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Methodists Struggle To Reflect Diversity

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African and Asian Congregations Are on the Rise

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FORT WORTH, Texas -- Once the epitome of Main Street, U.S.A., the [United Methodist Church](#) is rapidly becoming an increasingly international family.

Put another way: The church of [President Bush](#) and [Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton \(D-N.Y.\)](#) is also the church of Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

And as the Liberian president stood before thousands of fellow Methodists here Tuesday, she presented herself as the personification of the church's global missions and urged a renewed effort to fight poverty in Africa.

Sirleaf, who in 2006 became Africa's first democratically elected female head of state, pointed to Methodists' centuries-old health and education ministries in her West African nation. Methodists built the first secondary school in Liberia, the College of West Africa, of which Sirleaf called herself a proud alumna.

"For more than 175 years, you, the Methodist Church, has stood by and with the Liberian nation," Sirleaf said. "The church must continue to work to assist us meet the challenges for the people of Liberia."

Challenges are abundant across the world, Sirleaf said. A widening gap between rich and poor nations threatens regional stability; climate change threatens natural resources; and rising food prices threaten to unleash a tide of hunger across the world.

"You are meeting at a critical moment in the history of the Christian church and the human family," she told the almost 4,000 Methodists gathered here at their quadrennial General Conference.

Indeed, they find themselves in the middle of an intense debate about exactly how their church can reflect its increasingly international membership and its sexual diversity at home.

While Methodist congregations are shrinking in America, they're booming in Africa and Asia -- 30 percent of the 11.5 million-member church lives outside the United States. Sirleaf's Liberia has 168,000 Methodists; this week, delegates formally received its West African neighbor, Ivory Coast, into the church. With 700,000 members, it's now the church's largest regional conference.

More than 275 of the almost 1,000 delegates gathered here to draw up church policy are from Africa, an increase of 100 from the last General Conference.

Still, Methodists have yet to decide how to fully reflect their diversity in church governance. On Monday, delegates scuttled a plan that might have given more influence to churches in Africa, Asia and Europe, instead deciding to study the matter further and report back in four years.

The meeting here, which ended yesterday, also reflects a wider struggle for the soul of America's mainline churches, as conservatives and liberals increasingly cross national and hemispheric lines in search of allies.

Several delegates warned that actions taken here directly affect Methodists in Africa and Asia, many of whom are conservative.

Delegates held to traditional Methodist rules on homosexuality, refusing to support or celebrate same-sex unions and maintaining language that calls homosexual activity "incompatible with Christian teaching."

Yet, efforts to remove a transgender pastor from ministry in Baltimore died quietly. The failure to enact a ban most likely means the Rev. Drew Phoenix, who entered the ministry as the Rev. Ann Gordon, cannot be defrocked solely because he is a transgender man before the next General Conference in 2012.

Liberal Methodists say a conservative coalition crossed ethical lines when it handed out more than 200 free cellphones to delegates from Africa and the Philippines. The giveaway sparked charges of racism, neo-colonialism and old-fashioned graft.

Conservative activist Mark Tooley of UMAction, a member of the coalition, called the cellphone brouhaha "very silly."

But the Rev. Troy Plummer of the gay-friendly Reconciling Ministries Network noted that the fliers advertising the giveaway called on delegates to elect a slate of conservative candidates to the church's supreme court.

Those candidates lost. Delegates elected church moderates and liberals instead.

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