

COOL UNDER THE COLLAR

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It has taken the United Methodist Church four months to assemble its case against Rev. Gregory Dell, though it is hard to imagine what took so long.

Consider the case file:

Item 1: In August 1998, the denomination's supreme court ruled that it is a violation of church law for a Methodist minister to perform a homosexual marriage, or for such a union to take place on church property.

Item 2: In September 1998, Dell performed a "Service of Holy Union" -- a church wedding in all but name and legal authority -- for two gay men at Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago.

Item 3: Dell has agreed to stipulate to all the facts.

If this were a criminal trial, it would last roughly as long as the smack of a gavel bouncing off oak, or the snort of a judge inconvenienced. But Greg Dell will be tried by the United Methodist Church, by a jury of 13 Methodist ministers from the Chicago area. If nine or more of them vote to convict, they have the power to ban Dell from ordained ministry, to censure him, or to hand down any number of intermediate penalties. Of course they could also vote to acquit him.

Either way, Dell does not plan to let the church dispose of the case easily. There will be no deal. Or, more accurately, the deal is this: The church can

do what it wants with the ministerial career of Rev. Greg Dell, but first he will have his say.

Dell plans to argue that his vow to minister to all people supersedes church law on homosexuality. He hopes to force the Methodist Church -- and with it, all the other U.S. mainline Protestant churches, which have been twisting and ducking and jabbing at the issue of homosexuality for two decades -- to hear a sustained, highly theological argument for blessing homosexual relationships. He wants to prod the church to go toe-to-toe with him on the issues, to respond to his interpretation of his duty as minister and then to make an unambiguous decision.

And that, far beyond the facts, is what provides the suspense. What is the penalty for a popular and conscientious pastor of 28 years who knowingly defies church law and refuses to repent? How will the

Methodists, who by most accounts are already headed toward some sort of schism over homosexuality, react to the outcome? And not least, what will Dell say?

A Greg Dell sermon on any given Sunday morning begins with the easy humor of a skilled dinner party host -- the kind who makes you feel that you, among all others in the room, have his complete attention. Then, slowly, the preacher takes over, tugging you to the mountaintop, never stumbling, never looking down. When he is done, the only uncertainty left in the airy sanctuary at Broadway seems to be whether the whole place will break into applause.

At Dell's trial, that rhetorical skill will be paired with his genuine passion about the church's treatment of gays and lesbians. For 8.5 million Methodists, and millions of other Christians, the trial also carries some small hope -- and fear -- that the church may finally settle its wrenching conflict over homosexuality.

"For whatever reason, this has become a watershed issue in the Protestant church in the United States -- a watershed issue not just about sex, but about what it means to be a Christian, about how to understand the Bible," said Dell, sitting in a comfortable corner of his office. "In theology we talk about a moment of kairos. For Greeks, regular time was chronos. A kairos moment is outside of chronos, a moment of particular poignancy and intensity and crisis. We talk about God breaking in at that moment.

"This is a kairos moment."

Dell's opponents on the issue of homosexual marriage also see history in this moment, though they see history turning away from Dell and an entire generation of clergy that put confrontation at the heart of its theology.

"The '60s thing had all of us. I was out walking around steel plants, trying to shut down factories as a high school student. It was crazy. Some people have moved beyond that," said Rev. Scott Field of Naperville, leader of the conservative Methodist movement in northern Illinois. "But it's almost a foregone conclusion that if there's a barbed-wire fence, Greg will throw himself on it. . . . I think his tactics are emblematic of a movement that has seen its day."

With pretrial maneuvering dragging on since October, with Dell himself talking about how he wakes each morning to thoughts of the trial, one can only imagine the psychological toll it must be taking on him.

"He sleeps like a rock," said his wife, Jade.

Even with the calls from anguished parishioners, the interviews on national television?

"Like a rock."

On the day the charges against Dell became public, a photographer pulled the minister aside for a quick sit-down portrait. After shooting several frames, the photographer looked up and asked solicitously, "Aren't you worried?"

