

Liberal D.C. pastors torn in response to gay marriage: Conflicting loyalties

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In the nation's capital, it now would be legal for Mary Kay Totty to perform marriages of same-sex couples. But in the United Methodist Church, the denomination that ordained Totty two decades ago, that act could get her defrocked. Totty, 46, said she's willing to take the risk.

"The institutional church has for so many years oppressed and excluded and harmed our [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] sisters and brothers," Totty said. "We have to say, 'Enough already. These are people's lives and loves that we continue to exclude from the fullness of life in the church.'"

Nineteen other current and former United Methodist clergy in this city have signed a statement supporting Totty and Dumbarton United Methodist Church, the small, liberal congregation that she's pastored since July. Many others campaigned to legalize gay marriage in Washington. But so far only Totty is willing to put her job on the line.

"It's very hard," said Dean Snyder, who supports Totty and leads Foundry United Methodist Church, one of this city's largest Methodist congregations, where one in four members is gay or lesbian. "We have no desire to defy the larger denomination; at the same time we want to minister to all members of our congregation."

As gay rights spread through civil society, an increasing number of clergy are, like Snyder, caught by conflicting loyalties, forced to choose between church law and civil law in pastoring to their gay and lesbian congregants.

Same-sex marriage is now legal in the District of Columbia and five states—Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Washington's large gay population—it has more same-sex couples per capita than any state—and its spotlight as the nation's capital only intensify the pastors' dilemma.

“My heart breaks for them,” said Amy Butler of Calvary Baptist Church, “because they do not know what to do.” Butler said Calvary, which will marry gay and lesbian couples, is reassessing its own ties with several Baptist denominations, including the conservative Southern Baptist Convention.

Most of the country’s large Christian denominations still consider homosexuality unbiblical and prohibit clergy from officiating at same-sex weddings—though those policies have been fiercely debated for decades.

In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for example, Jane Spahr was brought up on charges in March for marrying a lesbian couple in California in 2008, when it was briefly legal in the state. Church courts in the 2.3-million-member PCUSA have ruled against pastors who presumed to marry same-sex couples, though “blessing” such unions is allowed.

If Spahr is found guilty, it would be the first time for a pastor in the country’s largest Presbyterian denomination to be disciplined for following civil law over church law.

“It certainly gives us pause,” said Jeffrey Krehbiel, pastor at Washington’s Church of the Pilgrims, a PCUSA church that has offered “services of Holy Union” to gay couples for several years. “You are taking a risk if you publicly perform gay marriages, because you don’t know the consequences.”

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the conflict is not between church and civil laws but within the church itself. One policy, reaffirmed in 2005, says there is “no basis” in scripture or tradition for establishing rites for blessing gay couples. But last summer the ELCA voted to commit to “finding ways to allow congregations” to recognize same-gender partnerships.

So, which policy should D.C. Lutherans follow? “That’s exactly what we’re trying to figure out,” said Bishop Richard Graham of the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Synod. “This is a live issue for us.” Graham said his position mirrors that of the ELCA at large: the usual context for marriage is one man and one woman, but congregations and pastors may celebrate same-gender marriages.

Several pastors have already asked Graham for permission to marry gay couples, which he has granted, provided they gain approval from their congregation. The Washington synod will also hold a series of meetings to draft guidelines for same-gender marriages, Graham said.

“The best and worst part of Lutheranism is that everyone understands that what we really need to start with is a document—the more subordinate clauses the better.”

The rules are clearer in the United Methodist Church, whose Book of Discipline forbids churches and clergy from celebrating same-gender unions. Bishop John Schol of the UMC’s Baltimore-Washington Conference pledged to uphold the ban in a statement issued in March.

Louis Shockley, pastor of Washington’s Asbury United Methodist Church, said he will obey church rules, even though his congregation hosted a rally in favor of gay marriage last fall.

“I am ordained by the church. I am bound by the church. I desire to serve the church, and I am governed by church law,” Shockley said. “But it’s a struggle for me not to embrace all people.” *-Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*