

Gay man in UMC case welcomed as member this time: Conflicts in membership criteria

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The openly gay Virginia man who was at the center of a high-profile court case after he was denied membership in a United Methodist church has been accepted into membership under the church's new pastor.

Barry Burkholder, current pastor of South Hill (Virginia) United Methodist Church, said he welcomed the man into membership during services March 11 because he "met all the requirements" and professed a "belief in Jesus Christ." The new pastor accepted the man's transfer of membership from a Baptist church, though the man was already worshiping at the Methodist church.

In a 2005 ruling, the Methodists' highest court sided with South Hill's former pastor, Edward H. Johnson, who refused to admit the gay man as a church member. The controversial decision upheld the right of local pastors to make such decisions.

Johnson—who was put on involuntary leave by a vote of fellow clergy but has since been reinstated—was eventually placed with a congregation in Dahlgren, according to officials of the church's Virginia Conference.

Burkholder said the man (who has not been named publicly) approached him about church membership last July. "He was sincere," Burkholder said. "I know that as we talked he satisfied me that he believes that Jesus Christ died for his sins."

Susan S. Garrett, director of connectional ministries at the Virginia Conference, headquartered just outside Richmond, said the membership was a "local pastor decision."

"The authority now falls on me," Burkholder said. "It is very important to know that the bishop didn't impose anything on me or suggest what I needed to do in this situation."

Burkholder said he feels that there was “not a major disconnect” among congregants concerning the man’s membership. “We felt the time was appropriate,” he said. “For the majority of the congregation he was warmly received.”

Bishop Charlene Kammerer told United Methodist News Service that she was unaware of the latest development in the case until Burkholder contacted her afterward.

“So what this conveyed to me was that another United Methodist pastor in the Virginia Conference—through his own getting to know the man and counseling with him spiritually and also with working with other leaders in the church—felt very comfortable inviting him to join,” Kammerer said.

The Methodists’ Judicial Council ruling on the Virginia case was the subject of a denominational consultation last February in Nashville involving pastors, bishops, seminary deans and denominational staff. The consultation focused on the nature, practice and integrity of the church’s leadership, said the news service.

The ruling uncovered conflicts in church membership criteria, ecclesiology and the authority given to pastors, leading some church leaders to expect that the issues will continue to be debated across United Methodism. *—Religion News Service*