

Lesbian reinstated; bishop to appeal case: Guilty verdict sustained; sentence thrown out

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The United Methodist bishop of Philadelphia plans to appeal the case of a lesbian minister who was reinstated last month after she was initially defrocked for violating a church ban on “self-avowed practicing” gay clergy.

Bishop Marcus Matthews said May 3 that he will appeal to the Judicial Council, the church’s highest court, the reinstatement of Irene “Beth” Stroud. The court will hold its next session in late October. Matthews said he would file within the required 30-day window following the April 29 ruling.

Last December, Stroud was convicted of violating church rules against active gay clergy. A regional appeals court upheld the conviction but tossed out the sentence, citing legal and procedural errors by the lower court.

Obedying the court, Matthews restored Stroud’s clergy credentials and offered to let her return to First United Methodist Church of Germantown in Philadelphia. While an associate pastor, she revealed her sexual orientation two years ago to the congregation. But Stroud said she will await the outcome of her case before returning to the pulpit.

“I do not want my ordination to be a symbol of who is ‘winning’ or ‘losing’ in a controversy at any given moment,” Stroud said in an e-mail to supporters. “When I do put my robes back on, whether that is at the conclusion of my case or in a number of years . . . I want that to be simply a symbol of the sacred trust among me, God and the larger church.”

In the meantime, Stroud will continue to serve as a paid staff member of the Philadelphia church but will refrain from exercising any duties of a minister.

Critics of the recent ruling, including the UMC bishops, said that Stroud, 36, won a reprieve only on a technicality. In an 8-1 decision the panel sustained the guilty verdict against Stroud but threw out the sentence because of due-process errors and because the church's use of "practicing homosexual" had not been clearly defined.

Mark Tooley, director of United Methodist Action, part of the conservative, Washington-based Institute for Religion and Democracy, said he hoped the church's Judicial Council would define church law more definitively. "In the short term it's disturbing to those of us who are on the orthodox side," Tooley said.

A pro-gay group was disappointed in the limited appeals victory. "We know the bishops are not of one mind on the issue, just as the church is not of one mind," commented Troy Plummer, executive director of Reconciling United Methodists. But he said that the ban has amounted to "decades of discrimination" against otherwise qualified clergy candidates. *-Religion News Service*