

United Methodist conferences petition denomination on behalf of LGBT rights

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(RNS) An Upstate New York bishop has dismissed a 2013 complaint that accused a retired United Methodist pastor of breaking church law by officiating at several same-sex weddings, including his daughter's.

Bishop Mark J. Webb's May 26 decision to dismiss charges against Steve Heiss eliminates a costly and controversial church trial, which in other cases has highlighted the denomination's divisions over ministering to gays and lesbians.

The decision also points to growing momentum among U.S. Methodist bodies to change church law, which forbids the ordination of LGBT ministers and bars its pastors from officiating at same-sex weddings.

Late last month, members of the Upper New York Annual Conference approved eight resolutions calling for changes to the denomination's guidebook, the Book of Discipline, regarding gays and lesbians. The resolutions will be presented to next year's General Conference, the denomination's highest legislative body.

Other Methodist conferences, or regional bodies, meeting across the country have taken similar votes:

- Delegates at the Great Plains United Methodist Conference, which encompasses Kansas and Nebraska, approved a petition Saturday (June 13) calling on the denomination to allow gay marriage in the church and enable gay people to become ministers.
- The Baltimore-Washington Conference voted on a resolution to remove from the Book of Discipline the sentence, "The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible

with Christian teaching.” It too will be sent to the General Conference.

- The New York Annual Conference passed a resolution committing the conference to be “a place of safety, equality, and welcome for LGBTQI lay persons, clergy, candidates for ministry and their families.” The conference also passed a resolution to present a petition to the General Conference to remove from the Book of Discipline all language that would exclude LGB people from ministry in or with the church. New York’s late bishop, Martin D. McLee, in 2014 dropped a case against retired Yale Divinity School dean Thomas Ogletree, who had faced charges after officiating at the 2012 marriage of his son to another man.

But some conferences went in the opposite direction:

- The Eastern Pennsylvania Conference—the same one that defrocked Frank Schaefer after a contentious church trial—approved a resolution that urges the conference to demand clergy accountability to the Discipline’s “rules of our common covenant,” and to call upon clergy to challenge those rules only “through legitimate channels of holy conferencing, rather than breaking that covenant.” Last year, the denomination’s top court agreed to reinstate Schaefer’s ministerial credentials after an appeal.
- The Alabama-West Florida Conference passed resolutions upholding the denomination’s rules on homosexuality.

Some expressed disappointment with the decision to dismiss the complaint against Heiss. John Lomperis, program director at the Institute on Religion and Democracy, said the decision shows the denomination’s lack of accountability.

“None of this changes the fact that the United Methodist Church affirms biblical standards for sexual self-control,” he said. “We expect our clergy to honor these boundaries God gave us for our own good.”

But on the whole, supporters of LGBT inclusion seemed to get a bigger boost.

Heiss, who retired last year as pastor of Tabernacle United Methodist Church in Binghamton, New York, in the Upper New York Conference, said he was not asked to stop performing gay marriages.

“I have four weddings scheduled this summer,” he said. “One is a gay couple. I’m not hiding anything.”

Supporters of LGBT rights scored another symbolic victory in Raleigh, North Carolina, when leaders of Fairmont United Methodist Church voted unanimously earlier this month to join the Reconciling Ministries Network, which is dedicated to the inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

Back in 1990, Fairmont expelled its pastor, Jimmy Creech, for his work advocating on behalf of gays and lesbians. A church trial later defrocked him for presiding at the wedding of a lesbian couple at a Methodist church in Omaha, Nebraska.

Creech said he was delighted his old church had moved toward accepting LGBT people.

“It’s a marker of how history changes—how perceptions, attitudes, and people’s comfort levels change over time,” said Creech, who lives in Raleigh. “It’s instructive and inspiring.”