

Bishop drops case on gay marriage

by [Renee K. Gadoua](#) in the [April 2, 2014](#) issue

United Methodist bishop Martin D. McLee of New York announced he is dropping the case against a retired seminary dean who officiated at his gay son's wedding. The bishop also called on March 10 for an end to church trials for clergy who breach rules against marrying same-sex couples.

The resolution of Thomas Ogletree's case highlights an emerging dynamic in the United Methodist Church: some pastors in the country's second-largest Protestant denomination can evade rules banning clergy from performing same-sex weddings, while others risk costly church trials and the loss of clergy credentials. Increasingly, those differences are geographically determined.

"Church trials produce no winners," McLee said. They result in "harmful polarization and continue the harm brought upon our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters."

Ogletree, 80, a former dean of both Yale Divinity School and Drew Theological Seminary, called presiding at his son's wedding "an act of pastoral faithfulness and fatherly love." Asked if he would perform another same-gender ceremony, he answered, "Sure."

The resolution in his case differs markedly from that of Frank Schaefer, a Pennsylvania pastor who was found guilty by local church leaders of violating church law when he officiated at his son's 2007 wedding. Schaefer was stripped of his credentials when he refused to agree not to perform additional same-sex weddings.

At least three other clergy face possible trials amid a growing wave of defiance of church law. The United Methodist Church accepts gay and lesbian members, but its Book of Discipline calls the practice of homosexuality "incompatible with Christian teaching" and bars clergy from performing same-sex unions or holding them on church property.

The varied responses reflect the denomination's polarizing demographics, said David Steinmetz, professor emeritus of the history of Christianity at Duke Divinity School.

“The two parts of the country that most strongly favor gay ordination and so forth are the West Coast, particularly the Pacific Northwest, and the Northeast,” he said. “Those places have Methodists in smaller numbers.”

Some Methodist clergy are asking to serve in regions of the country friendly to their views on gays and lesbians.

Jen Stuart, associate pastor at First United Methodist Church of Austin, Texas, for example, asked to be transferred to the Pacific Northwest Conference so she can be ordained an elder in a region more supportive of gay and lesbian equality.

She points to the treatment of a classmate, removed as a candidate for ministry because she is gay, as a motivating factor. The Schaefer trial convinced Stuart she had to minister in an inclusive conference. “I can’t make these promises to uphold the Book of Discipline,” she said.

Two Methodist pastors in the Pacific Northwest Conference, Cheryl A. Fear and Gordon Hutchins, were suspended without pay—but only for 24 hours—for officiating at same-sex weddings. The two acknowledged they presided at such ceremonies after Washington legalized same-sex civil marriage in 2012.

The 7.5 million United Methodists in the United States are closely divided on the issue of homosexuality, but most of the 4.8 million United Methodists who reside outside the United States take a decidedly negative stance on homosexuality.

“The people in Africa vote at General Conference, too,” said Steinmetz. “Every four years the numbers get larger against, not larger for.”

Worldwide, the percentage of United Methodists who support gay marriage is small, he said. And for now, geography is destiny when it comes to determining church discipline.

Bishop McLee of the New York area said he expected some to cheer the Ogletree resolution, while others will jeer its failure to hold the retired pastor accountable.

Indeed, Randy Paige, pastor of Christ Church United Methodist Church in Port Jefferson Station, New York, who filed charges against Ogletree, issued a statement that said: “I am disturbed that this settlement appears to represent a determination on the part of the New York Annual Conference leaders that they will no longer enforce or uphold the Discipline on this matter. . . . Today’s settlement increases the

probability that schism will take place.”

Since October, Methodists in New Directions, a group that advocates for gay and lesbian inclusion, has published on its website essays by people who presided at same-sex weddings. No complaints about them have yet become public, and McLee would not say if he has received any. —RNS

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