

NC Church Halts Weddings to Protest Gay Marriage Ban

A small United Methodist church in North Carolina said it will not host weddings for heterosexual couples until the rest of the Protestant denomination ends its ban on **same-sex marriage**, an unusual step in the traditionally conservative South.

The decision by leaders at Green Street United Methodist Church in Winston-Salem appears to be a first for the denomination in the U.S. South, said Tim Sturgis, who sits on the 18-member leadership council that unanimously endorsed the marriage statement announced by the church this week.

"We have a saying that 'all means all,'" Sturgis said on Wednesday. "At this church, we don't just say it, we live it."

The move comes as the Supreme Court is set to take up a pair of significant **gay rights** cases next week, including a review of a California law that defines marriage as only between a man and a woman.

Support for **gay marriage** in the South has lagged behind other parts of the country. As voters in Maine, Maryland and Washington state approved same-sex marriage in 2012, North Carolina joined the rest of the South in adding a voter-approved ban on gay marriage to its constitution.

Sturgis, who is gay, said Green Street council leaders crafted their protest of the Methodist denomination's stance against same-sex marriage using parts of similar statements made by congregations in California, New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C.

The church leaders also asked their pastors to refrain from signing marriage licenses issued by North Carolina or any other state that does not allow **same-sex couples** to marry.

Some of the church's 300 members expressed concern that ceasing all marriage ceremonies in the church's sanctuary would take away an important rite for heterosexual couples, Sturgis said. But church leaders said it was a short-term inconvenience for heterosexual couples who had multiple options for places to wed.

"I do not see it as an act of exclusion for straight couples, but an invitation for all people to be in solidarity with those who are excluded," Senior Pastor Kelly Carpenter wrote in a letter to members.

The United Methodist Church's governing Book of Discipline holds that the practice of homosexuality is "incompatible with Christian teaching." Since 1972, the church has defined marriage "as the union of one man and one woman."

Last year, the denomination's chief lawmaking assembly rejected a proposal to amend the book to say the church was in disagreement about homosexuality, according to the United Methodist News Service.

The bishop who oversees the 1,100 United Methodist churches in the Western North Carolina Conference said in a statement on Tuesday that the Green Street congregation's position on weddings did not violate church doctrine.

Bishop Larry Goodpaster said the church was practicing a passage from the Book of Discipline that says, "We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends."

Sturgis said the church has received thousands of emails, mostly positive, since going public with its statement on Sunday.

"The statement's already been effective," he said. "We are witness to the world that not all churches are equal and that this church is built on love and equality."

*Reporting by Colleen Jenkins; Editing by Cynthia Johnston and
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