

Methodists' top court to consider defiant same-sex marriages

News in the [October 16, 2013](#) issue

Facing a wave of open defiance to church law, the top court of the United Methodist Church is set to consider rulings challenging church teaching on homosexuality.

The United Methodist Judicial Council will decide whether church ministries can advocate for the acceptance of homosexuality, whether ministers can officiate at same-sex ceremonies and whether a regional conference can urge members to ignore portions of Methodist law.

The rulings made by regional conferences are among 17 items the court will consider at its October 23–26 meeting in Baltimore.

The United Methodist Church has repeatedly voted to retain language in its constitution, the Book of Discipline, that says “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” and that “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” are not allowed to serve as clergy.

But multiple regional conferences called for greater acceptance of gay couples during the recent conference season, saying the church’s current teachings are unjust and ought to be ignored.

The Judicial Council hearings come as at least four United Methodist ministers—including the former dean of Yale Divinity School—are facing trial for officiating at same-sex weddings and more than 1,500 clergy have signed a statement offering to marry gay couples.

One case involves Steve Heiss, pastor of a church in Binghamton, New York, who performed a same-sex marriage for his daughter on July 7, 2002. “Even then I knew it was worth the risk,” he said. “It was so right.” He has officiated at no fewer than five other such unions at his church.

The court has no power to change existing church policy—only the quadrennial General Conference can do that—but it can set boundaries on how far clergy and congregations can go in adhering to current policy.

Although gay rights and gay marriage have swiftly gained legal favor in North America and some other nations, the growing number of United Methodist churches in Africa—which strongly defend the current church stance—make any major change in church law unlikely. The church’s next quadrennial conference is in 2016.

Thomas Lambrecht, vice president of Good News, a conservative group within the United Methodist Church, said he believes the high court will maintain church doctrine and that accepting the resolutions would entirely undermine church law.

“What concerns us at this point is that so many people are attempting to essentially disregard our church’s position,” Lambrecht said.

“If people are putting themselves forward as United Methodist clergy and bishops and are not willing to abide by United Methodist policies, that seems to us to be somewhat dishonest and reflects moral confusion . . . How can you claim to be a United Methodist and take actions that are contrary to that?”

The regional council rulings say that the inconsistencies are instead within the Book of Discipline, which calls Methodists to minister to all people yet bans clergy from officiating at same-sex ceremonies, said Matt Berryman, executive director of Reconciling Ministries Network, an independent United Methodist group that advocates full inclusion of gay people.

Berryman said the rulings coming before the Judicial Council could be beneficial because they will further the conversation about the church’s response to gay people.

“We have to look at the tension between what’s in the Discipline and the reality of what’s going on,” Berryman said. “We have to decide what it means to love God and love our neighbor. And that’s not always clear, given the deep ambiguities in the Scripture.”

Momentum is growing to change the church law, said Andy Oliver, director of communications for the Reconciling Ministries Network, which includes 569 churches or communities that have written statements welcoming all people, regardless of

sexual orientation or gender identity.

In addition, the Western Jurisdiction, stretching from Colorado to Hawaii and from Alaska to Arizona, overwhelmingly passed a resolution in July 2012 that says the church “is in error on the subject.”

The jurisdiction will operate as if the church teaching in the Book of Discipline on homosexuality did not exist. Several regional conferences, the smaller areas that make up jurisdictions, have passed similar resolutions in recent years.

[Karen Oliveto, pastor of Glide Memorial United Methodist Church in San Francisco, told the Century that she thinks conservative Methodists have been quieter in the public square in recent years. “It is clear that the right has been updating their messaging as culture changes with increased medical, psychological, social and political information,” Oliveto said in an e-mail.

[“This is not a surrender,” said Oliveto, “but a flag of victory, that they have finally put an end to the debate about homosexuality” inside the worldwide Methodist ranks. “As the U.S. continues to evolve around homosexual issues, the UMC in the U.S. is going to have to make some hard decisions in the not-too-distant future.”]

Clergy who do go public about their actions, RMN’s Oliver said, “frame it as they’re not being disobedient to church law, [rather] they are being obedient to the fullness of church law that says a lot more than the few paragraphs about LGBT issues.”

The issue is evolving in the same way that the church addressed other civil rights issues, said Dean Snyder, senior minister at Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. “We’ve been through this again and again,” he said. “We did it over the issue of slavery. We experienced the same kind of thing around women being given the vote. The church was divided when it was segregated.”

Heiss sees himself as typical of his generation, growing more open to gay rights as time goes on. A big turning point was learning that his brother and daughter are gay, as is a close friend. “If everyone had a gay relative or a gay friend, this issue would disappear,” he said. When he performed his daughter’s marriage back in 2002, he did it with a bit of stealth. “I never really pronounced them married,” he said.

But these days he is feeling far more secure in his convictions. When his bishop suggested Heiss agree not to perform any more gay weddings, Heiss refused.

His bishop declined to comment, saying through a spokesperson that it was a personnel matter. Richard Barton, a district superintendent in the Upper New York Annual Conference who filed the complaint, did not respond to a request for comment.

Should he lose his clergy credentials, Heiss would also lose his health insurance. But since his two daughters are grown and he's divorced, it's easier for him to take the risk than for younger clergy, he said. More important is the principle.

"After suffering the kind of bias these people have gone through, I have the privilege of standing there and saying, 'You are married.' It's just knowing you are on the right side of history." —RNS/added sources

This article was edited on October 2, 2013.