

Minister Must Wait For Ruling

August 10, 1999|By David Mendell, Tribune Staff Writer.

2-3 minutes

An appeals panel of the United Methodist Church decided Monday to take 30 to 60 days before rendering a judgment on whether to reinstate Rev. Gregory Dell, who was suspended from the ministry for presiding over a homosexual union.

But regardless of the outcome, Dell maintained that the issue of whether the church should sanction gay marriages will not go away.

"Whether they deny or uphold this appeal, the struggle will go on," Dell said after a hearing before the nine-member committee of clergy and lay church members held Monday morning at the Radisson Hotel in Rosemont.

In March, a jury of northern Illinois ministers found Dell guilty of violating church law by performing a ceremony uniting two gay men last year. The jury suspended Dell from his ministry at Broadway United Methodist Church in Lakeview, effective July 5, unless he submitted a document promising not to perform homosexual unions in the future.

Dell, saying he feels an obligation to minister to all people regardless of sexual orientation, refused to submit such a document.

That refusal was the basis for the argument used by a church minister against Dell's reinstatement. He said Dell plainly is violating church law and should not be permitted to minister again until he agrees to

follow it.

"Pastor Dell could end his suspension today as he could have ended it three months ago--simply by saying, 'Yes, I disagree with the law, but I will uphold the law,' " said Stephen Williams, counsel for the church, at a news conference following the hearing.

"There is no room for doubt about what the church expects from its clergy," Williams said.

Dell's counsel, Rev. Larry Pickens, said Dell has a responsibility to be inclusive in his ministry. He noted that nearly a third of the parishioners at Broadway United are homosexual. Pickens also asked for a time limit to Dell's suspension.

"Clearly it was not a defiant act, but it had to do with a pastor's clear understanding of what his responsibilities are to his parishioners," Pickens said after the hearing.

The church banned same-sex marriages about a month before Dell performed the ceremony.