

United Methodist pastor reinstated on appeal

by [Renee K. Gadoua](#) in the [July 23, 2014](#) issue

In a surprising reversal, a Pennsylvania pastor who was defrocked last year after he officiated at his son's same-sex wedding has been reinstated.

Frank Schaefer learned June 24 that his ministerial credentials will be restored after the church's Northeastern Jurisdictional Committee on Appeals voted 8-1 in his favor.

The committee, which held a hearing June 20 near Baltimore, found that "errors of Church law" had been used in imposing the penalty against Schaefer.

"I was wrongfully punished for standing with those who are discriminated against," Schaefer said in a statement. "Today's decision is a sign that the church is starting to listen."

The decision comes as the world's 12 million United Methodists appear headed toward a split over the denomination's rules on ministering to gays and lesbians.

"The events over the last nine months make the division in our church much more clear," said Tom Lambrecht, vice president and general manager of Good News, a conservative group within the United Methodist Church. "I have not seen a realistic option that will allow us to live together in one church."

More than 80 pastors recently signed a statement saying the United Methodists have irreconcilable differences on the issue of homosexuality and a split is imminent. More than 2,500 United Methodist leaders have signed "A Way Forward," a proposal calling for local decisions on gay clergy and same-sex marriage.

Several other United Methodist clergy, including a retired bishop, are awaiting news about formal church complaints or trials for defying Methodist policy on ministering to gays and lesbians. A group of ten retired clergy said earlier this month that they would preside at same-sex marriages.

Schaefer, formerly pastor of Zion United Methodist Church of Iona in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, was found guilty of violating the church's Book of Discipline in a

November 2013 trial. A church jury suspended him for 30 days, during which he was told to decide whether he could comply with church law. If he could not, the jury said, he was to surrender his clergy credentials.

The United Methodist Church accepts gay and lesbian members, but its Book of Discipline states that the “practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” and bars clergy from performing same-sex unions.

But the appeals committee ruled that the penalty was beyond those outlined in church law. It also said the penalty “could not be predicated on a future possibility.”

The committee also ruled that the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference must compensate Schaefer for all lost salary and benefits from the date he lost his credentials, December 19, 2013. The committee’s decision could be appealed to the Judicial Council, the church’s highest court. —RNS

*This article was edited July 10, 2014.*