

March 4, 1999

## Greg Dell trial: questions and answers

By United Methodist News Service

Questions and answers about the clergy trial of the Rev. Greg Dell, beginning March 25 in Downers Grove, Ill., were prepared by United Methodist News Service.

### What is a church trial?

A trial in the United Methodist Church occurs when a complaint is filed against an individual -- in this case a clergyman -- and specified committees have reviewed the charges and recommended a trial.

Most complaints against clergy are resolved in the supervisory process, making a trial unnecessary. According to the church's *Book of Discipline*, "Church trials are to be regarded as an expedient of last resort." *The Book of Discipline* contains the bylaws of the United Methodist Church.

While official policies and procedures are determined by The United Methodist Church as a whole through its General Conference, clergy in the United States are accountable to one of 66 annual (regional) conferences in which they have membership. A jury includes 13 clergy members from the annual conference, with nine votes necessary to convict.

### Who is charged with what?

[The Rev. Greg Dell](#), pastor of Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago, will be on trial. He is charged with disobeying the "order and discipline" of the United Methodist Church, one of 10 chargeable offenses listed in the denomination's *Book of Discipline*.

Dell performed a union ceremony for two men Sept. 19. The denomination's top legislative body added a statement to the church's Social Principles at its last meeting in 1996 saying, "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches." There were conflicting opinions about the status of this sentence after it was adopted by the General Conference in 1996, but the church's nine-member Judicial Council ruled in August 1998 that it is a chargeable offense and has the force of church law. The council is the denomination's supreme court.

Dell said he has conducted 33 services of holy union for gay and lesbian couples during

the past 18 years of his 30-year pastoral ministry. He also declared publicly that he "will never stop doing such services as long as I have my ordination." He contends that to refuse such services is to discriminate against the approximately 30 percent of his congregation that is gay.

## **How does the widely publicized 1998 trial of Nebraska clergyman Jimmy Creech relate to this case?**

Before the Judicial Council issued its opinion about the statement against same-sex unions, a church trial was held in Kearney, Neb., March 11-13, 1998, for the [Rev. Jimmy Creech](#). He had performed a covenant ceremony for two women at First United Methodist Church in Omaha Sept. 14, 1997..

Eight of the 13 trial jurors voted to convict Creech of violating the order and discipline of the church. He was acquitted since nine votes were necessary for conviction. The Dell trial in the Northern Illinois Annual Conference will be the first since the Judicial Council issued its ruling on the matter. Creech and Dell were friends in the Duke University Divinity School class of 1970. Trial officer (judge) for the Creech trial was retired Bishop Leroy Hodapp, Evansville, Ind.

## **Who made the formal complaint against Dell?**

Bishop Joseph Sprague of the church's Chicago Area (Northern Illinois Annual Conference) filed a complaint against Dell Oct. 12. Sprague has publicly stated that he disagrees with the church's position against same-sex unions but made the formal complaint because he felt duty-bound to do so in his official capacity as bishop.

## **When and where will the trial be held?**

The trial will begin at 9:30 A.M. Thursday, March 25, at First United Methodist Church, Downers Grove, Ill., a suburb west and slightly south of downtown Chicago. It is not known when the trial will end. The Creech trial took three days.

The first major agenda item for the trial will be the selection of a trial court (jury) which could take several hours. Members of the jury are chosen from ordained elders in the Northern Illinois Annual Conference.

## **Who will preside over the trial?**

Presiding over the Dell trial will be retired Bishop Jack Tuell of Des Moines, Wash. (not Iowa), who was an attorney before becoming an ordained clergyman. Tuell has presided

over several church trials.

The Rev. Stephen Williams, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Franklin Park, Ill., will be the counsel for the church, assisted by James Geoly. Counsel for Dell will be the Rev. Larry Pickens, pastor of Maple Park United Methodist Church in Chicago, assisted by Theodore M. Swain and Atonious L.K. Porch.

### **Will the trial be open to spectators and the news media?**

According to the church's *Book of Discipline*, a trial is closed unless the respondent (defendant) requests in writing that it be open. It is expected that this trial will be open, but no official announcement has yet been made.

