

Improper Voting Discovered at Methodist Vote on Gay Clergy

By **Elizabeth Dias**

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It was a momentous vote for the United Methodist Church, as the future of the country's second-largest Protestant church hung in the balance. In a former football stadium in St. Louis last month, church officials and lay leaders from around the world voted to strengthen their ban on same-sex marriage and gay clergy, a decision that could now split the church.

But at least four ballots were cast by individuals who were not authorized to vote, according to interviews and a review of the church's records. The individuals were from African delegations whose votes were critical to restricting the church's rules on homosexuality.

The final 54-vote margin against gay clergy and same-sex marriage exceeds the number of unauthorized votes discovered so far. But the voting irregularities raised questions about the process behind the divisive decision, which devastated progressive members. Some have discussed leaving the denomination and possibly creating a new alliance for gay-friendly churches.

Church leaders are now discussing whether new votes should be called, Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton, who serves on the commission on the general conference, said in a phone interview.

"The findings that have come out have caused a serious impact on issues of trust and integrity about the whole process," he said.

A query by The New York Times last week prompted church officials to hire a consulting firm to examine whether people who were ineligible may have received credentials to vote at the church's general conference.

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Church leaders who oversaw the conference said in a statement that the audit showed it was “possible that a very limited number of ineligible persons” had participated. These people were denied credentials by staff at the conference, the officials said, but were later able to procure them.

The Times found additional irregularities. For example, two delegates from South Congo, a church district in the Democratic Republic of Congo, are listed on the official attendance records. But they never traveled to the United States for the conference because of visa issues, according to a phone interview with one of the delegates and a message sent by the other to Rev. Kalaba Chali, an official translator for the conference, who did not support the decision to strengthen the ban on gay clergy. In addition, three people voted as delegates for South Congo but their names are absent from conference attendance logs and delegate election records.

One unauthorized delegate was Philippe Kasap Kachez, whose father is Bishop Kasap Owan, a prominent opponent of gay clergy. Three Methodists from the Congo region identified Mr. Kasap Kachez to The Times as a voter seated on the floor. Mr. Chali spoke with him in St. Louis and asked why he was present.

“He said he did not go to a Methodist church in Congo; instead he lives in Brussels,” Mr. Chali said in a phone interview. “He said, ‘I came here because my dad asked me to come vote against the lesbians.’”

When contacted on Facebook and WhatsApp, Mr. Kasap Kachez declined to comment. Bishop Kasap Owan did not respond to questions.

“To learn that there were irregularities in the voting is distressing and of great concern,” said Bishop Kenneth H. Carter, the president of the Council of Bishops, said in an interview on Thursday.

When asked what these findings meant for the result of the vote of the general conference, the Rev. Gary W. Graves, secretary of the conference, said, “That is a matter that would still be under review.”

The United Methodist Church has detailed strict rules for how to conduct important votes, such as the one last month on gay clergy.

The church worldwide is divided into geographical units, called “annual conferences.” Each one elects delegates to the church’s global meetings, called “general conferences,” and it also elects “reserves” in case a delegate is not able to attend. The list of delegates and the reserves for each region is published at the start of the general conference.

In the rare event that neither delegates nor reserves can attend, an annual conference can send a different individual, but only if that person was elected as an alternate for the process that elects bishops. Even then, those reserves would have to have followed the proper registration procedures to be allowed onto the floor.

There are no exceptions to this rule, which is codified in the church’s Book of Discipline.

Experts in Methodist governance say it would be highly unusual for a delegate to be allowed on the floor who was not listed publicly as a delegate or reserve at the start of the general conference.

But there were examples of discrepancies between who voted and who was listed as eligible to vote.

Germain Unda Mupasa said in a phone interview that he was a delegate for East Congo, where his father is Bishop Gabriel Yemba Unda. His name is on the attendance record, but not on the authorized list of delegates or reserves. Records on the United Methodist website show that he was not elected as a delegate or alternate when the church community in East Congo decided its delegation last year.

“If my name was not on that list, it means my name was missed,” Mr. Mupasa said. “In Africa, we can have many reserves, because there are visa issues.”

Hassa Satshishinga Suzanne Malandji was listed as an elected reserve delegate for Lukoshi, another church district in Africa, but she told The Times she was a delegate for South Congo. She said that she supported the vote outcome because “we have the responsibility to do what the Bible says.”

Voting integrity matters not just for the outcome of the vote, but for the fair representation of all churches. Some delegations, like South Congo, had delegates who could not travel because of visa issues. But in several cases, to abide by the rules, delegations like North Katanga, also a church district in Congo, voted with fewer than their allotted delegates, according to attendance records.

Church law does not allow proxy votes, and only elected reserves can replace absent delegates.

The United Methodist legal structure does not have a clear procedure on how to investigate or adjudicate improper election activity. The relevant ethics committee does not have jurisdiction when the general conference is not in session.

The system itself has not had to ask itself these types of questions, said Lacey Warner, a professor of Methodist studies at Duke Divinity School.

“The polity of the United Methodist Church presumes trust,” she said. “The last several years, the ethos of the denomination has been characterized more by mistrust and misunderstanding.”

Margaret Kramer and Jennifer Harlan contributed reporting.

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