



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on June 20, 2011

United Methodist Clergy Defy Church's Same-Sex Marriage Ban

Many United Methodist Church clergy are revealing an increasing willingness to disobey church doctrine that prohibits them from officiating at same-sex marriages, regardless of the potential consequences of such disobedience. Trials of Methodist pastors who conduct same-sex marriages have occurred rarely — only once every few years. However, Methodist Rev. Amy DeLong (left) of Osceola, Wisconsin, is currently facing a three-day trial, beginning on Tuesday, on two charges: violating the church prohibition of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals,” and officiating at the marriage of a lesbian couple.



The Blaze [reports](#):

In some parts of the U.S., Methodist pastors have been marrying same-sex couples or conducting blessing ceremonies for same-sex unions for years with little fanfare and no backlash from the denomination. Calls to overturn the rule have become increasingly vocal in recent weeks, ratcheting up the pressure for the Methodist church to join other mainline Protestant denominations that have become more accepting of openly gay leaders.

According to DeLong, 44, she was open with her supervisors regarding her own lesbian relationship and was comforted by the support and care she received in response. She said that she did not discuss her relationship in church settings, and that her efforts to keep her personal life secretive took a toll on her. In the fall of 2009, she agreed to marry a lesbian couple, and honestly reported on the incident in a ministerial report months later. Eventually, the two church charges were filed against her.

In response, DeLong commented:

I would be lying if I said this process hasn't been difficult, but I also feel called to break the silence and tell my own truth regardless of the consequences. When I entered [the ministry] I did not suspend my conscience. It's incumbent on me not to perpetuate its unjust laws.

DeLong is just one of a growing number of Methodist clergy willing to defy the church rule. *The Blaze* writes that hundreds of pastors in Illinois, Minnesota, New York, and New England have signed a statement asserting their willingness to break the rule, regardless of the potential penalties they may face by the church, which include suspension from the ministry.

Likewise, Minnesota Methodist Rev. Bruce Robbins invited a number of clergy to sign a similar statement indicating that they would be willing to perform any weddings, not just heterosexual ones, and has received 70 signatures thus far. Robbins indicated that he was inspired to do so because lawmakers in his state are working to limit civil marriages to heterosexual couples, adding:



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One of the tragedies is, there are so many things we should be attending to: poverty issues, justice issues. I wish this didn't have to be at the center of our efforts today. But it is because of the inequality, the unfairness of the policy.

Over 140 clergy in New York signed a similar statement, with an additional 500 signatures from members of the church. In New England, 100 retired clergy signed a statement making similar assertions, with nearly a dozen already having conducted same-sex marriages without facing complaints. Illinois pastors accumulated 200 signatures from members of the clergy on June 10, who also passed nonbinding agreements that any jury convicting a pastor of violating the church rule recommend a penalty no stronger than a 24-hour suspension, as those on the church juries are clergy members.

One retired Illinois pastor explained, "It's not something we can dictate to the jury but it's a suggestion of how we can both honor rules of the church law and also honor Jesus' teaching about inclusivity."

Methodist clergy say they are pushing for momentum to overturn the ban because the church is in violation of "social-justice teachings."

Retired pastor Richard Harding of Massachusetts, 85, who had been performing same-sex marriages for 10 years without drawing complaints, remarks:

I'm getting on in years and I may not see the change but there's definitely an uprising taking place. There are signs that the pole of justice is beginning to lean the proper way. I think we'll see even more of this. We aren't going to go away.

Though members of the Methodist clergy are interested in reversing the rule, *The Blaze* contends it will be a difficult process:

The chances of getting the rule reversed within the Methodist church are far from certain, however. Rule changes must be approved by delegates at the church's General Conference, held every four years. Because a growing number of delegates come from Africa, the Philippines and other theologically conservative regions, voting patterns reflect strong resistance to change.

Theologically conservative Methodists believe that the Bible bars same-sex relationships and have been advocating for years to keep the prohibition against same-gender marriage in the Methodist's Book of Discipline. Just last month, the Methodist Judicial Council, the denomination's highest court, upheld the ban on same-gender marriage and clergy who are "self-avowed practicing homosexuals."

Mark Tooley, president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, indicates that the rule would have to be overturned by a vote of the entire worldwide delegation, or that the U.S. delegation would set its own rules, both of which seem to be long shots.

Photo: In this June 16, 2011 photo, Rev. Amy sits at her home, in Osceola, Wis.: AP Images



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