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Dell plans new role as director of In All Things Charity

By United Methodist News Service

The Rev. Gregory Dell, convicted in a clergy trial for performing a same-sex ceremony, will take on a new role when his suspension becomes effective this summer.

The pastor of Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago will become the director of In All Things Charity, an unofficial network of clergy members and others in the denomination who support full inclusiveness of gays, lesbians and bisexuals in the life of the church. The Broadway church, which has been the base for In All Things Charity, created the new job for Dell.

Dell will spend three-quarters of his time as director of In All Things Charity. The remainder of his new position will involve acting as a consultant on an as-needed basis for whomever is appointed interim pastor at Broadway.

"I want to make it clear that it is my intention and my promise not to violate the suspension," Dell told United Methodist News Service. "That is to say I will not be the 'pastor behind the curtain' who is pastoring the congregation through someone else. The interim pastor will be the pastor at Broadway United Methodist Church."

A trial court of 13 clergy members from the Northern Illinois Annual Conference found Dell guilty on March 26 of disobeying the order and discipline of the United Methodist Church. Dell had performed a holy union service for two male church members Sept. 19.

The Judicial Council, the United Methodist Church's supreme court, had declared in August that a statement in the denomination's *Book of Discipline* barring such unions carried the weight of church law, and that violating the stricture constituted a chargeable offense. The *Discipline* states that ceremonies celebrating same-sex unions shall not be performed by United Methodist ministers nor in United Methodist churches.

During the two-day trial, Dell argued that he was faithful to the order and discipline of the church, and that he had performed holy union ceremonies in the context of being in ministry to the whole community. Broadway's area has a large gay population, and one-third of the church's 180-member congregation is homosexual.

Dell was suspended effective July 5. At that point, he will step into his new role as director

of In All Things Charity.

He has been involved with In All Things Charity since its beginning in January 1997. In the last two years, more than 1,430 clergy and over 500 laity have endorsed the organization and its "statement of conscience," protesting the church's policies regarding sexual orientation. Broadway adopted In All Things Charity as a ministry, with Dell serving as the unofficial coordinator. The movement hasn't had a staff.

Until now, instead of promoting the group strongly, Dell and others have chosen to work through three already-established groups that are dealing with same-sex issues. Those groups, all unofficial United Methodist organizations, are Affirmation, the Methodist Federation for Social Action and Reconciling Congregations. They are working together in preparing for General Conference, the top lawmaking body of the United Methodist Church, which will meet May 2-12, 2000, in Cleveland.

In his new role, Dell said he will work to raise awareness of what's at stake for the character of the United Methodist Church, as well as for gay, lesbian and bisexual clergy and laity in the denomination, as decisions are made at General Conference.

"It is very clear that there are many United Methodists who represent a spectrum of opinion around issues of sexual orientation, who are alarmed that the church may be moving in the direction of becoming a doctrinal denomination rather than a confessing church," he said. " ... There is this very clear emerging issue about the character of the denomination that is being decided to some extent around the issue of sexual orientation."

One of Dell's initial tasks will be raising money for In All Things Charity. Some support will come from remaining funds that Broadway had raised for Dell's defense in the trial.

Dell said he will make himself available to go anywhere in the country to speak, organize or use his skills in other ways. Exactly what form the organizing would take is unclear and would be determined in dialogue with other people, he said. He doesn't foresee at this point creating another structure in addition to Affirmation, MFSA and Reconciling Congregation, if it's not needed. However, a national board of directors for In All Things Charity probably is needed, he said.

The other part of Dell's new job will involve being available as a consultant to whomever Bishop C. Joseph Sprague appoints as interim pastor.

"It was a way of our saying, while we absolutely are going to honor the decision of the trial court as we must, we are very concerned about the ongoing ministry of Broadway United Methodist Church and the future life and ministry of Greg Dell," Sprague said.

"What we want to do is support an interim situation that both honors the decision of the trial court, supports the Broadway congregation and keeps open as many options as possible for the future ministry of the Rev. Dell," the bishop said. "So this particular strategy is an interim strategy."

Sprague will appoint an interim pastor to serve from the start of Dell's suspension until either the General Conference or the beginning of the next conference year in July 2000.

Much depends on what happens at General Conference – that is, whether or not the church law regarding the prohibition against holy unions is changed. If it is changed and Dell's suspension is lifted, he would be reappointed to Broadway, Sprague said. However, if that doesn't happen, then someone else would be appointed permanent pastor.

"This is, in some ways, a holding action that is an attempt to be fair to all concerned and to honor the decision of the trial court," Sprague said.

Dell said his presence will also help provide continuity at a "very painful time" for the congregation. "There is a lot of anger, a lot of sense of betrayal and a lot of grief."

Increasingly, interim pastors are being appointed in unusual situations where there's concern for the long-term health of a congregation, Sprague said. "For example, we have increasingly used an interim behind a long-term pastor to provide a transition before a permanent successor is appointed, or we've put interims in where there has been controversy of one kind or another."

As for his own future, Dell said he feels called to be a pastor. "It's certainly where I find the greatest joy and fullness of being a Christian and a human being.

"I do not want to see that interrupted beyond a year," he added. If the suspension lasts longer, he would have to consider moving his ministry to another denomination, he said.

With the suspension date drawing closer, Dell's workload has remained heavy. "We do a membership series about three or four times a year, and we have a lot of folks join this church, but frankly the spring session has been the low-attended series," usually drawing six to eight people. However, this spring, 30 new people have attended, he said.

"All of a sudden, things are very busy."