



Northern Illinois elects Dell delegate to church's top meeting

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By United Methodist News Service

The Rev. Greg Dell, convicted in a March church trial for performing a same-sex union, has been elected as a delegate to the United Methodist Church's top legislative body, along with the pastor who defended him.

Dell, who was suspended from his pastoral duties effective July 5, and the Rev. Larry Pickens, who served as defense counsel during the trial, were elected among the delegates to represent the Northern Illinois Annual Conference at the General Conference. The lawmaking body will meet May 2-12, 2000, in Cleveland.

The annual conference, meeting in Dekalb, Ill., elected a slate of candidates who support changing the denomination's official proscriptions against homosexuality, according to Linda Rhodes, director of communications for Northern Illinois. The actions of the members attending the June 5-8 annual gathering have been viewed by many as a protest against the restrictions on the participation of homosexuals in church life, she said.

The conference elected 12 delegates (six clergy and six lay members). Dell was the sixth clergy member elected.

"The trial was easier than this election in a lot of ways," Dell wrote in an open letter to friends and supporters. "But the election should not be misunderstood." He said that while the conference's actions were "to some extent about me as a candidate," it was about much more.

"It was about a vision of the church and a vision of faithfulness. And it was about having the disciplined commitment to bring that vision to reality," he said.

Before the balloting, Northern Illinois Bishop C. Joseph Sprague ruled that Dell was eligible to be elected because his suspension had not begun. He also emphasized that Dell cannot be seated at the General Conference if his suspension is in effect next May.

Another 12 clergy and lay delegates will join the General Conference

delegates at the North Central Jurisdictional Conference in July 2000. The primary business for this regional meeting, held every four years, is the election and appointment of bishops.

A trial court of 13 Northern Illinois clergy members found Dell guilty on March 26 of disobeying the order and discipline of the United Methodist Church. Dell, pastor of Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago, had performed a holy union service for two male members Sept. 19.

The Judicial Council, the denomination'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 trial, Dell argued that he was faithful to the church's order and discipline, 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.

When the suspension becomes effective next month, Dell 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 is the headquarters for the group.

Dell also will act as a consultant on an as-needed basis for the interim pastor at Broadway. He has promised not to violate his suspension and to let the pastor run the church.

Dell 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.

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, as decisions are made at General Conference.

If Dell's suspension is in place next May, an alternate delegate will take his seat in the Northern Illinois General Conference delegation. The two clergy alternate delegates are Myron McCoy, pastor at St. Mark United Methodist Church in Chicago, and Margaret Ann Williams, an associate executive

director of Chicago's Marcy-Newberry Association.

According to Dell's letter, he emerged on the first ballot in the fourth position. After several changes in positioning, he rose to the lead in the sixth ballot, but he was unable to get a majority of the votes needed from the 1,000 lay and clergy members. A log jam in the balloting was broken on the 17th ballot, after McCoy requested that conference members not vote for him but vote with integrity to elect the final delegate. Dell received 172 votes, the required number for election.

Northern Illinois members also approved a General Conference petition calling for the deletion of the phrase in the *Discipline* that states that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."

In a related issue, a resolution was passed encouraging the conference to offer pastoral ministry to homosexuals. It called on members "to acknowledge the commitment of two homosexual persons to be in loving and mutually beneficial relationships with each other and with God."

Before the resolution was approved, Sprague ruled it in order because it did not call for a ceremony or blessing service for homosexual unions, Rhodes said. Displeased with the ruling, the Rev. Kent Svendsen, pastor of Reynolds United Methodist Church, Ashton, Ill., is appealing to the Judicial Council.

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