

Bishop lifts censure on church with lesbian pastor: Action is first of its kind

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A Missouri bishop has lifted the public censure of a Lutheran church that hired a lesbian minister in 2000. The action is seen as the first of its kind since the nation's largest Lutheran denomination removed a ban on gay clergy last summer.

Bishop Gerald Mansholt of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America lifted the public censure and admonition against Abiding Peace Lutheran Church in North Kansas City, Missouri, in a January 25 letter that was reported recently by the ELCA. The censure had been imposed by a previous bishop.

In 2000, Abiding Peace hired Donna Simon, an open lesbian, as pastor. Before the final step to her ordination, Simon told an ELCA committee that she could not comply with the denomination's ban on gay and lesbian leaders. That ban was lifted last summer at the 4.5-million-member ELCA's Church wide Assembly.

Simon was later ordained through Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries, a group that accepts clergy candidates regardless of sexual orientation, although it is not considered an official body of the ELCA. ELM executive director Amalia Vagts said three ELCA churches and one pastor had been under public censure for violating the old policy, and Abiding Peace is believed to be the first to have the censure lifted. An ELCA spokesman concurred with that assessment.

Churches and clergy under public censure and admonition are not allowed to take part in ELCA councils, boards, or leadership teams.

"Now there's reconciliation, and we're part of the [church] that we've loved so long," Simon told the ELCA's News Service. "The lifting of the censure has touched us emotionally."

In a letter to Abiding Peace, Bishop Mansholt said, "I am deeply grateful for your patience and continuing partnership in the gospel over the last nine years." - *Religion News Service*