

SUBJECT TO FINAL EDITING

JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

DECISION 1470

[Docket 1022-07]

IN RE: Review of a Bishop's Report of a Ruling in the Northern Illinois Annual Conference Concerning a Question That Was Asked From the Floor but was Never Submitted in Writing.

DIGEST

A request for a ruling on questions of law submitted orally, but not in writing, during the regular session of annual conference is not sufficient to confer jurisdiction for an episcopal ruling on the merits. JCD 1161. The Bishop's ruling that the "request for a ruling of law was improperly submitted because it was not submitted in writing" is affirmed.

STATEMENT OF FACTS

The Secretary of the Northern Illinois Annual Conference provided the following excerpt from his official minutes:

From Plenary Session 1, June 8, 2022 One hour and 11 minutes into the session which started at 3:30 PM.

"Bishop Hopkins then recognized the Rev. Jim Bell who put forth a question of law inquiring as to the power of the Annual Conference Committee to require the submission of proof of Covid-19 vaccinations for Annual Conference attendance and excluding people who did not have this proof, citing The Book of Discipline paragraph 608. Bishop Hopkins thanked Rev. Bell for his question and indicated was more properly a question of parliamentary procedure indicating the Annual Conference Committee had decided that the best thing for this Conference to do was to have some provisions by which everybody could be represented, adding that this is why we had both masked and unmasked sections and asked people to have vaccination cards. Bishop Hopkins indicated that the concern would be recorded."

The above text represents a section of the official minutes of the Northern Illinois Conference Annual Conference held on the date and at the time above.
Randy A. Hayes, NIC Annual Conference Secretary
Extracted from the typed minutes on 6/30/2022 by Randy Hayes

Prior to the adjournment of the Annual Conference, there was no written submission to the presiding Bishop nor to the Annual Conference Secretary of the above request for an episcopal ruling concerning whether the 2022 Regular Session of Annual Conference was convened in violation of ¶ 608.

Within thirty days, the Bishop timely filed his ruling regarding the above exchange. He ruled that the “request for a ruling of law was improperly submitted because it was not submitted in writing.”

Jurisdiction

The Judicial Council has jurisdiction under ¶ 2609.6 of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church — 2016*.

Analysis and Rationale

In Decision 153 the Judicial Council noted:

There was no request voted by the Conference for a declaratory decision; there was no appeal voted from any episcopal ruling made in the Conference session; there was no question of law submitted in writing at the Conference session. We point out that there is no procedure in the Discipline by which a Bishop, personally, may request a decision from the Judicial Council.

The Judicial Council on several occasions has declined to take jurisdiction where the provisions of the Discipline were not carefully followed (see Decision No. 66). It takes this Position reluctantly but with the conviction that such provisions are for the protection of the proper judicial procedures of the Church.

In the case before us, the questions of law would have needed to be submitted in writing in order for jurisdiction to have been conferred. Given that written questions were not submitted, Bishop Hopkins’ ruling is affirmed. See, *e.g.*, Decisions 64, 66, 153, 799, 1121, 1161, 1219, 1279.

Decision

A request for a ruling on questions of law submitted orally, but not in writing, during the regular session of annual conference is not sufficient to confer jurisdiction for an episcopal ruling on the merits. JCD 1161. The Bishop’s ruling that the “request for a ruling of law was improperly submitted because it was not submitted in writing” is affirmed.

March 20, 2023