

PCUSA minister rebuked for lesbian wedding: Mildest form of punishment

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A midlevel court of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has overturned a lower court ruling and declared that an activist lesbian minister should be rebuked for conducting a same-sex wedding ceremony.

The 6-2 decision against Janie Spahr was made August 18. Spahr, 65, who was set to retire from the ministry at the end of August, said she was saddened by the decision.

While a rebuke is the denomination's mildest form of punishment, Spahr, of San Raphael, California, told Presbyterian News Service that she would continue performing marriage ceremonies for same-sex couples—which could lead to further discipline.

“These couples and many like them have found a sacred trust in their love for each other,” she said. “This reversal of the presbytery’s decision promotes a belief that somehow this love is less than valid.”

Spahr was originally charged in presiding at the 2005 wedding of two women near Guerneville, California. The denomination allows pastors to preside at same-sex blessing ceremonies as long as they are not treated as marriage rites.

The lower court had cleared Spahr in March 2006 of wrongdoing, saying she was acting “within her right of conscience.” The higher court, however, disagreed.

“Regardless of the expression of conscience . . . she may not circumvent the standards of the church,” ruled the Permanent Judicial Commission of the church’s Synod of the Pacific, adding that “her actions were contrary to the constitution as it is authoritatively interpreted.”

Spahr and one of her attorneys, Sara Taylor of San Francisco, vowed to appeal the latest ruling to the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission, the PCUSA’s highest court. The earliest the case could be heard is next spring, Taylor said. –

