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## Creech 'stunned' by penalty against Dell

By United Methodist News Service

DOWNERS GROVE, Ill. (UMNS) – Throughout his trial, the Rev. Greg Dell received support from the one man who understood perhaps better than anyone else what the accused pastor was going through.

That man was the Rev. Jimmy Creech, who almost exactly a year before had been acquitted in a similar church trial for doing what Dell had done: performing a holy union service for two people of the same gender. Creech's defense, however, would not have helped Dell; in the 12 months between the two trials, the United Methodist Church's Judicial Council had closed the loophole that led to Creech's acquittal.

Creech sat on the front row of the courtroom throughout most of the two-day Dell trial. Creech said he was there to support his fellow clergy member with his presence. When it was all over, Creech expressed his dismay at the outcome.

"I'm stunned by the decision on the penalty, especially because it's conditioned on Greg's having to sign a pledge," Creech told United Methodist News Service. "It's mean-spirited and punitive."

Dell, pastor of Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago, was suspended effective July 5 until he signed a document agreeing not to perform any more holy union services, or until the denomination's law against such services was changed.

"It's simply saying to him that he will have to violate his own integrity in order to return to ministry," Creech said. "I think that's unnecessary." The trial court could have imposed a different penalty that was clear and definite about length of time, he said.

"It's a clear signal that the church, represented by a trial court, will use the power of the church to discourage pastors being in ministry to gay and lesbian persons," Creech said.

"It is a use of church law to enforce bigotry," he said.

The verdict was reached by a trial court of 13 of Dell's clergy peers from around the Northern Illinois Annual Conference. They sat through two long days and nights of testimony and arguments during the trial, held at First United Methodist Church in the Chicago suburb of Downers Grove.

Creech said he was prepared for the guilty verdict intellectually but not emotionally.

Asked what kind of signal this sends to gays and lesbians in the United Methodist Church, he replied: "It's going to cause a lot of people to question whether to stay ... if the pastors who are there to serve them are punished for serving them."

He hopes "that churches in ministry to gays and lesbians will continue to be a redemptive presence to a (denomination) that has lost its integrity."

Creech said he planned on staying in Chicago through Sunday, March 28, and worshipping at Broadway United Methodist Church. Dell's sermon topic that day was "We've only just begun."

Creech was acquitted on March 13, 1998, of charges of disobedience to the order and discipline of the United Methodist Church for uniting two women in a holy union service the previous September. He won his case by arguing that the prohibition against such ceremonies did not carry the weight of church law. His argument hinged on the fact that the prohibition is contained in the Social Principles section of the denomination's Book of Discipline and not in the main section, where the rest of church law is defined.

The Judicial Council, which serves as the denomination's supreme court, closed that loophole last August, when it ruled that the prohibition is enforceable as church law and that violating it makes a minister liable to charges.

Though he was acquitted, Creech was not reappointed pastor of First United Methodist Church in Omaha, Neb., where the controversial ceremony had been held. He took a leave of absence last June and returned to North Carolina, where he had served previously.

"I'm devoting my time to writing a book and traveling around the country to speak," he said. "That's what I understand my vocation to be."

Creech's book is about the struggle the church is having with sexuality and being open to people of all orientations, he said. He plans to have it finished within this calendar year. However, his agent tells him it will take another year to publish the book, so it won't be out in time for the 2000 General Conference, where the issue of holy unions is likely to be raised.

He said the trial court decision in the Dell case "in no way changes my mind or commitments."