### **What if Dell is found guilty? Not guilty?**

A conviction could result in penalties ranging from the withdrawal of his ministerial credentials to a "lesser penalty." If found not guilty, it is likely that he would continue his ministry at Broadway United Methodist Church, retaining all the privileges of a clergy person in full connection with the annual conference.

### **What is the denomination's official policy regarding homosexuality?**

See the World Wide Web site listed at the top of this story.

---

For assistance, news reporters may contact:

Linda Rhodes, director of communications for the Northern Illinois Annual Conference and key contact person, (312) 541-1602, e-mail: [linda\\_rhodes@msn.com](mailto:linda_rhodes@msn.com).

Covering the trial for United Methodist News Service will be Linda Bloom director of the agency's New York office, and Tim Tanton, news editor of the agency with headquarters in Nashville, Tenn. Questions in advance of the trial may be directed to the UMNS home office in Nashville: (615) 742-5470 or e-mail [newsdesk@umcom.umc.org](mailto:newsdesk@umcom.umc.org). Staff photographer Mike DuBose will be shooting at the event.

Hour-to-hour UMNS coverage of the trial will appear on the Web site.

**Spokespeople:** The United Methodist Church is intentionally organized so that no one individual, officer or staff member has the sole authority to speak for the denomination. Any individual can speak for himself/herself. No single building or office is understood to be the central headquarters of the church. All bishops of the church have equal status. The only group that speaks officially for the church is the international General

Conference, a legislative assembly of nearly 1,000 delegates, which meets every four years. Its decisions and actions are recorded in the church's *Book of Discipline* and *Book of Resolutions*.

Bishop Sharon Zimmerman Rader of the Wisconsin Area is serving a four-year term as secretary of the United Methodist Council of Bishops. Bishop George Bashore, Pittsburgh Area, is serving a one-year term as president..

Members of the Judicial Council, like members of the U.S. Supreme Court, do not comment on their rulings.

Chicago Area Bishop Sprague has announced that he will not comment on the Dell case until after the trial verdict.

News media representatives looking for comments may want to contact church leaders in their own area. Most annual conferences have staff communicators who can help reporters and others contact appropriate people for responses.. UMNS can provide phone numbers.

### **Organizations with special interest in the trial:**

Leaders of several unofficial organizations that have particular interest in this trial might be available for comment.

Reconciling Congregations, a coalition of United Methodist congregations and organizations that publicize the fact that they are open to full participation of all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation. Executive director: Mark Bowman, Chicago, (773) 736-5526. E-mail: [mark@rcp.org](mailto:mark@rcp.org)

Transforming Congregations, an organization that believes the practice of homosexuality is a sin and that individuals can be "transformed" or changed through the grace of Jesus Christ. Executive director: Jim Gentile, Penndel, Pa., (215) 757-5513; quarterly newsletter editor: Robert L. Kuyper, Bakersfield, Calif., (805) 325-0785.

[Affirmation](#), a caucus of United Methodists for lesbian, gay, bisexual and "transgendered" concerns. Spokespeople: the Rev. Jeanne G. Knepper, Portland, Ore., (503)760-4215, and Morris Floyd, Minneapolis, (612) 824-5021. E-mail: [umaffirmation@yahoo.com](mailto:umaffirmation@yahoo.com).

Good News, a conservative renewal movement within the church that publishes a regular magazine by the same name. President and publisher: the Rev. James Heidinger, Wilmore, Ky., (606) 858-4661; chairman of the board: the Rev. Philip Granger, Kokomo, Ind., (765) 864-0655.

[CORNET](#), an offshoot of the Affirmation Caucus organized specifically to "address unjust practices in the United Methodist Church concerning same-gender covenant services (and) to educate people about this concern." Spokesman: Morris Floyd, Minneapolis, (612) 824-5021. E-mail: [umaffirmation@yahoo.com](mailto:umaffirmation@yahoo.com).

Confessing Movement, an organization of individuals and congregations launched in April 1994 who "pledge unequivocal allegiance to Jesus Christ" and who "contend for the apostolic faith" within the denomination.. Executive director: Patricia Miller, Indianapolis, (317) 356-9729; president: the Rev. John Ed Mathison, Montgomery, Ala., (334) 272-8622.