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United Methodists Reach a Verdict

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The issue of homosexuality has roiled the waters of virtually all major denominations, and few churches remain untouched by the issue and its many controversies. Over the last year and a half, the Episcopal Church USA has elected an openly homosexual bishop, and other denominations have taken various positions ranging from conservative churches with clear biblical standards and convictions to more liberal churches with policies similar to the military's "don't ask, don't tell" culture.

The Pennsylvania case concerned the Rev. Irene Elizabeth Stroud, Associate Pastor at Philadelphia's First United Methodist Church of Germantown. Meeting in Pughtown, Pennsylvania, a thirteen-person jury of clergy members heard the prosecution make the case that Rev. Stroud is a self-avowed homosexual living in a sexually active relationship with another woman. Voting twelve to one, the jury found Rev. Stroud guilty of violating church law. With a 7-6 vote, the jury then moved to terminate Rev. Stroud's ministerial credentials in the United Methodist Church.

The case of Rev. Irene Elizabeth Stroud came to the nation's attention back in April, when she preached a sermon to her Philadelphia congregation. In "Walking in the Light," Stroud presented a confessional testimony of her experience as a lesbian. She told the congregation that she had come to understand that she was a lesbian during her studies at Bryn Mawr College, noting, "I came to understand that I was a lesbian, it seemed for awhile that I would have to choose between being true to myself and being a Christian." After a period of withdrawal from the church, she became a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York City—a center of liberal theology and biblical studies. There she "experienced a crisis of faith so profound and agonizing that I hope I never go through anything like it again." She dropped out of seminary, only to reenter in time to graduate and move into the ordination process of the United Methodist Church. "The whole story of how I came to begin the ordination process in the United Methodist Church, despite its discriminatory stance, is a longer story than I can tell today," she informed her congregation. Nevertheless, she did tell the church that she had experienced "a call to ministry" as she was "working on a newspaper article about gay and lesbian spiritual leaders in New York, interviewing four different pastors and rabbis, all of whom had found ways to integrate a healthy honesty about their sexual orientation with a powerful, effective ministry."

Though members of the Germantown church concede that they assumed Beth Stroud to be homosexual, it was not until she preached this sermon that the issue became fully clear—and public. As she reached the climactic section of her sermon, Stroud explained, "I know that, by telling the truth about myself, I risk losing my credentials as an ordained United Methodist minister. And that would be a huge loss for me. But I have realized that not telling the whole truth about myself has been holding me back in my faith. I have come to a place where my discipleship, my walk with Christ, requires telling the whole truth, and paying whatever price truthfulness requires. I don't feel afraid. I feel that God is with me. I feel that I'm doing my best to follow Jesus and to walk as he walked. I know that God will take care of me. I know that God will bless my truth-telling and my risk-taking as God has blessed my ministry. I believe that somehow, in my taking this step together with [her church in Germantown], the life and light of Christ will shine in the world. And that's what really matters to me."

In other words, Beth Stroud came out of the closet and dared the United Methodist Church to challenge her fitness for ministerial office on the basis of her homosexuality. Just in case church officials missed the point, she went on to tell her congregation “about a very important person that most of you haven’t had a chance to know.” That person was her partner, Chris Paige. “Chris and I have lived together in a covenant relationship for two and a half years,” Stroud explained, noting that “Chris is understandably nervous about becoming known as a ‘minister’s wife’.”

When the jury met to consider Stroud’s case, they should have had no question about the standards of their denomination. The United Methodist Book of Discipline twice identifies homosexuality as “incompatible with Christian teaching.” In the most important section of the standards, the language is precise and clear: “While persons set apart by the church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world. Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”

That language should be more than sufficient to make the case, but a similar trial held earlier in 2004 ended in the acquittal of Rev. Karen Dammann. Like Stroud, Dammann was a publicly-avowed lesbian, living in a sexual relationship with a female partner.

