

Lesbian UMC pastor faces tough trial: Irene "Beth" Stroud

News in the [September 7, 2004](#) issue

Three months after the United Methodist Church tightened its rules against "self-avowed, practicing" gay clergy, a lesbian pastor in Philadelphia will face trial after disclosing her sexual orientation.

Irene "Beth" Stroud, associate pastor of First United Methodist Church of Germantown since 1999, "came out" last year in a sermon, saying she had lived "in a covenant relationship" with her partner, Chris Paige, for more than two years.

A church investigation committee voted 5-3 on July 23 that "reasonable grounds exist" for a church trial. Bishop Peter Weaver of Philadelphia has not yet set a trial date. "I love the United Methodist Church," Stroud said in a statement on her church's Web site. "This is where I came to know the love of God as a young child, and where God is calling me to serve."

In her 2003 sermon, Stroud acknowledged that she could lose her job. "I know that God will take care of me. I know that God will bless my truth-telling and my risk-taking as God has blessed my ministry," she said then. Stroud's sermon came well before the highly publicized case in Washington state of a lesbian pastor, Karen Dammann, whose not-guilty verdict was upheld by the church's highest court in May.

Still, Stroud's case is likely to be affected by newer, stricter policies adopted by the court and delegates at the Methodists' General Conference to prevent similar verdicts like the Dammann acquittal. Even though the court said it could not overturn the Dammann verdict, it ruled that homosexual practice is a "chargeable offense." Bishops may not appoint pastors who have been found to be "self-avowed practicing" homosexuals by a church trial, the court said.

Senior Pastor Fred Day said the Germantown congregation fully supports Stroud's ministry and has started a legal defense fund for her. "She is an excellent pastor, deeply appreciated for her ministry," he said on the Web site. *-Religion News*

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