

PCUSA cleric to appeal same-sex marriage rebuke

by [Chris Herlinger](#) in the [October 5, 2010](#) issue

A retired California Presbyterian minister, rebuked by the church after being charged with violating her ordination vows by performing marriages of same-sex couples, plans to appeal the ruling, which she said sent contradictory messages about the church's support of gay rights.

The August 27 ruling by a court of the Redwoods Presbytery, a church district of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Napa, California, reprimanded Jane Spahr, 68, for violating church policy on same-sex marriage by conducting marriage ceremonies for 16 same-sex couples between June and November 2008. Same-sex marriage was legal in California during that period.

At the same time, the court commended Spahr for "her prophetic ministry" in supporting "people who seek the dignity, freedom and respect that they have been denied." The court noted that the Presbyterian Church's own rules offer "conflicting and even contradictory rules and regulations that are against the Gospel."

While the six-member court rebuked Spahr on three charges, she was acquitted of a charge of failing "to further the peace, unity and purity of the church."

In an interview on August 29, Spahr said she was "stunned" by the decision, having expected a different outcome given predictions that the commission might vote in her favor and because of what she called heartfelt testimonies by couples who testified on her behalf. "The law here is wrong," said Spahr. "It was not a just decision." Being found guilty and then commended for her prophetic ministry, Spahr said, shows the "church is in great conflict and playing it out on our lives."

Spahr had already faced a denominational court in 2008 over whether she broke church rules on same-sex marriage. In the 2008 trial, Spahr was acquitted, with the court ruling that a couple's wedding ceremony was not recognized by either the church or the state.

A new dilemma faces some Presbyterian pastors who live and work in the five states and the District of Columbia where same-sex marriage is legal. At least a dozen Presbyterian pastors in those areas are marrying same-sex couples under the radar, said Pam Byers, executive director of the liberal Covenant Network of Presbyterians.

Under PCUSA law, pastors are allowed to bless same-gender unions but are not permitted to call them marriages or represent them as such. The Presbyterian biennial assembly in July voted to maintain the current definition of marriage—between a man and a woman—in its constitution. —ENI