

Citing 'Apostasy,' Mormon Church Excommunicates Woman's Ordination Activist

Prominent Mormon activist Kate Kelly was excommunicated by her church on Monday for violating its "laws and order" after advocating for women's ordination, a view that leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints said amounted to apostasy.

Kelly in 2013 founded the group Ordain Women, which has pushed for gender equality and has appealed to the faith's highest leaders to seek direction from God on the issue of women joining the priesthood.

A three-man panel held a church disciplinary hearing for her on Sunday in Virginia, where she lived until recently, and their verdict was delivered by email.

"Our determination is that you be excommunicated for conduct contrary to the laws and order of the Church," Kelly's former ecclesiastical leader in Virginia, Bishop Mark Harrison, said in the message.

"These conditions almost always last at least one year," it said, adding that if she showed "true repentance" and gave up teachings and actions that "undermine the Church, its leaders and the doctrine of the priesthood," she could be readmitted.

Kelly, a former Washington human rights attorney, said the decision had forced her out of her community and her congregation and was exceptionally painful.

"Today is a tragic day for my family and me as we process the many ways this will impact us, both in this life and in the eternities," Kelly said in a statement.

Kelly is about to move overseas and did not attend the hearing, sometimes called a church court. Instead she wrote a letter defending herself and asking to keep her membership.

She has said she continues to believe in Mormon leaders and has suffered no crisis of faith, but rather has sincere questions about policies that bar women from the priesthood.

The actions of the Ordain Women group have caused tensions between the Utah-based LDS and the women, who say they are steadfast in their faith but want a more significant role in the life of a religion that claims over 15 million global adherents.

The church has accused some members of “actively teaching and publicly attempting to change doctrine” due to their personal beliefs, and it says LDS leaders have a duty to defend the church’s fundamental principles from distortion.

Men ordained to the priesthood in the Mormon church can perform religious rituals, including baptisms, confirmations or blessings and can be called to lead congregations.

Kelly and another prominent activist, John Dehlin, have received support and calls for clemency from the online world of Mormon-themed blogs and social media sites, commonly referred to by Latter-day Saints as the “bloggernacle.”

Dehlin, founder of the Mormon Stories website and podcast, was also threatened with disciplinary action, but now says he has a June 29 meeting set with his regional lay leader to discuss his case.

(Reporting by Jennifer Dobner; Editing by Daniel Wallis and Will Dunham)