

Controversy surrounds upcoming event at Lake Junaluska

By Neill Caldwell

LAKE JUNALUSKA, N.C. (UMNS) – This placid United Methodist retreat center has found itself in the center of a summer storm over rental of its facilities by the Reconciling Ministries Network, which advocates full participation in the church by people of all sexual orientations.

E-mail and official statements have passed back and forth in recent weeks, and church-related blogs and internet forums are buzzing about the gathering. Several hundred participants are expected for the “Hearts on Fire” event Sept. 2-5 at Lake Junaluska, a Southeastern Jurisdiction ministry about 30 miles west of Asheville.

“SEJAC does not approve of or disapprove of the ‘Hearts on Fire’ conference program,” said Jimmy L. Carr, executive director of Lake Junaluska Conference and Retreat Center. “The participants in the event will use the facilities of SEJAC and we will host them, as we do other groups who are our guests, in a gracious way that is exemplary of the wonderful United Methodist Church that we so love and desire to serve in the name of Jesus Christ.”

Conservative leaders within the church have marshaled their supporters to express dismay at the gathering being held at Lake Junaluska.

“The ‘Hearts on Fire’ conference should not be held,” said the Rev. James V. Heidinger II, president and publisher of “Good News” magazine. “The conference will not just be advocating for change in the church’s standards; it will include large doses of preaching and teaching which are in direct opposition to the Scriptural norm and to the church’s standards. That should not happen at a United Methodist conference center.”

“Since Lake Junaluska’s own internal rules require it to rent its facilities only to groups that share the ‘mission’ of the United Methodist Church, it seems highly inappropriate to rent those facilities for a rally for same-sex ‘marriage,’ homosexual clergy, and various exotic forms of sexual expression,” said Mark Tooley, director of UMAction, part of the Institute on Religion and Democracy.

The Rev. Troy Plummer, executive director of the Reconciling Ministries Network, said Lake Junaluska is fulfilling its mandate as a “faithful United Methodist retreat and conference center to serve the whole church.”

Lake Junaluska officials are “practicing open hearts, open minds, open doors as they continue to make disciples for Jesus Christ,” he said. “I am per-



Photo by Annette Bender, *The Call*

“SEJAC does not approve of or disapprove of the ‘Hearts on Fire’ conference program,” said Jimmy L. Carr, executive director of Lake Junaluska Conference and Retreat Center (pictured here at the Holston Annual Conference in June).

plexed by any who would confuse the love of God and grace of Jesus Christ with closed doors, closed minds, closed hearts.”

Carr said the leadership at Lake Junaluska treated the request to rent the facilities the same as it would a request from any other United Methodist group. The retreat center “researched their request and found RMN to be an affiliated caucus of the United Methodist Church,” he said. He cited pages 198-201 of The 2005 United Methodist Directory, published by Cokesbury. While Reconciling Ministries, Good News and UM Action are listed in the directory under a heading of “Affiliated Caucuses and Ecumenical Groups,” all three organizations are unofficial United Methodist groups.

Reconciling Ministries “is made up of a broad cross-section of the United Methodist Church, and we understand its members are primarily heterosexual,” Carr said. “They also plan to host many United Methodist leaders during their event. We also discovered that RMN was allowed to participate during the 2004 General Conference along with other affiliated caucuses.

“The executive committee of SEJAC, which administers Lake Junaluska facilities, reviewed their request and agreed for us to provide hospitality to this group.”

The IRD’s Web site and “Good News” magazine have urged supporters to contact Carr and express their feelings.

The Lake Junaluska Conference and Retreat Center is known throughout Methodism as host to a number of events and gatherings each year. The

conservative Confessing Movement, another unofficial United Methodist group, held its annual Epworth Institute for young pastors there in July.

Several bishops – including Minerva Carcaño, Scott Jones, Susan Morrison, Sally Dyck and John Schol – have indicated they plan to attend the “Hearts on Fire” conference, Carr said. Some bishops “plan to also participate in the Confessing Movement Convocation to be held later in September ‘to listen and build relationships,’” he said.

Heidinger noted that bishops “are responsible for ‘carrying into effect the rules, regulations, and responsibilities’ set forth in the *Book of Discipline*. “They are not to be dissenters to the church’s doctrine or moral teachings,” he said.

According to its Web site, Reconciling Ministries Network “is a movement of United Methodist individuals, congregations, campus ministries, and other groups working for the full participation of all people in the United Methodist Church.”

The debate led to an exchange of statements between Reconciling Ministries clergy members and “Good News” magazine.

The clergy letter, signed by 687 pastors, stated that many people “are suffering intensely due to the current policies of the church on homosexuality,” and that “Hearts on Fire” will be a time for healing for those people and the church as a whole.

Heidinger wrote in response that, rather than working for the acceptance of homosexual behavior, United Methodists should “be pouring our time and energy into ministries that can help persons experiencing all forms of sexual brokenness to find healing and wholeness in Christ.”

“Hearts on Fire” will feature workshops, worship and entertainment. Speakers include the Rev. Beth Stroud, who was defrocked in December and reinstated last April during a church legal process that resulted from her disclosure that she is a practicing lesbian. Her case will be heard by the United Methodist Church’s Judicial Council in October.

The United Methodist *Book of Discipline* affirms God’s love for homosexuals but calls homosexual practice “incompatible with Christian teaching.” Human rights for gays are supported in the church’s Social Principles, but the church denies ordination to practicing homosexuals, refuses funding for pro-homosexuality advocacy, forbids same-sex unions, supports civil laws defining marriage as a union between man and woman, and declares that “sexual relations are only clearly affirmed in the marriage bond.” ■

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