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## Holy union participant voices hurt, anger over Dell verdict

**By United Methodist News Service**

The two men whose holy union ceremony led to the March 25-26 trial of Chicago pastor Greg Dell are angry over the verdict, but the experience has strengthened their relationship, one of the couple said.

"We feel very hurt and angry," said Keith Eccarius, a systems analyst and member of Dell's Broadway United Methodist Church. He and partner Karl Reinhardt have a lot of emotions that they need to work through, he said.

"We've been out there for so long now that we need to get back to our lives," Eccarius said in a March 29 telephone interview. "This issue is not going away, and we understand that, and we need a break right now."

Eccarius and his partner, Karl Reinhardt, declared their commitment to each other in a Sept. 19 holy union ceremony performed by Dell. The preceding month, the United Methodist Church's Judicial Council declared that a prohibition in the *Book of Discipline* against such ceremonies carried the weight of law and made any pastor who violated it liable to being charged. The stricture says that ceremonies celebrating homosexual unions shall not be conducted by United Methodist ministers in United Methodist churches.

Last fall's holy union ceremony led to the March 25-26 clergy trial of Dell in the Chicago suburb of Downers Grove. The trial court of 13 clergy members from the Northern Illinois Annual Conference found Dell guilty of disobedience to the order and discipline of the United Methodist Church. The penalty: suspension, effective July 5, unless Dell submits a signed pledge not to perform any more holy union ceremonies – or until the denomination's law might be changed.

The months leading up to the trial have been difficult for Eccarius and Reinhardt. But the experience has "made us stronger," Eccarius said. "We have to be there for each other, and we are there for each other."

The Dell case has affected Eccarius and Reinhardt in other ways. They strongly suspect it is the reason for Reinhardt's contract as a high school English teacher not being renewed. Although all of Reinhardt's performance reviews have been "outstanding" and

he has a good relationship with the students, the North Chicago Public School System told him recently that his contract wouldn't be renewed for next year, Eccarius said.

Both Eccarius and Reinhardt testified on Dell's behalf during the trial. The trial court "seemed to be very compassionate," Eccarius said. "When the verdict came down, and more importantly the penalty, I was totally shocked.

"The verdict itself was not terribly surprising. The penalty was what was surprising," he said. "In a lot of people's minds ... the penalty was very cowardly on the part of the trial court. They basically, in order to avoid making a definitive ruling, dumped it back on Greg's lap. They're basically telling him that it's his responsibility to decide what to do. That, to me, was very cowardly."

Though glad that the trial court didn't remove Dell's credentials altogether, Eccarius said "they've pretty much done that to him" anyway. "They know how strong Greg believes in this issue. They know Greg will not compromise what he believes," he said.

"In our eyes, we look at it as by not taking away his ordination, there are still options there for ministry," he said. "But the penalty they did give him was just as severe in a lot of peoples' eyes."

Eccarius said he has talked with Reinhardt and others in the gay community, and "none of us would feel that Greg was abandoning us if he were to sign that paper that he needed to sign."

Broadway, which is 30 percent gay, is united behind Dell. Last October, the church's administrative council met and voted unanimously to support the pastor, Eccarius said.

"Our hope would be that Greg would not leave, but Greg's pretty adamant right now about not signing any document," he said.

Facing the prospect of Dell's departure, the church members are aware of the need to talk to Bishop C. Joseph Sprague, who leads the Chicago Area.

"All we are hoping for is that our bishop will be sensitive to our community," Eccarius said, "and the worst thing that the bishop could do is assign a pastor that doesn't share a sensitivity to the diversity of our community because that would destroy Broadway."

Sprague told United Methodist News Service after the trial that the conference would be sensitive to Broadway's needs in the appointment process.

Eccarius said the church needs to determine how best to move ahead toward General Conference, which meets next year in Cleveland to set and change denomination law.

The issue of holy unions is sure to be on the agenda and probably will be the most hotly debated topic of the gathering.

In his Palm Sunday sermon, March 28, Dell encouraged the Broadway congregation to push ahead. His topic: "We've only just begun."

"It was obviously very emotional; it was very uplifting," Eccarius said of the Palm Sunday worship service. "One of the things that Greg said was the pain that we're feeling is ours and no one should deny us that pain and that anger and frustration, but we have to use that to move ahead, and we can't stop here. We've only just begun."

As to whether the verdict will result in gays and lesbians leaving the church, Eccarius said: "There's always going to be that possibility. There are people that come to Broadway that have no religious affiliation in their past. There are people that have been in the Methodist church for years. You are always going to have a small percentage of the people that have reached their point of feeling that they can't handle it anymore. But by and large, we are united, and we will continue on."