"Yes, I certainly am worried," Dell replied.

"Well, then," the photographer hesitated, "couldn't you look a little more worried?"

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The Delbaccio family had only recently changed its name to Dell when Greg was born in 1945 on the east side of Blue Island, in an enclave of Italian immigrants and first-generation Italian-Americans like his father, Tony. When Greg was 2, the family moved a few miles west to Midlothian, a suburb south of Chicago.

"My father's goal from early on was to be an American in every way, to be as American as he could," Dell said.

Midlothian was in Tony Dell's imagination all-American, and he would become its police chief. There he and his wife, Jeanette, raised Greg and daughters Gloria and Laura.

When it came time to join a church, Tony Dell chose not to return to the Roman Catholic faith of his childhood. Instead, he took his family across the street to the Methodist church. His son smiles at the recollection: "What could be more American than the Methodist Church?"

Greg soaked it in, every bit of that all-American ethos. He became a Boy Scout, then an Eagle Scout, then the first member of his extended family to go to college. On Sundays, he absorbed more than his father had intended. When Greg was in 7th grade, in 1958, a new pastor came to the Midlothian Methodist Church. More than any preacher Greg had heard before, Rev. Donnell Jenkins made an explicit link between the radical equality Jesus preached and the budding civil rights movement. By 1965 Dell was so convinced of that link that he and a friend decided to march with Rev. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), taking on the segregation of Chicago.

Tony Dell was adamantly opposed. The police chief did all he could to keep his son away from the march, which to him seemed to threaten everything he was working for, the peace, the safety, the American status quo. Greg Dell told his father that the Bible called for something different: justice for all people, regardless of identity. He argued that that meant taking risks. And though Tony Dell never saw it that way, he stood by his son's decision.

"In some ways, that's very Italian. You stand by your family, even if they're crazy," said Greg Dell.

Even decades later, when Tony Dell came to live his final months in Greg and Jade's home in Oak Park, father and son could not agree on politics or social issues. But they never let it get in the way of family.

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Greg Dell met Jade on the first day of classes at Illinois Wesleyan University in 1963. Both of them, along with a half-dozen other lost freshmen, showed up at the wrong classroom. Greg entertained them, or at least Jade, by telling jokes.

Not everyone was so amused by Dell. Jade's father, Oliver Luerssen, a business professor at Illinois Wesleyan, thought he had scored a coup for the university when he persuaded Chase Manhattan Bank to send a recruiter to the Bloomington campus. The recruiter never made it, however. A student group led by Greg Dell began protesting Chase Manhattan's dealings in South Africa, raising enough of a ruckus to dissuade the bank from making the trip. "He remembered that for a long time," Dell said.

Greg and Jade were married in 1967, after their graduation from college and before both matriculated at [Duke University](#) Divinity School. Greg Dell had wanted, off and on since junior high school, to become an ordained minister. It seemed the best way to do the things he wanted to do, to spend time improving community, fighting for what he believed was just.

That all changed in April 1968, when Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

"Here's a guy who committed himself to all the values I hold dear, a mentoring influence on my life, and he gets killed," Dell recalled. Through the night, the young seminarian wrestled with it, growing more and more discouraged. Then -- a kairos moment -- he became suddenly and deeply certain that King's life and death did make sense.

"I don't know how this conviction came upon me. In a sense I was touched by God. It convinced me well beyond intellectual argument," he says. "I talk about it every time we do a baptism. I talk about how baptism is a rehearsal for death. That act says two things: First, everybody is going to die, including you and your child. Second, the only way you are going to live is if you accept your death. You have to live, not avoid death."

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Even a partial list of Greg Dell's causes over his 28 years of ministry reads like a history of the American left. For civil rights. Against the war in Vietnam. For a woman's right to abortion. Against U.S. involvement in El Salvador and Nicaragua, a position that led Dell to declare his pastorate at the

time, Wheadon United Methodist Church in Evanston, a sanctuary for Central American refugees who were not legally allowed in the country. He violated U.S. travel bans to Cuba and, in 1979, to Iran, where he met with the American hostages and ended up on "60 Minutes."