In the face of this evidence, and against the clear text of the Book of Discipline, the jury refused to convict Dammann, demonstrating a pattern known in legal circles as “jury nullification.” Faced with overwhelming evidence of guilt, the jury simply refused to convict. In essence, the jury decided to put the standards of the church on trial, rather than Rev. Dammann.

In an exhibition of verbal gymnastics mixed with intellectual dishonesty, the Dammann jury claimed, “We have made every attempt to be faithful to the Book of Discipline in its entirety. We have taken very seriously the mandate to presume innocence unless there is sufficient evidence to bring a different verdict. The church’s obligation is to present clear and convincing evidence to sustain the charge. We searched the Discipline and did not find a declaration that ‘the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching’.”

Come again? Those very words appear in clear text in two different places in the Book of Discipline. The jury did find the statement within the Book of Discipline—they just refused to find the statement to be “a declaration.”

Meeting in May, just weeks after the Dammann debacle, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church adopted several measures that, among other things, made clear that these words were to be taken as nothing less than a “declaration” of the church’s convictions and standards for ministry.

Armed with that clarification, the Pennsylvania jury moved quickly to convict Rev. Stroud of violating church law by being in a sexual relationship with another woman.

Thomas Hall, lead counsel for the United Methodist Church, told the denomination’s news services, “We do not like bringing charges against a colleague, but the Book of Discipline is very clear about what it means to be an ordained United Methodist minister.”

After the trial, Stroud told observers that she had expected to be convicted. Throughout the trial, the Germantown congregation offered public support of their associate pastor. After the trial, church leaders pledged to hire Stroud in a lay capacity, even as they pushed for the United Methodist Church to abandon its prohibition against homosexual clergy.

In the wake of the verdict, conservative groups cheered the result, expressing hope that the trial and conviction would be a sobering moment for the denomination that would increase its resolve and serve as a catalyst for returning the church to a biblical standard of sexual morality.

Predictably, homosexual advocates saw the conviction as a great step backwards. Kathryn J. Johnson, Executive Director of the Methodist Federation for Social Action, came up with a most interesting argument. She allowed that Stroud had violated the Book of Discipline by being a “practicing” homosexual living in a partnership with another woman. Furthermore, she conceded that, “there is overwhelming agreement across the church as to the meaning of this covenant.” Nevertheless, “throughout the course of this trial everyone agreed, that with one exception, Beth has not only

honored this covenant but has served as a spirit-filled role model for parishioners, colleagues and Bishops in living out this covenant.”

Johnson argued that the jury—and by extension the whole church—should have taken a larger view. Had they done so, she argued, the jury would have found Stroud “not guilty” because, even though she was in clear violation of the Book of Discipline on this point, she was otherwise faithful.

You can count on this argument appearing again and again in the future. Homosexual advocates will now press their case to argue that sexuality just isn’t that big a deal after all. So long as a candidate is otherwise judged to be faithful and shows evidence of possessing gifts for ministry, why should a little issue like sexuality be a hang-up? Sinlessness is not a qualification for Christian ministry. All ministers—and all Christians—are sinners saved by grace. At the same time, Christians may not persist in sin—celebrating such persistence as a “lifestyle” or “orientation”—but are to repent of sin, trust the grace and mercy of God, and move into patterns of biblically-defined righteousness and holiness.

The United Methodist Church took a great step forward in this trial, tragic as it was. There is no joy in dealing with sin, and a church trial is, in itself, evidence of prior moral failure or theological compromise. Nevertheless, once her sexual orientation and relationship became known, Rev. Beth Stroud became a test case for United Methodist conviction and courage.

In convicting Beth Stroud of violating church law by a 12-1 margin, the church demonstrated clarity and courage. The 7-6 vote to terminate her ministerial credentials was a close call, but can still send a loud message.

On December 2, 2004, the United Methodist Church reached a verdict. We must all hope that this will be a first step toward comprehensive recovery. Otherwise, the forces of moral relativism and theological compromise will surely gain ascendancy in short order.

