

Ruling sought on transgender pastor in Methodist Church: Officials considering reappointment

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United Methodist clergy in the Baltimore-Washington area have asked their bishop and the denomination's high court to review a recent decision to reappoint a transgender pastor.

Bishop John R. Schol said he would reappoint Drew Phoenix, 48, to St. John's United Methodist Church in Baltimore, where he has served for five years. Phoenix, formerly Ann Gordon, changed his gender and name after a medical procedure about a year ago. United Methodist clergy are reappointed or given new assignments annually.

Phoenix, ordained in 1989, spoke to both a closed clergy session and a plenary session of the Baltimore-Washington Conference on May 24. In his plenary statement, he said he hoped that fellow Methodists "will commit ourselves to becoming educated about the complexity of gender and gender identity and open ourselves to those in our congregations who identify as transgender," reported United Methodist News Service.

However, senior pastor Kevin M. Baker, of Oakdale Emory United Methodist Church in Olney, Maryland, asked for a "rule of law" from the bishop to clarify the decision to reappoint Phoenix. He said the decision was made without adequate discussion of the "theological implications" of having a transgender pastor in the pulpit.

"There [are] a lot of questions here that no one is talking about," said Baker, who noted that clergy were not given advance notice of the matter.

Schol's written decision will come down within 30 days and, under church rules, will be reviewed by the denomination's Judicial Council in October. The United Methodist Church bans gay clergy but does not have a policy on transgender pastors.

This is the second time within the past five years that the Baltimore-Washington Conference has dealt with a transgender pastor. Rebecca A. Steen, who had served three Maryland communities during a 17-year ministry as Richard A. Zamostny, decided to leave the church in 2002 amid controversy.

In the new case, St. John's Church members told Schol that under the leadership of Phoenix the congregation has grown and its financial situation has improved, according to United Methodist News Service.

The pastor said in a statement that he decided to change his sex "after a lifelong spiritual journey and years of prayer and discernment. Fortunately, today, God's gift of medical science is enabling me to bring my physical body into alignment with my true gender." *-Religion News Service*