

Methodist Pastor Faces Trial for Uniting 2 Men

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March 25, 1999

For the second time in a year, a United Methodist Church minister will face an ecclesiastical trial on a charge that he violated a church law against ministers' officiating at same-sex unions.

The minister, the Rev. Greg Dell, 53, has been formally charged with disobedience to Methodism's "order and discipline" for having blessed the union of two men in his church, Broadway United Methodist Church, here in Chicago last September. The trial will begin on Thursday, with 13 ministers acting as a jury and a retired bishop as judge, in a church sanctuary in suburban Downers Grove. A verdict could come on Saturday. Conviction could lead to loss of his ministerial credentials.

In its largest sense, the trial illustrates a national controversy, in both religious and secular spheres, over same-sex unions. Even while gay men and lesbians have filed lawsuits in states like Hawaii and Vermont seeking legal recognition of their unions, the Federal Government and a majority of states have passed laws against recognizing the legality of such bonds.

Many religious groups have been wrestling with questions of how to relate to the gay men and lesbians in their midst. But while much of the controversy in Protestant denominations has turned on whether to

ordain noncelibate homosexuals as clergy members, controversy over same-sex unions has become particularly acute lately among the country's 8.5 million United Methodists, who constitute the nation's second-largest Protestant denomination, after the Southern Baptist Convention.

In part, this is because the church, whose members include Hillary Rodham Clinton, Gov. George W. Bush of Texas and former Senator Bob Dole, is theologically diverse, including liberal and conservative wings, as well as a broad center. It also lacks a single, central authority, like the Pope, but at the same time does not permit its congregations the sort of autonomy found within Jewish synagogue organizations and some other Protestant denominations.

In 1996, the church's top policy-making body, the General Conference, voted to place the following sentence in the church's rule book: "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches."

Because the sentence was not inserted among the book's specific regulations, but in a section detailing advisory stands on issues like the use of tobacco and alcohol, some questioned whether it was binding.

In March 1998, the Rev. Jimmy Creech, who had blessed the union of two women at his church in Omaha, was narrowly acquitted in a church trial after his lawyers argued that the sentence was advisory. (Mr. Creech's bishop did not reappoint him to his pulpit, however.) In August, the denomination's highest court, the Judicial Council, ruled that the sentence had the force of law.

The next month, Mr. Dell blessed the union of Karl Reinhardt, 33, a high school English teacher, and Keith Eccarius, 41, a computer systems analyst, at a service attended by about 150 people at Broadway Church. Mr. Eccarius had been a member there for eight

years. He and Mr. Reinhardt, who met at a Christmas party in 1996, had asked Mr. Dell to officiate at their union a year before the ceremony was conducted.

Within Mr. Dell's case some would discern an additional ethical question. Can a clergy member violate a denominational law if he or she believes the pastoral care of an individual requires it? Or does such law-breaking, especially in a highly contentious issue like this one, threaten the integrity of the institution to which that clergy member belongs?

Mr. Dell, who is married with an adult son, says about 30 percent of the people in his urban, 181-member congregation are gay men and lesbians, and it would be discriminatory not to offer them the ministerial services he provides to heterosexual members.

"The defense will be, the only way I can obey the order and discipline of the denomination is to violate this rule in this context," Mr. Dell said.

But the Rev. Stephen C. Williams, who has agreed to prosecute the case for the church's Northern Illinois Conference, said the issue was one of a minister's being accountable to the vows he took to uphold church rules. "He's free to try to change church law," Mr. Williams said of Mr. Dell. "He's not free to break it."

Mr. Dell, who attended Duke University Divinity School with Mr. Creech in the 1960's and remains a friend of his, said he had officiated at 33 same-sex unions since 1981. He does not call them weddings, because such ceremonies lack legal sanction. Among other clergy members here, Mr. Dell has a reputation as a supporter of liberal social causes, an inclination he traces to the influence of his childhood pastor, a Methodist minister in suburban Chicago who spoke out against racism in the early 1960's.

After the Judicial Council ruled that the pronouncement on

homosexual union had the force of church law, Mr. Reinhardt and Mr. Eccarius asked Mr. Dell if he still felt he could officiate. Mr. Reinhardt said they would have "fully understood" had Mr. Dell decided they needed to find another minister. "I did it as an act of pastoral ministry," Mr. Dell said in the interview. "I didn't do it to raise attention to this issue."

In October, Bishop C. Joseph Sprague, head of the Northern Illinois Conference, filed a complaint against Mr. Dell, saying he was bound as Bishop to uphold church law, but also saying he personally disagreed with the stand against same-sex unions. Bishop Sprague has said he will make no further comment until after the trial.

Mr. Dell said he saw the trial as a test of "the nature of ministry," the latitude a clergy member is allowed in working with a particular congregation.

One of Mr. Dell's critics offered a somewhat similar appraisal of what is involved in this case.

"It's really about issues of conscience, both on Greg's side and the side of others," said that critic, the Rev. Scott Field, a Methodist minister in nearby Naperville, Ill., who also serves on the board of Good News, an evangelical caucus within the United Methodist Church.

Mr. Field said he saw a "collision between moral visions" in the case. For Methodists on both sides of the issue, he asked, "can we still walk together?"