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Complaint filed against Chicago pastor for same-sex service

By United Methodist News Service

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See also: [A Message from Greg Dell](#)

The first formal complaint since the United Methodist Judicial Council ruled that pastors shall not perform same-sex ceremonies has been filed against a Chicago pastor who conducted a union service for two men.

Chicago Bishop Joseph Sprague filed a [formal complaint](#) against the Rev. Gregory R. Dell, pastor of Broadway United Methodist Church, on Oct. 12, citing "failure to uphold the Order and The Discipline of the United Methodist Church." Dell performed a union service for two men at the church on Sept. 19.

Besides serving as pastor, Dell is coordinator for the ["In All Things Charity"](#) effort, a movement of clergy who disagree with the denomination's position that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." The movement supports covenantal commitments between same-gendered couples and ordination of gay men and lesbians.

Nearly one-third of the 185 members at [Broadway United Methodist Church](#) identify themselves as gay or lesbian.

Dell conducted the ceremony two days shy of the anniversary of a similar service that the [Rev. Jimmy Creech](#) performed for two women at First United Methodist Church in Omaha, Neb., on Sept. 17, 1997. That service set off a firestorm of divisiveness and debate in the denomination, and led to a clergy trial for Creech. He was acquitted on March 13 of being disobedient to church law.

Creech's acquittal led to calls for a ruling by the Judicial Council, the denomination's supreme court, on whether a prohibition against same-sex ceremonies was enforceable as church law. The prohibition states that "ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our pastors and shall not be conducted in our churches." The statement was in the Social Principles, a section of the denomination's *Book of Discipline* that is considered largely advisory. In August, the nine-member Judicial Council ruled that the statement has the effect of church law regardless of its placement in the Discipline, and therefore governs the conduct of the ministerial office.

Because Dell "knowingly, as a stated act of conscience and pastoral ministry, failed to uphold the Order and Discipline of the United Methodist Church," his actions are a "chargeable offense," Sprague said. Disobedience to the order and discipline of the United Methodist Church is one of 10 offenses for which a clergy member may be tried in a church court.

The complaint will be processed by the appropriate investigative bodies in the Northern Illinois Annual (regional) Conference to determine if the case should lead to charges requiring a church trial. A conviction under church trial could result in penalties ranging from withdrawal of Dell's clergy credentials to suspension or a "lesser penalty."

In an Oct. 12 statement, Sprague admitted that he has "my own theological and pastoral disagreement with this component of church law." The bishop said he filed the complaint despite his high regard for Dell as a faithful and effective pastor.

In response, Dell said he did what "I understood faithfulness to Christ and my ordination vows require. I extended ministry to two men who love each other, love God and love the church."

According to a statement by Dell, Sprague has "assured" him that he would not be suspended as pastor while the matter is under investigation. In contrast, Creech was suspended while the charges against him were being investigated. His suspension was lifted upon his acquittal. He has since taken a leave of absence from the ministry and is living in North Carolina.

Dell said he has conducted services of holy union for same-gendered couples for nearly 30 years, and the Judicial Council's decision didn't

cause him to hesitate in performing the most recent ceremony. He and the men had prepared for the celebration for almost a year.

The same-sex service was a faithful expression of his ministerial office as a United Methodist pastor, Dell said. He could not "conceive of excluding people from the ministry of the church because of their identity," he said. "When an expression of someone's identity involves the making of holy vows for faithfulness and ministry, the church should understand itself to be privileged in offering a blessing."

The church, he said, is not of a common mind on issues related to homosexuality. But he "celebrates our denominational diversity as an opportunity for all of us to grow."

In a news release from Broadway United Methodist Church, Dell said a potential trial raises the issue of whether the understanding of faithful ministry can be tolerated. He said a trial could be held as early as January, depending on the outcome of deliberations by the Northern Illinois Annual Conference Committee on Investigation.

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