

Methodist trial on lesbian rite ends

Minister's peers say he's innocent of disobedience

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KEARNEY, Neb. — A Methodist pastor accused of disobeying church rules by performing a lesbian unity ceremony was found innocent yesterday by a jury of fellow ministers.

If convicted, the Rev. Jimmy Creech could have lost his position as senior pastor of Omaha's largest United Methodist Church and been stripped of his ministerial credentials.

The case was the first challenge to United Methodist policy on homosexual union, and the jury's decision could shape how the 9.5 million-member denomination interprets rules governing its treatment of homosexuals.

The jury was made up of four women and nine men, all ministers from Nebraska.

Jury foreman Grant Story said the vote reflected the difficulty the church has had with the issue.

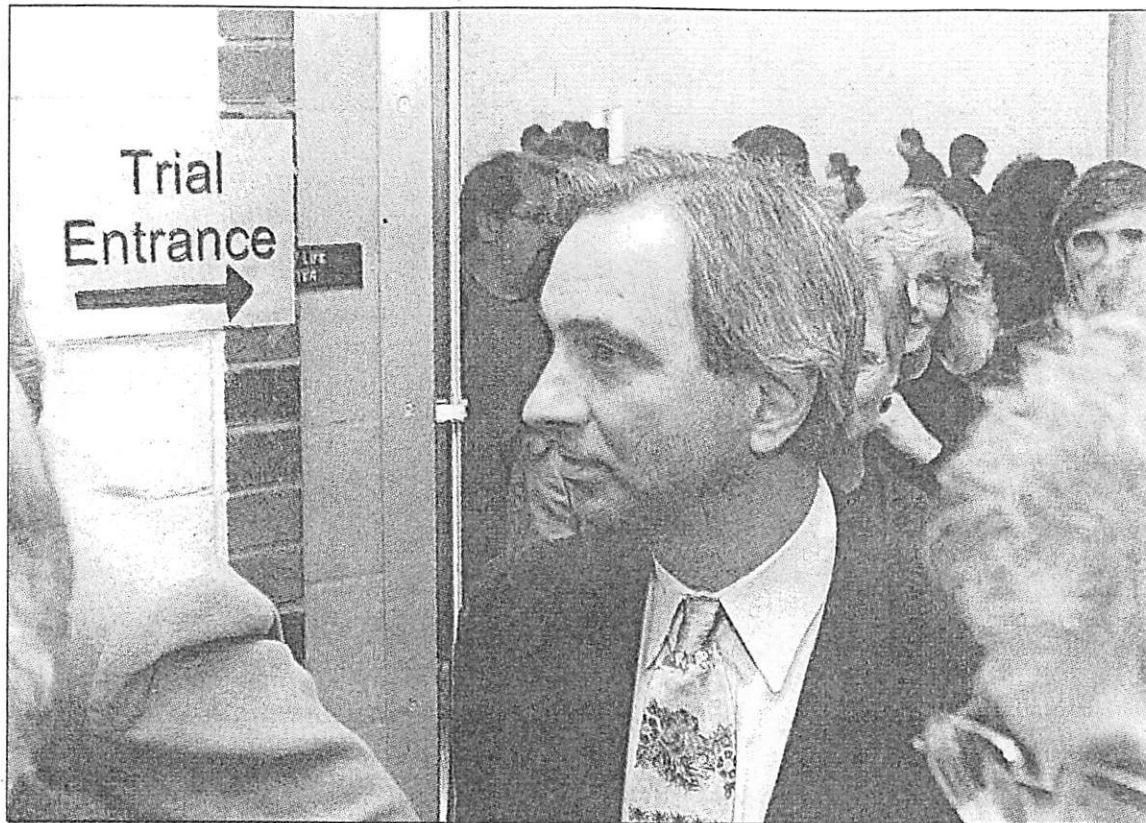
"We have struggled, no, agonized together in a spirit of love and our hope is that United Methodists everywhere will receive our verdict in that same spirit of love and respect," Story said after the verdict was read.

The 53-year-old Creech conducted the commitment ceremony in Kearney in September. He was suspended from the leadership of his congregation on Nov. 10.

Creech testified that he was simply serving the spiritual needs of two female church members.

The Rev. Loren Ekdahl of Lincoln, who argued the church's side, said Creech went wrong by conducting the ceremony as if it were an official rite.

In Creech's defense, the Rev. Douglas Williamson of Nebraska Wesleyan University argued that the church's Social Principles, amended in 1996 to prohibit "ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions," are



The Rev. Jimmy Creech, seen here leaving the courtroom Thursday, testified that he was merely serving the spiritual needs of two female members of the church when he performed the ceremony in September.

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merely guidelines.

The Methodist case was being closely watched by gay-rights activists and others.

"A decision against the church's rules will not alter the rules, but it certainly will raise the level of discussions in church circles," said the Rev. Bill Lawrence, a Duke University professor who studies U.S. Methodists.

Creech's backers included President Clinton's pastor, who testified yesterday.

"We have to find a way to be supportive of these committed relationships," said the Rev. Phil Wogaman, pastor at Foundry United Methodist

Church in Washington. "The church also speaks in many voices."

Joe Leonard of the National Council of Churches, which represents 34 Protestant and Orthodox churches in the United States, said many congregations of various denominations are conducting same-sex ceremonies, "but often they have to do it in defiance of their denomination's policies."

The United Church of Christ is the only mainline Protestant church that appears to permit homosexual ceremonies, Leonard said. It also is the only major denomination that permits the ordination of homosexuals.

The United Methodist Church is

the largest of the mainline Protestant denominations, a group that also includes the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA), which have endured continuing internal struggles between supporters and opponents of ordaining homosexuals as clergy members.

In 1996, the Methodists' top policy-making body rejected a proposal to allow non-celibate homosexuals to be ministers. It also voted to add a single sentence — "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches" — to the church's rule book, "The Book of Discipline."