

Methodist bishops asked to charge one of their own for performing gay wedding

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November 16, 2013

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(RNS) The United Methodist Church's division over homosexuality grew heated Friday (Nov. 15), as the denomination's Council of Bishops called for charging retired Bishop Melvin Talbert with presiding at the Oct. 26 wedding of two men, which the church forbids.

The council asked its president, Bishop Rosemarie Wenner, and Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett of the North Alabama Conference, to file a complaint accusing Talbert of undermining the ministry of a colleague and conducting a ceremony to celebrate the wedding of a same-gender couple at Covenant Community United Church of Christ in Center Point, Ala.

Talbert, who served as bishop of the San Francisco area, ignored a request not to perform the ceremony. He has said in the past that the church's position on homosexuality "is wrong and evil ... it no longer calls for our obedience."

The retired bishop did not respond to calls Friday.

The council's statement, made after a weeklong series of meetings in North Carolina, comes as the church's disagreement over ministry to gays and lesbians grows divisive and vocal.

Next week, the Rev. Frank Schaefer of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference faces a church trial in Spring City, Pa., for performing a same-sex wedding for his son in 2007.

To show support for Schaefer, 36 Methodist clergy and nine clergy from other faith traditions presided at a Nov. 9 same-sex ceremony in Philadelphia.

Three other Methodist clergy in New York face formal complaints for violating the denomination's policies on homosexuality.

Harvard-Epworth United Methodist Church in Cambridge, Mass., announced in October that its church building is available for same-sex weddings, and the congregation said it would support its pastor if he performs services there. Church law forbids same-sex marriages in United Methodist churches.

It's unclear if Talbert, who is the only United Methodist bishop known to have publicly presided at a same-sex wedding, will actually be charged. The Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops would receive the complaint and have authority for processing it. That jurisdiction, which stretches from Colorado to Hawaii and from Alaska to Arizona, overwhelmingly passed a resolution in July 2012 that says the church "is in error" on homosexuality and will operate as if the teaching does not exist.

In its statement, the Council of Bishops acknowledged the denomination is “not of one mind in matters of human sexuality.” The council also called for a task force to lead “honest and respectful conversations regarding human sexuality, race and gender in a worldwide perspective.”

John Lomperis, Methodist program director of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, praised the Council of Bishops for urging action against Talbert.

“When individuals choose to accept election as bishop, they choose to make a covenant with God and the rest of the church to uphold our code of conduct,” he said in an email. “And if our bishops cannot be trusted to not lie to God and the church, we have no basis left for unity as a denomination.”

Matt Berryman, executive director of Reconciling Ministries Network, which affirms gays, said the council is attempting to silence Talbert.

“The Council of Bishops has showed a lack of leadership by saying the only way forward is by putting on trial those clergy who can no longer follow discriminatory, unjust laws that limit their ministry with specific members of our church because of their sexual orientation,” Berryman said in a statement.