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Can the Methodists Recover? The Trial that Wasn't

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Tuesday, March 23, 2004

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The facts of the case are straightforward. Karen Dammann is an ordained minister [elder] in The United Methodist Church. She claims that she did not fully realize her sexual orientation when she submitted herself for ordination as a minister in 1994. Shortly thereafter, she identified herself as a homosexual, found a partner, and began living in a lesbian relationship. At the same time, she was also appointed as pastor of the 200-member First United Methodist Church of Ellensburg, Washington.

Her trial was the result of the fact she “came out” to her bishop, stating that she could no longer live dishonestly, knowing that the Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church disallows “avowed practicing homosexuals” from serving as ministers in the church. Upon receiving this notice, Bishop Elias Galvan began the process that led to the three-day trial that ended on March 20.

Like the other denominations of liberal Protestantism, The United Methodist Church has been torn by debates over homosexuality. The denomination meets every four years for a General Conference—and every meeting since 1972 has been marked by rancorous debate over the issue of homosexuality and the status of homosexual clergy. When the church faced its most recent trial of a practicing lesbian serving as pastor, that minister was stripped of her credentials and removed from the ministry. Karen Dammann’s acquittal indicates just how fast the homosexual agenda has gained momentum within The United Methodist Church.

The trial called for a jury of thirteen members to hear the evidence presented by the church’s prosecution and then to hear witnesses presented by the defense. Bishop Galvan brought the charges against Rev. Dammann with considerable hesitation, and the official prosecutor for the case actually made only a half-hearted attempt to present his case before the jury. The defense called twenty witnesses to the stand, while the prosecution called only one. After the trial, the Rev. James Finkbeiner, who argued the church’s case during the trial, said he thought jurors had been inclined to acquit Dammann even before the evidence was presented. Furthermore, he told The Seattle Times that the verdict was “out of bounds with the way the Discipline actually reads.” Astonishingly enough, he then went on to say: “I’m glad I lost.” With a prosecution like that, who needs a defense?

The defense also brought “expert” witnesses from the Pacific School of Religion, who sought to undermine the authority of Scripture. The biblical passages that condemn homosexuality are not to be taken seriously, these liberal scholars argued, for translation issues and selectivity make the texts unreliable. The Pacific School of Religion, located in Berkeley, California, is affiliated with the United Church of Christ, a far-left denomination that ordains openly homosexual ministers. The school also serves as host to the “Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry” [CLGS] and actively supports calls for same-sex marriage. PSR claims to have “strong ties” to The United Methodist Church.

When the verdict was announced, Rev. Dammann and her partner, Meredith Savage, embraced and celebrated. The jury went on to read a statement explaining its decision. “We have made every attempt to be faithful to the Book of Discipline in its entirety,” the jury claimed. “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.’” That statement is a breathtaking exercise in intellectual dishonesty and theological evasion. The very fact that the jury’s statement included the words, “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” demonstrates that they did find the statement within the Book of Discipline. Nevertheless, they did not “find” the statement to be a declaration.

The English language can be made to perform incredible verbal acrobatics, but if grammar and words mean anything, the text of the Book of Discipline is unambiguous. In its section regarding the practice of homosexuality, the Book of Discipline reads: “Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God’s grace is available. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn their lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.”

Obviously, this official statement obligates United Methodists to “consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” The jury disingenuously chose to declare those words to be short of a “declaration.”

In a separate section dealing with the ministry of the ordained, the Book of Discipline is even more 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, and 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.” Once again, the Book of Discipline has declared that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” and goes on to extend that argument to declare that practicing homosexuals are thus not to serve as ministers of The United Methodist Church. Nevertheless— in the face of clear and unambiguous language—the jury claimed that it could not find these words to constitute anything binding on the Church.

The Rev. Karla M. Fredericksen, one of the thirteen jurors, explained, “Although we, the trial court, found passages that contained the phrasing ‘incompatible with Christian teaching,’ we did not find any of them constitute a declaration.” Rev. Fredericksen’s exercise in theological gymnastics was affirmed by retired Bishop Jack Tuell, who served as one of the witnesses who testified on Dammann’s behalf.

Presented as one of the denomination’s top experts on the Book of Discipline, Tuell claimed that the official policy uses “soft words” that do not amount to a declaration. The use of words like “consider” and “condone,” Tuell claimed, are a way of avoiding any clear statement. “The United Methodist Church knows how to declare something incompatible,” Tuell said. According to the retired bishop, the denomination’s statements on homosexuality are “fatally ambiguous and uncertain.”

With bishops like this, it is no wonder that The United Methodist Church is in big trouble. How does a denomination deal with a retired bishop—posing as one of the “top experts” on its official policy—who suggests that the church intended to be ambiguous and thus really says nothing binding about homosexuality? How can biblical Christians reconcile their membership in The United Methodist Church with a process that so deliberately subverts biblical teaching?

Rev. James V. Heidinger, president of Good News, a group of conservatives within the church, expressed grief and outrage at the decision. “It was assumed by most of us that we were just going through due process to make sure her rights were protected, but that she was obviously in violation of church law.”

“How can there be a not guilty verdict when what she’s done is public and she has confessed it?” asked Rev. Dr. Maxie D. Dunnam, president of Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. “I’m very surprised and I’m very disappointed because it’s another sign of really anarchy in the church,” he said. “We can’t continue to live with the whole segment of the church that is deliberately disobeying the Church’s law.”

The outcome of the Dammann trial can be explained as a case of “jury nullification.” Karen Dammann declared herself to be an avowed, practicing homosexual. That was never in question. The Book of Discipline condemns this

sexual lifestyle as incompatible with Christian teaching and disallows homosexual clergy. That was never seriously challenged. At the end of day, the jury put the law and doctrine of The United Methodist Church on trial—not Karen Dammann. The jury simply refused to find her guilty.

The fact that this was a case of jury nullification is proved by the fact that Karen Dammann’s homosexuality was never even in doubt—and it didn’t matter to the jury. All concerned knew full well that the Book of Discipline settles the issue clearly. Yet—in brazen defiance of the church’s law—the jury found her not guilty. According to Bishop Galvan, she will be appointed to another post of ministry, and perhaps back to her pulpit in Ellensburg.

This is another tragic tale of liberal leaders rejecting all accountability to the church, to their own Book of Discipline, and ultimately to the Word of God. They bend the knee to the authority of popular culture and political correctness, and are proud of their self-declared progressivism. They see the laity of the church as backward and repressive, and appoint themselves to the task of theological and moral revisionism. They know no shame and show no fear of correction or of being called to account. Denomination by denomination, the liberals are hi-jacking churches and institutions and getting away with it. As Maxie Dunnam stated, a whole segment of this church is “deliberately disobeying the Church’s law.”

There will be no recovery until obedience to biblical authority is recovered. There will be no respect for the Book of Discipline until the church reasserts discipline. There will be no peace in the church until the church finds its peace in God’s truth and stops subverting the Word of God. It’s that simple.

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