Dell was arrested in 1986 for chaining himself to the entrance of the General Board of Pensions of the United Methodist Church in Evanston, to protest the board's holdings in firms that dealt with South Africa. He thinks he has been locked up four or five times, but does not know offhand.

"I haven't been arrested in years, because I'm not convinced it's effective anymore . . . You change strategies and tactics as needed," he said.

Rev. Jim Reed, pastor of Union Avenue Methodist Church in Chicago, met Dell in the early 1970s, when both were fighting their bishop over his reassignment of white pastors whose churches' membership had become black. Though Reed was 15 years older, he was impressed with Dell, who was then a young associate pastor from Naperville.

"He's not the kind of person who goes off tilting at windmills. He thinks things through very well," Reed said. "He's highly committed, very articulate, not hesitant to put himself on the line."

In 1974, Reed's first wife, the late Jane Mills Reed, went to work in Washington, D.C., for a new office of the United Methodist Church that would identify and act on "emerging issues." Jane Mills Reed wanted to pursue gay and lesbian rights as an emerging issue, but her boss did not; ultimately, the director tried to fire her over the conflict. Without anybody asking him, Dell flew to Washington and spent several weeks acting as Mills Reed's advocate. He marshaled votes on the board that oversaw the emerging-issues office and he saw to it that she was not forced from office.

Few issues are too large or too small to inflame Dell's sense of social justice. In December Dell and a group of likeminded friends known as the "Sis-Bros Covenant" took time out to protest Toys "R" Us' sale of toys they perceived as promoting violence.

"It's making me tired just hearing you say all the things he's been involved in," Jade Dell said. "We're both tired." And with good reason. Jade has been an equal, if quiet, participant in virtually every protest, every campaign, even the arrests. Though she never sought ordination, Greg calls her a partner in his ministry, organizing parish groups for everything from social activism to liturgical dance.

But when Greg Dell explains why he decided to join a longtime Broadway United Methodist parishioner, Keith Eccarius, with his partner, Karl Reinhardt, in a Service of Holy Union, he does not tell war stories from a generation in the liberal trenches. He insists that the union ceremony he performed in September was not a political act, or even an act of ecclesiastic defiance, but simply an act of pastoral care.

He talks about Sean.

Dell met Sean in the mid-1980s, when Sean began attending services at Wheadon, where Dell was then pastor. Sean was hard to miss. At Wheadon, the kind of place where a new pair of jeans made you look dressy, Sean invariably wore a suit and tie. Moreover, at age 14, Sean had the mental abilities of a 6-year-old. But once he started coming, he never missed a Sunday.

One day Sean approached Dell and asked if he could be baptized. For Dell, that was a predicament. When infants were baptized, Dell put the parents through a rigorous training to ensure their commitment to Christianity. With adults who decided to join the church, to be confirmed or to be baptized, Dell was tougher still. He believed that if you were old enough to make the choice, you were old enough to learn what it was all about. He had no program for a teenager who was old enough to choose Christianity but not advanced enough to read or understand even the most basic literature of the faith. Neither did the church.

"I thought about it for a long time. Then I wrote a baptism liturgy at about a 6-year-old level and waived everything else," Dell recalled. "I said, 'Sean, do you love God?'"

" 'Yes, I do,' he said.

" 'Do you believe God loves you?'"

" 'Yes, I do.'"

" 'Do you want to belong to this church, with all these people, many of whom are very different from you?'"

" 'Yes, I do,' he said, and I baptized him. I violated every previous understanding I had about adult preparation, and I violated the rules of the church. I did it because Sean was right." Dell insists that a church willing to throw a pastor out because he broke the rules and married a gay couple should have thrown him out long ago, for breaking the rules and baptizing Sean without proper preparation.

