

Church trial shines spotlight on denomination's ambivalence

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(RNS) The United Methodist Church was not on trial at a recently concluded courtroom hearing outside of Philadelphia. But the denomination's ambivalence over homosexuality took center stage.

At its conclusion Tuesday (Nov. 19), a jury of 13 clergy suspended the Rev. Frank Schaefer from ministry for 30 days and told him that if he cannot uphold the Book of Discipline, the United Methodist rule book, including its provision on gays, he must leave the ministry.

"It reveals the struggle that we're having as a church around the issues," said the Rev. Gary MacDonald, a United Methodist minister and director of Advanced Ministerial Studies at Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology.

"We do have a history of wrestling with who we are and how we are responding to God. I think that's happening now."

Schaefer's trial for officiating at the same-sex wedding of his son is the first since the United Methodist Church's General Conference in 2012 upheld its 40-year-old rule that calls homosexuality "incompatible with Christian teaching." The denomination's Book of Discipline forbids the ordination of "avowed" homosexuals and bans clergy from officiating at same-sex marriages or holding such ceremonies in its churches.

At least four other clergy cases are headed to church trials as an increasing number boldly perform such weddings in defiance of the rule book. The dispute pits two camps against each other: those who argue for inclusion and focus on the church's

commitment to equality and justice for gays, lesbians and transgender people, and those who stress rules and accountability.

MacDonald said movements on both sides of the issue are likely to continue advocating their positions in the run-up to the 2016 worldwide General Conference, when the church could change the laws in its Book of Discipline.

“I think people are really concerned for the unity of the church,” he said but added, “You look at our divisions as a nation and we shouldn’t be surprised that this is happening.”

Demographic changes are also at play. With 7.5 million members, the denomination is the nation’s second-largest Protestant group. But church membership declined by nearly 72,000 U.S. members in 2011, with 55 of 59 U.S. conferences reporting declines, according to United Methodist News Service.

That decrease comes as the denomination grew nearly 25 percent to 12 million members worldwide, thanks to dramatic growth in places including Africa, Eastern Europe and the Philippines.

Delegates of the estimated 4 million-member African church members are expected to overwhelmingly block efforts at the 2016 General Conference to change church policy on homosexuality.

Meanwhile, challenges to gay policies have become increasingly public and vehement in recent months. Tuesday night, United Methodist clergy said they will officiate at same-sex weddings on Schaefer’s behalf.

Schaefer, pastor of Zion United Methodist Church of Iona in Lebanon, Pa., was found guilty on two charges for presiding at his son’s 2007 wedding to another man. The jury convicted him of officiating at a gay wedding and showing “disobedience to the order and discipline of the church.”

Schaefer says he won’t repent. During testimony Tuesday, he put on a rainbow stole and said it was a sign of his support for gay rights.

“I cannot go back to being a silent supporter,” he said. He would not promise not to quit officiating at same-sex weddings.

The Rev. Steve Heiss, a Binghamton, N.Y., pastor who is awaiting word of his own trial in the Upper New York Annual Conference, said after observing the two-day trial in Spring City, Pa., that he, too, will not agree to quit presiding at gay marriages.

Jimmy Creech, a former ordained elder in Nebraska who lost his clergy credentials in 1999 after a church trial found him guilty of presiding at gay weddings, called the jury cowardly for the penalty it imposed on Schaefer.

“This is shifting the responsibility to Frank so the jury doesn’t have to be responsible,” said Creech, who lives in Raleigh, N.C. “It shows a lack of courage and integrity. He has to surrender his conscience to be a part of the church or give up his credentials.”

After the penalty was announced about 9 p.m. Tuesday, many observers began singing “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” The group formed a circle, and Heiss broke bread while Schaefer raised the Communion cup.

“The ambiguity of it was so awful and so painful,” Heiss said. “We were trying to find some peace in the midst of this.”

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