

United Methodist court rules against consecrating gay and lesbian bishops

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This article appears in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue.



Karen Oliveto (left) meets Dixie Brewster (right) for the first time prior to a United Methodist Judicial Council meeting in Newark, New Jersey, in April 2017. Brewster was a petitioner questioning whether a gay or lesbian pastor such as Oliveto can serve as a UM bishop. They said they are praying for each other and the church. At rear is Keith Boyette, who represented Brewster before the council. Photo by Mike DuBose, [UMNS](#).

At the end of the day, Karen Oliveto remains a bishop even after the United Methodist Church's top court ruled that consecrating a gay bishop violates church law.

The Judicial Council said that such a bishop would still be in “good standing” until a local administrative or judicial process is completed.

“It has been a very stressful time of waiting—waiting for clarity,” Oliveto said. “I’m very excited that I get to continue to do the job God has called me to do and that the community has affirmed—and that we get to return to the Mountain Sky Area to work with clergy and laity there.”

The decision is being greeted with confusion but also with hope by some that the Commission on a Way Forward, created to review church law on sexuality and search for ways to maintain unity, has time to do its work.

“We acknowledge that the decision does not help to ease the [disagreements, impatience, and anxiety that permeates the United Methodist Church over the matter of human sexuality](#), and particularly this case,” said Bruce R. Ough, president of the Council of Bishops.

Officials in the U.S. Western Jurisdiction consecrated Oliveto, who is married to another woman, as a bishop in July 2016. She leads the Mountain Sky Area, which encompasses Colorado, Montana, Utah, Wyoming, and one church in Idaho.

“A same-sex marriage license issued by competent civil authorities together with the clergy person’s status in a same-sex relationship is a public declaration that the person is a self-avowed practicing homosexual” for purposes of the prohibitive language in the United Methodist Book of Discipline in regard to who can be ordained, the council ruled.

The Judicial Council also decided during its April 25-28 session that United Methodist boards of ordained ministry must look at whether a ministerial candidate adheres to the church’s position on sexuality.

Dixie Brewster, the South Central Jurisdiction lay delegate who brought the petition asking about a gay bishop’s election, said she was pleased with the decision and thankful to the Judicial Council.

“It gives us specific and faithful direction in determining our future as United Methodists,” she said.

While she expressed disappointment that Oliveto remains a bishop, she said she understands that the church allows fair process.

“My prayer is that Oliveto will step down and not create further division within the church,” Brewster said.

Bishops from the Western Jurisdiction said in a statement that they are already working to respond to complaints filed after Oliveto’s election.

“We’re not trying to skirt this or defy the church,” said Grant Hagiya, head of the Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops and a member of the Commission on a Way Forward.

Groups who advocate for the current church teachings on sexuality, such as the Wesleyan Covenant Association and Good News, expressed skepticism that the Western Jurisdiction would follow through on complaints against Oliveto. Some see the ruling as leaving open the possibility that the jurisdiction could stall on a response or choose not to remove Oliveto.

“We don’t have any hope—because of its past track record—that the Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops will address this either swiftly or with integrity,” said Rob Renfro, president of Good News. If that is the outcome, he said, the Way Forward commission must take into account “that we are at least two different churches and that some kind of compromise that cobbles us together . . . is not going to work as a way forward.”

Matt Berryman, the executive director of Reconciling Ministries Network, a group that has worked to overturn church teachings on sexuality, also does not expect that the Western bishops will remove Oliveto from her role.

“Given the strong leadership in this jurisdiction, it seems highly unlikely she will be removed from her ministry as a result of a trial,” [he wrote in a blog post](#).

“Depending on the actions of individuals and committees moving forward, it can be argued that the Judicial Council rulings are practically meaningless.”

Berryman, who is also a member of the Way Forward commission, sees the rulings as “stops along the way to inclusion.”

John K. Yambasu, bishop for Sierra Leone in the UMC, which is a global body, agreed with the Judicial Council that Oliveto’s consecration violates church law. But he was glad the matter goes back to the Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops for supervisory response, rather than resulting in immediate removal of Oliveto as

bishop.

Her immediate removal would have created “more wounds” in the church, he said. “This decision will give us time—maybe to pray over our situations and to talk to one another.”

Ken Carter, Florida Conference bishop and one of the moderators of the Way Forward commission, does not see the ruling as impeding the commission’s goal of a response that “is not so focused on a person or supervisory issues,” he said. “What the General Conference does in 2019 and 2020 will really shape the church” and provide a response to varied understandings of LGBTQ people in the church.

Lonnie Brooks, a lay member of the Alaska Conference who wrote a brief supporting the Western Jurisdiction, sees it differently.

“I fully believe that this decision will increase the pressure on the commission to propose a plan of separation to General Conference,” Brooks said. —United Methodist News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on May 4, appears in the May 24 print edition under the title “UMC court rules against consecrating gay bishops.”