

Methodist court says pastors may bar gays from membership: No automatic right to membership

by [Kevin Eckstrom](#) in the [November 15, 2005](#) issue

An openly gay United Methodist minister lost her bid to return to the pulpit when the denomination's highest court upheld her conviction on charges of being a "self-avowed practicing" lesbian.

But a separate decision could have even wider implications. The church's Judicial Council said gays and lesbians have no automatic right to church membership and upheld the power of local pastors to turn them away.

The twin rulings, announced October 31, represent a major setback for those who seek greater inclusion of homosexuals in the nation's second-largest Protestant denomination, and they served to reinforce church policy on homosexuality.

A leader of a Methodist gay caucus said she was "absolutely astounded" that the Judicial Council reversed a bishop's decision to suspend a Virginia pastor who had refused church membership to a gay man. "Up until this point, gay-identified people have generally been admitted to church membership despite contradictions" in current policies, said Peggy R. Gaylord, co-spokesperson of Affirmation: United Methodists for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns.

The more closely watched case had centered on Irene Elizabeth "Beth" Stroud, a gay pastor.

"I think it's clear that the whole policy one day is going to be something that the church is going to be ashamed of," said Stroud, who will remain at Philadelphia's First United Methodist Church of Germantown as a lay minister. In an interview, Stroud said she and partner Chris Paige recently were certified as foster parents. "I'm going to continue to work for change, with or without the credentials," Stroud said.

The Judicial Council ruled 6-2 against Stroud, who disclosed her homosexual relationship in 2003. A church court convicted her last December of conduct that is “incompatible with Christian teaching” and revoked her ordination. An appeals panel threw out the verdict, citing legal errors, but the high court ordered the trial court’s penalty reinstated. The court said the evidence against Stroud was “uncontradicted and overwhelming.”

Two members of the panel, Susan Henry-Crowe of Atlanta and Beth Capen of Kingston, New York, dissented in part. “While the Judicial Council must be faithful to its charge from the church, we are also sensitive to the hurt, pain and brokenness of the family of God,” they said.

Conservative church leaders praised the court decisions for affirming a decades-old policy. A “standard is a standard and the church needs to abide by it,” said Jim Heidinger, head of the Good News movement. “We’ve talked and debated and dialogued, and we do know what the church’s position is,” Heidinger said.

In the case involving church membership, the court sided with pastor Ed Johnson of South Hill, Virginia, who refused to admit an openly gay man as a church member and was subsequently ousted by his peers. Johnson was charged by Virginia Bishop Charlene Kammerer with “unwillingness or inability to perform ministerial duties.” Other Virginia pastors voted 448-114 in June to place Johnson on an involuntary leave of absence.

The court overruled Bishop Kammerer’s decision to oust Johnson and ordered him to be reinstated with back pay. Capen, Henry-Crowe and Jon Gray of Kansas City, Missouri, dissented.

The high court found that Johnson’s due process rights were violated, and said the church’s constitution allows pastors to exercise “pastoral judgment in determining who may be received into the membership of a local church.”