

# Methodist court upholds ruling on gay membership: Pastor can keep man from joining church

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The United Methodist Church's highest court has decided not to reconsider a case in which it permitted a Virginia pastor to prevent an openly gay man from joining his church.

In two rulings last fall, 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.

The court also ruled at the time that Johnson's due-process rights were violated when he was charged by Virginia bishop Charlene Kammerer with "unwillingness or inability to perform ministerial duties." An overwhelming majority of other pastors in the state voted to place Johnson on an involuntary leave of absence, but the court ordered him reinstated with back pay.

Three of the nine council members explained in a concurring opinion that those seeking reconsideration of the case had not shown the previous decision "clearly to be in error." They noted that the decision had drawn a great deal of attention.

"The 12 briefs and the more than 2,000 communications filed with the Judicial Council on the petitions for reconsideration . . . reflecting the diversity of positions on the issues before the Council have not persuaded us that the Council erred in Decision 1032," wrote members James W. Holsinger Jr., Mary A. Daffin and Keith D. Boyette. "We believe that reopening this matter, especially where no grounds have been demonstrated to do so, will further polarize the various parts of the church."

The court decided April 28 not to reconsider the case during its meeting in Overland Park, Kansas. Its decision was made public May 2.

Two court members said in a dissenting opinion that the decision “creates grave theological problems” and is legally flawed. “We deeply regret the denial of reconsideration because it further advances a spirit of distrust and contributes to the brokenness of the church,” wrote Susan T. Henry-Crowe and Shamwange P. Kyungu, who were joined by two others in their dissent.

“Determining who is eligible for life in the church is not the vocation of the pastor. It is the Holy Spirit who makes us members of the church. . . . For the pastor to deny membership is to present obstacles to the work of the Holy Spirit.”

The executive director of Reconciling Ministries Network, a Chicago-based organization that seeks full inclusion of gays and lesbians in church life, said that in 2008 his organization will seek the removal of the five justices who voted not to reconsider the case. Troy Plummer, noting the numerous pleas for reconsideration, said: “Closed eyes, deaf ears do not represent our church vision of ‘open hearts, open minds, open doors.’” *-Religion News Service*