

# Dammann verdict prompts mixed reactions from groups

A UMNS REPORT

By Amy Green

**T**he acquittal of a lesbian clergywoman in a United Methodist church trial has sparked both criticism and praise from unofficial advocacy groups, as some celebrate the verdict while others blast it as “schismatic.”

The March 20 acquittal of the Rev. Karen Dammann of Ellensburg, Wash., led some groups to call for a reprimand of church leaders in the region. Others, however, said the verdict should push United Methodists to focus instead on Christian unity and tolerance.

The trial’s outcome “points to the deep and painful divisions that exist within our denomination,” said the Rev. Kathryn Johnson of the Methodist Federation for Social Action, a group that supported the verdict. “As the news of the ‘not guilty’ verdict spread across the country ... tears of rejoicing and relief were shed and prayers of thanks uttered. At the very same moment,

others were shedding tears of grief and pain as they tried to deal with feelings of shock and betrayal.”

■ For additional coverage of the Washington state verdict, visit the United Methodist News Service site at [www.umns.umc.org](http://www.umns.umc.org), click on “Daily News,” then “Karen Dammann Trial.”

The denomination put Dammann, a Seattle-area pastor, on trial after she acknowledged her longtime homosexual relationship. While church law prohibits the ordination of “self-avowed

practicing homosexuals,” a jury of 13 of her peers found Dammann innocent of the single charge against her, that of “practices declared by the United Methodist Church to be incompatible with Christian teachings.”

Groups disappointed in the decision directed some of their criticism at the denomination’s Pacific Northwest Annual (regional) Conference and Western Jurisdiction. The jurisdiction, one of the church’s five U.S. regions, is viewed as being more liberal on social issues than other parts of the church, particularly in comparison with the denomination’s Southeastern and South Central areas.

The Confessing Movement said that by the actions of the jury, the Pacific Northwest Conference has become “schismatic.”

“This nullification of church law ... must not be allowed to stand,” the group said in a statement. “The clergy jury have broken covenant with the church and failed to live up to their ordination vows.”

The verdict came a month before General Conference, the church’s largest legislative assembly held every four years. Nearly 1,000 delegates from across the globe will gather in Pittsburgh on April 27-May 7 to make laws for the denomination.

The Confessing Movement suggested that delegates consider a way to allow “those in the Western Jurisdic-



UMNS photos by Les Fetchko

The Rev. Judith Schultz, trial court chair, reads the not-guilty verdict at the Rev. Karen Dammann trial on March 20.

tion – and the rest of the church for that matter – who are not willing to keep and live by the covenants of the church ... to amicably depart from the denomination with their property and clergy retirement benefits secured.”

The Good News organization argued the verdict puts the church “in the midst of one of its most serious crises in more than a decade.” That group, too, described the verdict as “schismatic” and called on United Methodists to voice their dismay to church leaders, and General Conference delegates to consider a censure of Pacific Northwest church leaders.

“The United Methodist Church cannot continue with any sense of unity with these kinds of destructive irregularities tearing at the heart, soul and conscience of the church,” Good News said in a statement.

The ecumenical Institute on Religion and Democracy condemned the verdict as “farcical.”

“Every United Methodist General Conference since 1972 has declared homosexual practice to be incompatible with Christian teaching,” said Mark Tooley, a spokesman for the group. “Yet a jury of 13 clergy decided the church in fact has no position on the topic.”

However, Johnson, executive director of the Methodist Federation for Social Action, cheered the verdict. The group has submitted a petition urging General Conference to delete a reference

in the church’s Social Principles to homosexuality being incompatible with Christian teaching and to acknowledge instead the differences that exist in the denomination “among faithful Christians.” “We stand before God admitting that we have thus far been unable to reach common ground,” the group’s suggested wording says.

This confession is necessary for the church to move forward on the issue, Johnson said.

“The question should not be which side will ‘win’ but rather how to address the deep divisions in the body of the church,” she said.

Others echoed that sentiment. Troy Plummer, executive director of the Reconciling Ministries Network – a group pushing for broader inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people in the denomination – found the verdict an affirmation of diversity that should be celebrated.

The Rev. Peggy R. Gaylord, spokeswoman for Affirmation, a group working to make the denomination more inclusive to all, summed her feelings up simply.

“We just really deplore any efforts to exclude to any degree any group from participation from life in the church,” she said. “I just think that...a fundamental message of Christ is that the church is open to all. We get hung up on doctrine. ... The doctrine was not what Jesus was about.” ■

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