

Lesbian minister's congregation celebrates her court victory

By Shannon Dininny
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ELLENSBURG, Wash.— Congregants in the Methodist church where the Rev. Karen Dammann used to preach celebrated her acquittal Sunday, a day after she was cleared of violating church doctrine by living in a lesbian relationship.

"I'm very pleased," said Dodie Haight, a member of the congregation who sat through Dammann's trial about 95 miles away in the Seattle suburb of Bothell. "I don't think the jury had an easy task, but I think they gave it long, thoughtful, prayerful consideration."

Dammann, 47, was acquitted Saturday by a jury of 13 pastors of violating a church ban on ordaining "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals." If the jurors had voted to convict, Dammann could have lost her ministry.

The United Methodist Church has repeatedly voted against loosening policies on homosexuality, but the response to the verdict in this small, central Washington town was warm.

Haight said she arrived at church early expecting protesters, but there were none.

"The people of the congregation have been incredible to me," Dammann said Saturday.

But there was concern about the fallout for the United Methodist Church, the nation's third-largest denomination with 15 million U.S. members.

"I believe the vast majority of United Methodists are in grief and shock today. I'm personally heartbroken," said Patricia Miller, executive director of the Confessing Movement, a conservative movement within the United Methodist Church.

"I think the issue is, a part of the jurisdiction has broken covenant with the rest of the

church and has decided to go the way of the world, as opposed to being faithful to and abiding by church law."

The conservative renewal movement, which claims more than 600,000 members, was formed 10 years ago. Miller said she could not predict how the tensions within the denomination will play out.

"We're just praying about what is the proper response to what has occurred," she said.

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Church law prohibits the ordination of open homosexuals and the church's Book of Discipline declares homosexuality to be "incompatible to Christian teachings." However, the denomination's social principles support gay rights and liberties.

Dammann, 47, declared her sexual preference in February 2001, when she sought a new church appointment. She and her partner of nine years, Meredith Savage, married earlier this month in Oregon. They have a 5-year-old son.

Dammann said she and Savage planned to stay out of

the public eye for a few days rather than join her congregation, but said she hopes to return to Ellensburg as pastor. She's been on family leave for more than two years, caring for her son, who has a respiratory illness.

At Sunday's service, attended by about 60 people, the Rev. Ron Hines, superintendent of the Pacific Northwest Conference's Seven Rivers District, read a letter from Bishop Elias Galvan.

"This decision will not resolve the conflict within the United Methodist Church, nor within the congregations of this conference," Galvan wrote. "As long as this issue is important to society, the church must continue to reflect theologically and biblically and lead in ministries of justice and peace."

Dammann said she realizes the church has a difficult time ahead of it. "For the church it means the beginning of another stage of the struggle," she said Saturday. "I'm mindful of that. This is going to be painful."

Since the late 1980s, Pacific Northwest Methodist leaders have petitioned for eased policies on homosexuality at each of the denomination's General Conferences, held every four years. During past international General Conferences, most attendees have opposed change. The next General Conference begins next month.

Similar rifts have developed in other Christian denominations — most notably the Episcopal Church, which confirmed an openly gay bishop last year. Since then, several conservative parishes have threatened to break ties with the denomination.

"These are not easy issues to agree upon," said Rev. Jim Finkbeiner, who prosecuted the case against Dammann. "Frankly, we in the Northwest are still in the minority, but it's a growing minority."

NEWS IN BRIEF

U.S. will retain power in Iraq after transfer of sovereignty

BAGHDAD, Iraq — The United States says Iraq will be sovereign, no longer under military occupation, on June 30. But most power will reside within the world's largest U.S. Embassy, backed by 110,000 U.S. troops. The fledgling Iraqi government will be capable of tackling little more than drawing up a budget and preparing for elections, top U.S. and Iraqi officials say.

"We're still here. We'll be paying a lot of attention,

and we'll have a lot of influence," a top U.S. official said on condition of anonymity. "We're going to have the world's largest diplomatic mission with a significant amount of political weight."

In just over three months, the mantle of sovereignty in Iraq will be passed to an interim government. Its composition and the manner of its choosing will be decided after a United Nations team arrives this week.

But with Iraqi elections scheduled for December or January, the interim government will last a fleeting seven months at most: a butterfly's life, in legislative terms.

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Symposium Panel Sessions
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International Center World Room, Room 1017

10:30 – 11:45 am - Panel II

"Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and Food Safety Issues"
Presidential Conference Center, Rooms 1011, 1011A

1:30 – 2:30 pm - Panel III

"International Criminal Court"
Presidential Conference Center, Rooms 1011, 1011A

2:45 – 4:00 pm - Panel IV

"Global Security Issues"
Presidential Conference Center, Rooms 1011, 1011A

4:15 – 5:00 pm - Concluding Remarks

Robert A. Bradtke, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, U.S. Department of State
Presidential Conference Center, Rooms 1011, 1011A

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