

Jury defrocks openly gay Methodist pastor: Irene "Beth" Stroud

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After one of his pastors lost her ministerial license because she is openly gay, the United Methodist bishop of Philadelphia said it was time for the church to "move on in our ministry."

Bishop Marcus Matthews urged fellow Methodists to accept the guilty verdict against Irene "Beth" Stroud, the second United Methodist clergywoman in 17 years to be defrocked for violating a church ban on "self-avowed practicing" gay clergy.

"No matter what our individual views are on the issue of homosexuality, we owe the members of the trial court our word of thanks," Matthews said in a statement December 3. "Theirs was a difficult task where answers do not always appear clearly or quickly."

Stroud, 34, was convicted the day before in a 12-1 vote by a jury of her peers for engaging in "practices incompatible with Christian teachings." The jury later voted 7-6 to revoke her ministerial credentials. Stroud said she hoped the trial had been "a teaching moment for the church." Despite feeling sad at the outcome, she said she also feels "hopeful for the future of the church."

Her conviction is the first since the church's highest court tightened rules regarding gay clergy after a lesbian pastor in Washington state was acquitted last March. The only other Methodist pastor to be convicted and defrocked was Rose Mary Denman, in 1987.

Stroud announced last year that she and her partner, Chris Paige, were living in a committed relationship, setting in motion the events that led to the trial.

The presiding judge, retired Bishop Joseph Yeakel of Smithsburg, Maryland, declined to let the jury hear expert testimony from six defense witnesses who believe the church's ban against gay clergy violates its own legal principles. He told the jury "constitutional issues are not before this court" when a similar argument was tried

by Alfred Day III, Stroud's senior pastor at Philadelphia's First United Methodist Church of Germantown.

After her license was revoked, Day said that Stroud, who had been an associate pastor since 1999, will continue to oversee youth ministries at the church but will no longer be allowed to administer the sacraments. "Beth is deeply disappointed but as always is faithful and grounded in God's unconditional love," Day said.

Following the verdict, members of the pro-gay group Soulforce broke into choruses of "We Are a Gentle, Angry People" as Stroud's family embraced. "The United Methodist Church's deceptive marketing slogan is 'Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors,' but the church's heart, mind and doors are not open to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people," said Soulforce spokeswoman Laura Montgomery Rutt.

Conservatives welcomed the verdict as a strong defense of church teaching. "In a culture awash with sexual confusion . . . it is especially important for the church to make a clear witness about sexual ethics," said Mark Tooley, director of the Methodist program of the Institute on Religion and Democracy. "This dramatically shows that the United Methodist Church is not going in the direction of the Episcopal Church," which is embroiled in controversy over an openly gay bishop. *-Religion News Service*