

# The Trial of Beth Stroud

Lesbian's pastoral credentials revoked by Methodist court.

BY EUAN BEAR

**G**ermantown, PA – Last month, after a two-day trial, the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church revoked the ministerial credentials of pastor Irene Elizabeth (“Beth”) Stroud as an “avowed practicing homosexual.” Stroud had written and preached about her decision to be out to her congregation, its other pastors, and to her bishop. The vote by the 13-member “trial court” was 12-1 for conviction of the charge and 7-6 for revocation of her credentials.

By her own admission, Stroud made a conscious decision to out herself, knowing the potential consequences. According to the sermon she delivered on April 27, 2003 wherein she declared herself – at least temporarily – “your openly lesbian, fully credentialed, United Methodist pastor,” she also said, “I know that, by telling the truth about myself, I risk losing my credentials as an ordained United Methodist minister. And that would be a huge loss for me.”

That prediction has come to fruition. And the process was both intense and in some way fulfilling, says Beth's sister, Burlington social worker (and occasional *OITM* contributor) Max Henson-Stroud. She and her partner Kendra were in the hearing room in the conference's retreat center at Camp Innabah for the second day of the trial.

Henson-Stroud said that waiting for the penalty decision was harder than waiting for the guilty-not guilty verdict: “There

was not much debate over the facts, and we kind of knew when we were called back so quickly, that it was likely a guilty verdict.”

When the penalty ver-

went out to dinner after the verdict and penalty were decided and told family stories and laughed together with the documentary film crew (that had been working on a story on the church

website.

Stroud was no newcomer to being out as a lesbian. She had come out during her undergraduate studies at Bryn Mawr. She was active in ACT UP and

another Methodist court acquitted openly lesbian minister Karen Damman earlier last year in an action analogous to “jury nullification.” In such cases, it is clear that the charges are provable, but because the jury disagrees with the law, they decline to find the defendant guilty.

Max Henson-Stroud came away from the experience “a little hurt” that their family's church could do such a thing to her sister, despite abundant testimony to her excellence as a minister. Max and Kendra Henson-Stroud are not connected to a church in Burlington, although now that they are expecting a child, the couple are in the process of evaluating that choice.

“Do you stay in the United Methodists? Or go to the Unitarians or the Episcopalians, where it's not your [church] culture or upbringing but they're more accepting,” Henson-Stroud wondered. “Why do gay Methodists stay? I read that George W. Bush and Dick Cheney are United Methodists. That made me almost want to leave. But the church was probably where I got my first sense of social justice values. It hurts when this organization that says it is founded on love disallows our love. And then we're asked to forgive, and that's really hard.”

Beth Stroud has been retained by her congregation as a lay worker. She is not allowed to wear ministerial regalia or administer the sacraments of baptism, communion, or marriage. ▼

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**Rev. Beth Stroud, April 27, 2003**

dict was delivered, “It was intensely emotional and very hard. There were a lot of tears. Beth was extremely strong. She hugged every member of the jury and thanked them for their time. The room was filled with supporters, some of whom started to sing.” There had been hopes that the trial court would opt for a lesser penalty. That was not to be.

The family – including members who had come in from Michigan, Vermont, and Washington, DC, and the parents of Beth's partner Chris Paige –

when Stroud came out) and a few other close supporters. Three days later the Strouds and the Paiges made lunch for the entire First United Methodist Church of Germantown, Beth's congregation.

That church is an activist congregation, a member of the Reconciling Ministries Network, “a national grassroots organization that exists to enable full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life of the United Methodist Church, both in policy and practice,” according to its

co-founded *LGNY*, which later became *Gay City News*. But, sister Max Henson-Stroud says, her sexuality “just never came up” in the context of her church and her job. Beth Stroud says in a document on her website that she was not in a committed relationship when she was appointed to either of the churches she pastored.

The charge of which she was found guilty included the step of telling a bishop of her orientation and active relationship, a sort of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” policy.

Across the country,