

Pastor faces credentials loss over gay weddings

by [Renee K. Gadoua](#) in the [December 11, 2013](#) issue

A United Methodist jury has given a Pennsylvania pastor 30 days to agree not to break church law by presiding at future same-sex weddings or give up his clergy credentials.

The penalty was announced November 19 in Spring City, Pennsylvania, after an emotional two-day church trial. On the previous day, Frank Schaefer was found guilty of violating church law by officiating at his son's 2007 wedding to another man.

The denomination's Book of Discipline forbids the ordination of "avowed" homosexuals and bans clergy from officiating at same-sex marriages or holding such ceremonies in its churches. But a growing group of clergy and lay members oppose these rules and are ready to defy them. Schaefer is one of dozens, possibly hundreds, of clergy who have rebelled by performing gay weddings.

The penalty from a jury of peers was sure to raise the specter of schism within the 7.5-million-member denomination, the nation's second-largest Protestant group.

The lines were drawn between Schaefer's supporters, who fought for inclusion, and his opponents, who defended the rules. Supporters said they felt called to focus on the church's commitment to equality and justice for all. Opponents said pastors cannot choose which church laws to obey. The church requires pastors to hold one another accountable for their actions, they insisted.

Schaefer, pastor of Zion United Methodist Church in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, said during the trial that he would not repent and that his actions were guided by love, not rebellion against church law.

During testimony on the second day, Schaefer put on a rainbow stole, signifying his support for gay rights. "I cannot go back to being a silent supporter," he said. He would not promise to quit officiating at same-sex weddings.

According to the terms set, if at end of the 30 days Schaefer can't agree to uphold church law, he must surrender his credentials.

The penalty is effective immediately, although Schaefer or the church can appeal. Church rules stipulate that nine of the 13 jurors must agree to a penalty. The tally was not made public.

The penalty announcement followed the earlier guilty verdict on two charges: officiating at a gay wedding and showing "disobedience to the order and discipline of the United Methodist Church."

Schaefer's trial is the first since the United Methodist Church's General Conference in 2012 upheld its 40-year-old rule that calls "homosexuality incompatible with Christian teaching."

The Schaefer case is among at least four open cases in which United Methodist clergy face disciplinary action for defying church law on gay marriage and homosexuality.

In a high-profile case, the denomination's Council of Bishops have called for charging retired bishop Melvin Talbert with presiding over an October 26 wedding of a same-gender couple at Covenant Community United Church of Christ in Center Point, Alabama.

It's unclear if Talbert will actually be charged. The male couple he blessed in a "ceremony of love" in the UCC church had already married legally weeks earlier in the District of Columbia.

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 it will operate as if the teaching does not exist. —RNS

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