

Church court finds UMC bishop not guilty in historic trial

by [Heather Hahn](#)

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Bishop Minerva G. Carcaño stands as the presiding officer reads the jury verdict on September 22. (Photo by Paul Jeffrey, United Methodist News)

A United Methodist church court found Bishop Minerva G. Carcaño—the denomination’s first Latina bishop—not guilty of four charges.

Carcaño, who has served as bishop of the California-Nevada Conference since 2016, stood trial before a jury of 13 racially diverse clergy members from the North Central Jurisdiction. The trial, which began September 19, took place in Glenview, Illinois, a Chicago suburb.

The bishop faced accusations under church law of disobedience to the order and discipline of the church, undermining the ministry of another clergy person, harassment, and fiscal malfeasance.

After a few hours of deliberation on the evening of September 21, the jury rendered a verdict acquitting her on all counts. This was the first trial of a bishop in the United Methodist Church and its predecessors in nearly a century.

Carcaño, who has served in ordained ministry for 47 years and as a bishop for nearly 20 years, has been under suspension with pay and benefits since March of last year. The situation, she testified during the trial, left her feeling “banished” from her family of faith.

After the verdict was announced, she said she felt “great joy.” With the resolution of the trial process, her suspension also has concluded.

“My banishment has ended, and I feel like I can step back into the family, get back into the circle of this beloved community that I call—with many, many others—‘my church,’” she said. “I feel like a tremendous burden has been lifted; the door has been opened; the table has been set.”

She said she looked forward to taking Holy Communion in a United Methodist church for the first time in 18 months this coming Sunday. She plans to attend First United Methodist Church at the Chicago Temple.

But she also acknowledged much healing will need to be done as she resumes her duties as a bishop of the California-Nevada Conference.

“The woundedness we feel is real,” she said, noting that not only she but also those who filed complaints against her were feeling hurt right now.

But, she added, “I believe we can overcome it because of the love of Christ, the love of God that binds us together, I believe we can overcome it.”

The charges she faced stemmed from three complaints filed by a total of seven members of the California-Nevada Conference. Those complaints [dealt with three very different situations](#), but they shared accusations that the bishop had overstepped her authority and acted retributively against her critics.

The 13-member jury of United Methodist clergy unanimously found her not guilty on all specifications in the charges. The jury remained anonymous throughout the proceedings and stayed in a hotel sequestered from all parties and observers in the case.

“It was interesting to hear that we were all very much of a very same mind coming into the room,” said the jury forewoman, who spoke in an interview on condition of anonymity.

She added that the jurors agreed that the evidence presented by the counsel for the church, the equivalent of a prosecutor, “did not give a clear and compelling case that the bishop was outside of her authority to make the decisions that she did.”

The jury included seven men and six women. The racial breakdown was four Asian American, three Black, three White, two Hispanic, and one who is of mixed race.

Carcaño was elected as the denomination’s first Latina bishop in 2004.

Carcaño now returns to the California-Nevada Conference, [which has experienced division over the whole suspension and subsequent trial](#). Because of age limits for bishops, Carcaño is scheduled to retire next September when she will be 70.

Carcaño [has gained renown as a pioneering church leader and champion of the human rights](#) of immigrants—both within the denomination and on the national stage, including testifying before Congress.

She has served on the boards of various United Methodist agencies and ministries, including Africa University, [the pan-African United Methodist institution in Zimbabwe](#). She also has called for the full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the life of the church.

News of her suspension stunned many across the denomination, and various groups called for immediate reinstatement. Among those groups was [MARCHA \(Methodists Associated Representing the Cause of Hispanic/Latino Americans\)](#), the denomination’s Hispanic and Latino caucus.

Lyssette N. Perez, a United Methodist pastor in New Jersey and president of MARCHA, was among those who attended the trial at the invitation of Gwinn to ensure fairness. In addition to representatives from MARCHA, official observers included representatives from the United Methodist Commission on Religion and Race, and the United Methodist Commission on the Status and Role of Women.

Perez said that she felt the trial was fair.

“Of course, I celebrate that Bishop Carcaño is not guilty,” Perez said. But when she looks back, Perez said she is still troubled by the suspension.

“She said that she was banished, but more than that, she was crucified for 18 months. And we crucified a voice that was extremely important for the denomination. In the end, this was something that could have been resolved at the conference level.”

After announcing the verdict, Gwinn, the presiding officer, urged those watching to consider a better way for handling disputes in the United Methodist Church than the church trial process. He has presided at such trials for more than a decade.

“I hope, brothers and sisters—particularly those of you who are younger—will come to understand that we must repair the harm we're doing with the process we use in dealing with this. We are not witnessing at all to a secular world in this process.”

Carcaño, as one of only two bishops to face a church trial since 1928, also said she hopes her trial might serve as “a breaking point” for the church.

She said her hope is that the church might move away “from being a litigious people to a people of love and compassion for one another, and in that manner extend ourselves to a broken world.” —United Methodist News