

Methodist bishops: Gay clergy ban intact: But Karen Dammann acquitted

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The acquittal of a lesbian Methodist pastor charged with violating a church ban on “self-avowed practicing” gay clergy does not change church law, United Methodist bishops have cautioned members as the denomination prepares for its once-every-four-years convention late this month.

The Council of Bishops said the authority of the church’s constitution is “unchanged.” The 17 bishops, issuing a statement on March 25, said that “this one case does not alter the Book of Discipline regarding homosexuality or the qualifications for ministry.” Five days earlier, pastor Karen Dammann was acquitted by a 13-member jury of Washington state clergy despite the fact that in 2001 she wrote to her bishop, Elias Galvan, telling him that she was living in a “partnered, covenanted, homosexual relationship.”

In an unorthodox interpretation of church law that raised eyebrows, the jury said it found no punishable “declaration” against gay clergy, even though homosexual activity is described in the Book of Discipline as “incompatible with Christian teaching.”

Dammann’s acquittal, along with the bishops’ statement, sets the scene for a heated battle when the 8.3-million-member denomination convenes April 27-May 7 in Pittsburgh for its General Conference legislative meeting.

The Pacific Northwest Conference, by action of the jury, “has become schismatic and separated itself from the rest of the church,” said the conservative Confessing Movement. “The clergy jury has broken covenant with the church,” according to the group, which also criticized three retired bishops who spoke as experts on church law and “lent the prestige of their office” to render a verdict contradicting interpretations going back decades.

Advocates for rescinding the church's ban on gay clergy and same-sex unions say the Dammann verdict offers new hope in an old battle. Even before the trial, Affirmation, a gay Methodist group, called upon the 2004 General Conference "to act as Christ's church to reject the powers of evil and proclaim an end to discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in church and society."

While cheering the verdict allowing Dammann to return to active ministry, the liberal Methodist Federation for Social Action also pointed to its proposal to deal with "the deep and painful divisions that exist" in the UMC. The federation has asked the General Conference to delete a reference to homosexuality being incompatible with Christian teaching and substitute sentences including: "We stand before God admitting that we have thus far been unable to reach common ground."

Conservatives, however, who decried the verdict as a dubious reading of church law, vowed to maintain the church's current positions, which were upheld by a nearly 2-1 margin at the 2000 meeting. The Kentucky-based Good News organization termed the jury's decision "an embarrassment to clear-thinking United Methodists everywhere, and a threat to the unity" of the church.

Besides urging like-minded conservatives to communicate their displeasure to UMC leaders and suggesting that the 11-day convention censure the Seattle-based regional conference, the Good News statement issued March 25 said that some United Methodists are holding back contributions—"the only way left to voice their protest of an errant, unfaithful church."

The Dammann trial was not the church's first judicial battle over homosexuality. In 1998, Chicago pastor Gregory Dell celebrated a same-sex union for two men and was found guilty. He was restored to his church in 2000. An Omaha, Nebraska, pastor, Jimmy Creech, also performed a "holy union" for two women in 1997, and was charged and acquitted by one vote. In 1999, after performing his second holy union, Creech was found guilty and defrocked.

The bishops, in their statement, acknowledged the divisions that resurfaced during and after the Dammann trial. "In such moments as this, we remember that our unity in Christ does not depend on unanimity of opinion," they said. "Rather, in Jesus Christ we are bound together by love that transcends our differences and calls us to stay at the table with one another."