

Court says transgender UMC pastor may stay: No prohibition in church Book of Discipline

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A transgender man can remain pastor of his Baltimore church, the United Methodist Church's high court has determined. But the court sidestepped larger questions about whether gender change is acceptable for clergy in the denomination.

No law in the church's Book of Discipline prohibits people who have undergone gender change from serving as clergy, the nine-member Judicial Council said October 30, so pastor Drew Phoenix, 48, cannot be removed from ministry without "administrative or judicial" action.

The ruling affirms Baltimore-Washington bishop John R. Schol's decision to reappoint Phoenix, formerly Ann Gordon, after five years of service at St. John's of Baltimore City.

The decision was quickly hailed by liberals as a historic achievement for transgender people and for the 8- million-member United Methodist Church.

"The adjective placed in front of the noun 'clergyperson' does not matter," the council ruled during its semiannual session October 24-27 in San Francisco. "What matters is that clergypersons, once ordained and admitted to membership in full connection, cannot have that standing changed without being accorded fair process."

The council acknowledged that it was not addressing "the question of whether gender change is a chargeable offense or violates minimum standards established by the [quadrennial] General Conference."

Schol's decision to reappoint Phoenix had been challenged by several ministers in the conference who said the church needs to have a discussion about the theological implications of transgenderism.

Phoenix transitioned from female to male with surgery and hormone treatments about 16 months ago after what he described as a lifetime of feeling he was in the wrong body.

He said he was “happily surprised” by the ruling. “My hope is that this is the first step in all of us coming to the table to have an open, respectful discussion about inclusion in the church,” Phoenix said.

The Judicial Council meeting had been widely anticipated in part because the panel’s president, Dr. Jim Holsinger, has written critically on homosexual and gender identification issues and is President George W. Bush’s nominee for U.S. surgeon general. But Holsinger recused himself from participation because he could become an “unnecessary and unproductive distraction” to the court’s proceedings.

The U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee has been awaiting answers from Holsinger to follow-up questions posed to him in August on his views on homosexuality. His nomination has drawn opposition from gay rights groups, among others.

Conservative Methodists lamented the church court ruling and pledged to push for a ban on transgender clergy at next year’s General Conference in Fort Worth, Texas. In recent years, conservatives have been largely successful in upholding church laws against sexually active gay clergy.

To some conservative Methodists, Phoenix embodies another front in the culture wars, a rebel who has defied God and nature.

To mainstream society, Phoenix is an enigma who transcends traditional sexual boundaries, provoking uncomfortable questions about the interplay between body, mind and soul.

“The theological issues here are very important,” said Mark Jordan, a professor of Christian ethics at Atlanta’s Emory University. “It’s not just an issue of church discipline and it’s not just a freak show.”

Phoenix describes the transition from female to male as a homecoming. “For me, now it’s very much about being embodied, my spirit is in a body now,” Phoenix said in an interview. As a female, “my spirit was just, like, homeless.”

The 40-odd members of St. John's, who say they pride themselves on being the most accepting and inclusive Methodist church in Baltimore, said their minister's sex change was no big deal. They had some questions, which Phoenix answered in individual meetings, but no large theological hang-ups.

"It was like, 'OK, great, congratulations. You're living as God intended now, how wonderful,'" said Kara Ker, 33, a social worker and lifelong Methodist. "Every now and then people struggle with the pronouns, that's the biggest challenge."

The United Church of Christ, traditionally the country's most liberal mainline Christian denomination, ordained its first transsexual pastor, Bran Scott, in 1999. Other mainline Protestant churches haven't banned transgender pastors, but haven't exactly welcomed them either.

Erin K. Swenson, a Presbyterian pastor who transitioned from male to female in 1996, has written that "transgendered individuals are modern lepers in a culture that worships at the altar of sexual stereotypes."

Some Methodist delegates tried unsuccessfully to pass a resolution banning transgender pastors at the General Conference in 2004, said Diane DeLapp, a transsexual from Massachusetts who heads Affirmation, an advocacy group for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Methodists.

"We seem to be the target now," DeLapp said. *-Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*