B. McGaw, Sally Poland, Ted Poland, Philip Polhemus, Donella G. Siktberg, Terry C. Thomason, Wendy E. Van Orden and Linda Wood-Boyle.

Early in his tenure, concerns about the new Bishop's stance increased when, in the context of pastoral appointments, he instructed the District Superintendents to raise questions about possible same-sex committed relationships among some of those to be moved. Primarily through the efforts of the RRCNEC, the Bishop apologized for his actions and promised the clergy of the Conference that no such further action would occur. Meeting in his office, he explained to an RRCNEC delegation that it had not been his intention to do any harm but rather to protect such persons from possible difficulties in meeting with local church Pastor Parish Relations Committees. In spite of his apology and promise, however, suspicions and fears had been generated and, among some clergy, the damage had been done.

On a later occasion, at the invitation of the RRCNEC, the Bishop met with a gathering of 35 members of the group to join in a discussion of their personal positions on homosexuality. When it came his turn to speak, the Bishop noted that, based on his own study of the Scriptures, he supported the statements in the *Book of Discipline*, yet he remained open to continued conversation on the matter.

As the group's various activities have become more visible, its membership has grown and expanded. It now has close to 100 members in the Covenant. Among those who have been or remain active are 14 former District Superintendents, 4 Boston University School of Theology faculty members, and several pastors from other conferences who now reside within the bounds of the New England Annual Conference.

\* Subsequently, the states of Connecticut and New Hampshire recognized the legality of same-sex marriages.

An important activity of the RRCNEC in the Conference has been to exert influence in the election of delegates to the last three United Methodist General Conferences. The group has been successful in helping to elect several delegates committed to changing the United Methodist position on homosexuality to make the Church more fully inclusive.

The active role of the RRCNEC has not gone unnoticed. At its 2006 national convocation, the Reconciling Ministries Network, an organization dedicated to the inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the policy and practice of the UMC, awarded the group its *Cup of Justice* award “for taking bold action to invoke justice where injustice, oppression, and exclusiveness exist.” On all Saints Sunday of the same year, RRCNEC was honored as “Saints of the Year” by the congregation of the Cambridge Welcoming Ministries, a New England Conference mission church serving LBGT as well as straight persons.

At the New England Annual Conference Retiree Luncheon in 2004, an elderly and frail Walter Muelder, Dean Emeritus of the Boston University School of Theology, stood and gave the RRCNEC an unanticipated but much appreciated accolade: “We retired ministers have an ongoing role in the conflicts, such as those of homosexuality, which threatened to split our Church at the last General Conference....The position taken by militant opponents [to a more inclusive church] are often narrowly based on appeals to the authority of single verses of Scripture as decisively conclusive....We [retirees] can help hold the Church together by reminding people to think comprehensively and holistically about these questions.” Sadly, this highly respected academician died just three days later.

Throughout its 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration the RRCNEC is pledged to heed Dean Muelder’s final words. The focus will be on the continuing struggle for justice and equal rights for all people. It is the group’s firm belief that human sexuality is a divine gift, regardless of gender orientation. The Wesleyan precept of an open and inclusive ministry is unwavering as is the group’s commitment to be mutually supportive of its Covenant members as well as other persons allied with its cause. Because of its strong disagreement with the *2008 Book of Discipline* and the ongoing potential for litigation, the group will continue to add to its recently established Reconciliation Fund.

A part of the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration is a year-long program of “saturation preaching” with a goal of RRCNEC members preaching in 100 churches throughout the N.E. Annual Conference on the topic: My View: Justice and Sexual Orientation in the UMC. It is hoped that these sermons, followed by open discussions in local churches, may represent another step in moving The United Methodist Church toward full inclusiveness of LGBT persons.

John Wesley provided these guidelines: “Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.” The RRCNEC firmly believes that the present position of the denomination that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” mocks Wesley’s sentiment and is itself incompatible with Jesus’ message of love and respect for all persons. By its effort, the RRCNEC hopes to make The United Methodist Church’s motto: “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors” less than the hollow words they now represent and more truly reflective of the teachings of Christ.