

UMC suspends minister for performing same-sex union

News in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue

A United Methodist minister was suspended for 20 days by a church court in Wisconsin for performing a same-sex union in 2009, a breach of denominational rules. After deliberating seven hours, a jury of local United Methodist clergy voted 9–4 on June 23 to suspend Amy DeLong of Osceola, Wisconsin.

The closely watched trial—presaging another contentious quadrennial United Methodist legislative meeting next April 24–May 4 in Tampa, Florida—resulted in unusual rulings. For the first time in 20 years, the conviction of a minister conducting a same-sex union did not result in a defrocking or indefinite suspension.

The jury ruled that DeLong should write a report on issues that break the covenant between UMC clergy or be suspended for one year. DeLong admitted during the three-day trial to performing a "holy union" ceremony for a lesbian couple in 2009 but said she would not pledge to stop the practice, which is banned by the church. "I can't imagine doing that," she testified, according to United Methodist News Service.

Thomas Lambrecht, the prosecuting counsel, argued that DeLong, 44, should be suspended from ministry unless she pledged not to perform same-sex unions, saying that failing to discipline DeLong would give free reign to ministers to flout church rules.

The UMC's Book of Discipline bars "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" from ministry and prohibits clergy from celebrating same-sex weddings. The jury voted 12–1 to acquit DeLong of violating a rule against homosexual activity. In her testimony, she remarked, "The word 'practicing' would never be used for a heterosexual person. It's just part of who they are."

The openly lesbian DeLong registered with her partner of 16 years under Wisconsin's domestic partnership statute in 2009. But she refused to tell the court whether the couple is sexually intimate, and her lawyer, Scott Campbell, argued that the church could not prove DeLong had violated her vows.

Hundreds of clergy in the 11-million-member denomination have petitioned recently for the UMC to lift the bans against gay clergy and same-sex unions. Some 70 clergy out of 450 in Minnesota recently said they would defy the church's ban on officiating at same-sex unions.

A reported 208 clergy in the northern Illinois regional UMC unit—nearly a third of the conference's 696 clergy—signed a statement saying they are willing to perform same-sex unions. The clergy also called on the global church to impose no more than a one-day suspension for ministers that defy the ban. Civil same-gender unions became law in Illinois on June 1.

A United Methodist conference encompassing New York City and Connecticut voted in its June meeting to send to the UMC General Conference five "marriage equality" resolutions.

"There continue to be difficult questions with no ready answers," Wisconsin Bishop Linda Lee said in a statement after the trial, which she described as a "heart-wrenching and painful process."

Lambrecht, the church counsel, is a board member of Good News, an unofficial United Methodist evangelical renewal group, and was to begin working for it after the trial, according to United Methodist News Service.

Lambrecht said he is confident that the church tenets, including the phrase "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with biblical teaching," would be upheld at the 2012 General Conference. Church officials expect an increase in the number of delegates attending from outside the U.S., particularly from Africa where delegates are more conservative.

Campbell speculated about two possible directions. "There may be some who move to tighten laws," he said. "There may be others who recognize that the time has come for us to stop trying to deal legalistically with matters of the heart, the spirit and the soul."