

United Methodist bishops vow to uphold church law

By United Methodist News Service

Leaders of the United Methodist Council of Bishops say that the denomination's long-standing position on the ordination of homosexuals is not affected by a church court decision involving a Washington State pastor.

The council's executive committee released a statement March 26 in response to questions raised by the acquittal of the Rev. Karen Dammann, who had been charged with violating a church law prohibiting the ordination of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals.

A 13-member jury of pastors from the Pacific Northwest Annual (regional) Conference acquitted Dammann after deliberating for more than 10 hours during the four-day trial. While unanimously agreeing Dammann is a self-avowed, practicing homosexual, the jury said it did not believe the church met its "clear and convincing" burden of proof.

The bishops reached agreement on the statement following a March 25 conference call organized by Bishop Ruediger Minor of Moscow, president of the council.

While reaffirming their "vow to uphold the Discipline of the United Methodist Church," the members of the executive committee said the Pacific Northwest case does not affect how other conferences adjudicate similar cases. They urge United Methodists to remember that "this one case does not alter the *Book of Discipline* regarding homosexuality or the qualifications for ministry."

The committee called on church members to "join us in respectful, prayerful dialogue... Let us find, affirm, and live a common understanding of our doctrines and discipline."

The bishops said they are convinced that General Conference, the denomination's top legislative body, "must be a place of prayerful consideration of and agreement over our commonly held convictions and norms for Christian teaching and living."

The 2004 General Conference will take place April 27-May 7 in Pittsburgh. The legislative body meets every four years to consider proposals regarding the *Book of Discipline*, which contains church law and social principles, and the *Book of Resolutions*, which addresses social issues. The nearly 1,000 delegates at the conference represent 8.3 million United Methodists in the United States and 1.7 million United Methodists who live in Europe, Africa, and the Philippines. ■

Holston leaders express concern, plead for prayers

By Annette Bender

In the days following the Rev. Karen Dammann's March 20 acquittal, Holston leaders issued statements expressing concern and asking for prayers.

On March 24, Bishop Ray Chamberlain posted his response on Holston's www.holston.org site (also published on this page).

On March 30, Jean Henderson, head of Holston's General Conference delegation, prepared "An Appeal to the Churches of Holston Conference."

"The Council of Bishops reminds us that this one case does not alter the *Book of Discipline* regarding homosexuality or qualifications for ministry and that the *Discipline's* authority is unchanged," she stated. "They also call the church to join in respectful, prayerful dialogue."

Henderson appealed to churches to continue to sign up for the "Saturating General Conference '04 in Prayer" vigil. The vigil will extend for 40 days before General Conference and 11 days while conference is in session, April 27-May 7.

"This is especially important in light of the recent church trial court decision that has left many of us wondering what we can do when there are those who by their actions say that upholding the *Discipline* is not important," Henderson stated.

"It would be wonderful if we had churches in every district praying every day for the delegates, for the petitions that will be coming before the conference, for a discerning spirit, and for God to work through the delegates as they make decisions that can affect our great church in the years to come," she added.

Henderson also invited concerned persons to attend the Holston delegation's next meeting on Thursday, April 15, at First White Pine UMC in Morristown District.

"We welcome any pastor or member of any church to come to that meeting between 10 a.m. and noon if you feel strongly that you have something you want to share with the delegation. Or, we welcome your communications by phone, e-mail or letters."

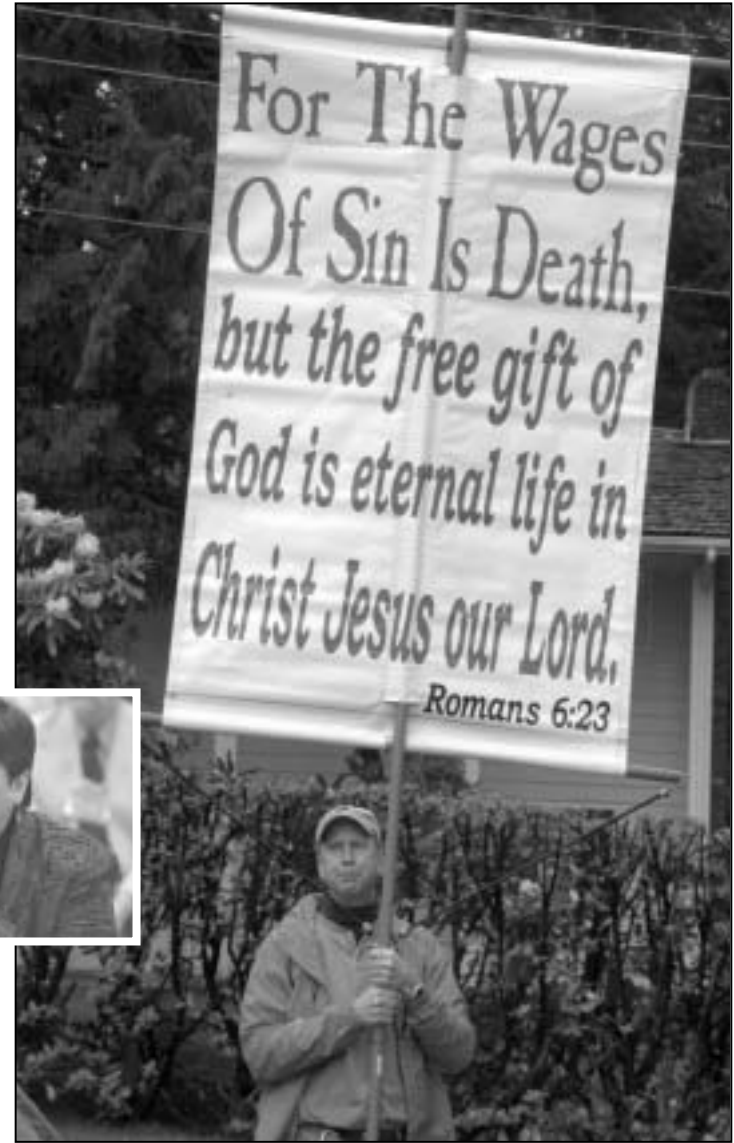
A list of delegation members and contact information is available in the Feb. 27 issue of *The Call* or by calling the conference office at (865) 690-4080.

Congregations wishing to participate in the prayer vigil should immediately contact Henderson at (423) 472-6428 or jeanhendersonj@aol.com.

Church members may also join others who have dialogued on the conference Web site. (Go to www.holstonconference.com and click next to "Holston Talk.") To send a letter to the editor, write "C-Mail," P.O. Box 32939, Knoxville, TN 37930-3162, fax (865) 690-3162, or e-mail thecall@holston.org. ■



The Rev. Karen Dammann waits to hear the verdict.



Richard Charles, of Bothell, quotes Scripture and shouts anti-gay messages in the parking lot of Bothell (Wash.) United Methodist Church, the site of the trial of the Rev. Karen Dammann.

Bishop Chamberlain's statement

"Personally I regret using a church trial to address the issue of homosexuality. The official position of the United Methodist Church is that all persons are of sacred worth. At the same time the United Methodist Church prohibits practicing homosexuals to be in ordained ministry.

"I do not know all the facts about this case nor the verdict that was rendered. I do not know that basis on which the jurors made their decision, but I do know that church trials, like civic trials, are often conflicted and complex. I encourage patience and prayer as this case plays itself out. Judgment should be withheld until all the facts are in.

"Since our prayers should always be for truth telling and healing, my plea is for all to be in prayer for the persons who will get hurt, misunderstood, and misrepresented in a case like this."

Bishop Ray W. Chamberlain Jr.

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