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The only other minister ever tried by the United Methodist Church for performing a homosexual union is Rev. Jimmy Creech, who married a lesbian couple in Nebraska in 1997. Last March, before a jury of clergymen, Creech argued that the Methodist prohibition against such unions was only a guideline, not church law. He was acquitted when the jury fell a vote short of the two-thirds majority it needed to convict him.

But if he squeaked by in battle, Creech's victory did not turn the war's tide. Shortly after his trial,

Creech's bishop decided not to renew his appointment to his prominent parish. The denomination's Supreme Judicial Council weighed in a few months later to declare, unequivocally, that Creech's interpretation was wrong: Marrying homosexuals violated church law.

Jimmy Creech was one of Greg Dell's best friends in the Duke Divinity School class of 1970. Greg was quick to formulate plans and demand action; Jimmy's was the more cautionary voice. But they shared a vision of a church on a mission to remake the world.

That vision, Creech remembers, "called for a different kind of church or ministry than that of the 1950s church we grew up in, which was based on charity and the status quo. Greg and I saw that the local church was the front line, the place where there was hope for change and renewal. . . . This is what has to happen . . . to stand out and say to the church, 'We will not let you get away with treating gays and lesbians this way,' " says Creech. "I'm very glad that Greg is the one who will have a chance to speak to what it is to be a pastor. I have great trust in his insight."

"It's hard to imagine them being able to get a jury that would vote to convict him," said Reed.

But when pressed, the same friends acknowledge that over the quarter-century that the United Methodist Church has discussed the issue, a significant majority always has believed that the church has no business blessing homosexual unions. Every four years, Methodist laypeople and clergy elect representatives to a nationwide General Conference to decide church policy; every time homosexual marriage has been on the agenda in recent decades, it has been defeated, sometimes by more than two-thirds of the representatives. When Creech was acquitted last year, a major parish in Atlanta and several others around the nation began withholding money from the denomination; others threatened to break away altogether.

In 1999, that majority remains unswayed by Creech or Dell or the 90 ministers in California who staged a group officiation of homosexual union in January, daring the church to try them all.

Bishop C. Joseph Sprague, who officially filed the charges against Dell in October, at first criticized the church's stance on homosexuality and praised Dell as an accomplished minister. Sprague has since declined to comment, however.

But Rev. Scott Field, leader of the Methodists' conservative Good News movement in northern Illinois, says it is his concern for the integrity of the church's democratic decision-making that led him to call Sprague's attention to Dell's Holy Union service in September. Field said he admires Dell as a person and as a pastor. But he sees Dell's act as an insult to the church and its members around the country.

"We understand that Greg has the integrity of following his conscience," Field said. "I say if you feel bound by that, go ahead and do it. But don't do it in the name of 8.5 million Methodists."

"Methodists are generally folks who are pretty open and willing to go along with things. But this (defiance) ends up always dividing us into winners and losers. The elitist perspective is that Greg Dell knows better than 8.5 million people."

Dell, for his part, said he does not want to fight the will of the 8.5 million.

"The question is, `Did I violate the order and discipline of the United Methodist Church?' If I did, they ought to kick me out. They ought not to stand for something that is clearly contrary to the faith," he said. The Dells have made contingency plans for such an outcome. Their only child, a 27-year-old-son, is out of the nest, living in California. Greg could live in a small cabin in southern Wisconsin that he and his sister own. Jade could take a room in downtown Chicago near her job at the city Health Department and spend weekends in the cabin. Greg could write and prepare for the church's quadrennial general conference in 2000, where homosexuality is bound to be discussed.

It doesn't seem like the kind of life that would appeal to Greg Dell for long. So why does the smile still come so easily to his face?

"I don't know that he would admit this, but he wants this," said Keith Eccarius, who has watched Dell from the center of the storm. "He wants the challenge. This is part of his ongoing fight. He's doing something that people wish they could do, but they're afraid."

Then again, maybe Dell would admit it.

"The trial is going to be a good forum. I'm looking forward to that. I want it to happen," he said. "But even when this trial is over, it won't be over."

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