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United Methodist pastor faces disobedience trial

By United Methodist News Service

See also: [United Methodist Pastor Faces Trial for Conducting Service of Holy Union](#)

The Chicago pastor who performed a same-sex union ceremony last September has been formally charged with disobedience to the United Methodist Church.

A church trial will begin March 25 at First United Methodist Church in Downers Grove, Ill. Retired United Methodist Bishop Jack Tuell of Greenbank, Wash., will preside. Thirteen clergy will be selected to serve on the jury.

The charge against the Rev. Gregory Dell, 53, pastor of Broadway United Methodist Church, resulted from a complaint filed by Chicago Bishop Joseph Sprague in October. A committee on investigation for the Northern Illinois Annual (regional) Conference -- of which Dell has been a member in good standing since his ordination in 1970 -- made the charge official after a Feb. 23 meeting.

The Rev. Stephen C. Williams, who is serving as church counsel on the case, said he was "saddened but not surprised" by the committee's actions. "It is tragic when a member of the clergy is charged with publicly and willfully violating the covenant he has vowed to uphold," he added in a prepared statement.

The Rev. Larry Pickens, who is counsel for Dell and pastor of Maple Park United Methodist Church in Chicago, also was not surprised by the committee's action. "It was the only decision they could make," he said, noting church's current legal prohibition against same-sex unions.

According to the committee, the charge of "disobedience to the order and discipline of the United Methodist Church" is supported by:

A statement in Paragraph 65c of the denomination's Book of Discipline that prohibits homosexual unions from being conducted by United Methodist ministers or in United Methodist churches.

An Aug. 8, 1998, ruling by the Judicial Council, the denomination's highest court, upholding that statement as church law.

The fact that Dell was asked by two male members of his church to perform a

holy union service in late summer of 1997 and agreed to do so.

The holding of the service at the Broadway church on Sept. 19, 1998.

Dell's awareness at the time that the Judicial Council had ruled the prohibition of such services "was binding church law."

"We are now required to act with integrity on behalf of the church," said Williams, pastor of First United Methodist Church in Franklin Park, Ill. "Our judicial process will ask a jury of Rev. Dell's peers to determine if he broke the church law which prohibits celebrating homosexual union ceremonies and, if so, what penalty might be imposed for deliberately breaking that law and disobeying the order and discipline of the church."

A Nebraska pastor, the Rev. Jimmy Creech, was tried and acquitted on the same charge of disobedience in March 1998. However, this will be the first trial regarding the conducting of same-sex unions to occur after the Judicial Council ruling.

Pickens considers Dell's case to be a beginning point to help the United Methodist Church define the "legal parameters" of the issue. "Essentially, we see this as being a clarifying opportunity," he explained.

Williams disputes that notion, saying Dell and Pickens are making "an end run" around church law.

In his statement, Williams noted that the church "is a guardian of moral and ethical teaching. Fundamental to all people of faith is the idea that choices have consequences."

But fundamental to Dell and Pickens, beyond the legal issue, is the obligation of a pastor to minister to all of his community. In Dell's opinion, that includes refusing to distinguish between people – or couples – "based on their identity."

Pickens pointed to Paragraph 204 of the Book of Discipline, which states: "Each local church shall have a definite evangelistic, nurture and witness responsibility for its members and the surrounding area and a missional outreach responsibility to the local and global community. It shall be responsible for ministering to all its members, wherever they live, and for persons who choose it as their church."

For Dell, the local community is a mostly young, diverse mixture that includes a substantial gay population. Broadway's current membership of 169 is about one-third gays and lesbians. "It's a vital community and neighborhood," he said. "The church is a place that's full of life."

Refusing to discriminate against couples willing to adhere to his standards for pre-

ceremony counseling and commitment, Dell confirmed he has conducted 33 same-sex unions over an 18-year period. Before the September ceremony, there had never been a complaint or response.

"Those were congregations that really saw it as part of their ministry," he said.

Dell believes that as more gays and lesbians became vocal about their acceptance in the church, others who would like to exclude them "have upped the ante by passing more and more restrictive legislation."

"I haven't changed my ministry," he said. "It's clear the legislation has changed. I don't know if the heart of the United Methodist Church has changed."

Dell added that he does not expect everyone to support same-sex unions.

"I can live in a denomination where there's a diversity of opinion. We've done that for years on other issues," he pointed out. "We're saying give us room to minister and give us room to stay in the dialogue."