

Lesbian Minister Suspended for 20 Days

(RNS) A United Methodist minister was suspended for 20 days by a church court in Wisconsin on Thursday (June 23) for performing a same-sex union in 2009, a breach of denominational rules.

A 13-member jury of local United Methodist clergy voted 9-4 to suspend the Rev. Amy DeLong, 44, of Osceola, Wis., according to gay rights activists witnessing the trial.

The jury also ruled that DeLong should write a report on issues that break the “covenant” between UMC clergy or be suspended for one year, said Reconciling Ministries Network, which advocates for gay rights in the denomination.

DeLong admitted during the three-day trial to performing a “holy union” ceremony for a lesbian couple in 2009, and would not pledge to stop the practice, which is banned by the church.

“I can’t imagine doing that,” she testified on Wednesday, according to United Methodist News Service.

The Rev. Tom Lambrecht, the prosecuting counsel, argued that DeLong should be suspended from ministry unless she pledged not to perform same-sex unions, saying that failing to discipline DeLong would give free reign for ministers to flout church rules.

The UMC’s Book of Discipline bars “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” from ministry and prohibits clergy from celebrating same-sex weddings.

The jury unanimously found DeLong guilty of the gay union charge on Wednesday, but voted 12-1 to acquit her of violating a rule against homosexual activity.

The openly lesbian DeLong registered with her partner of 16 years under Wisconsin’s domestic partnership statute in 2009. But she refused to tell the court whether the couple is sexually intimate, and her lawyer argued that the church could not prove DeLong had violated her vows.

Hundreds of clergy in the 11 million-member denomination have petitioned recently for the UMC to lift the bans against gay clergy and same-sex unions. But polls and church conferences indicate that a majority of ministers favor retaining them.

In 2005, a Philadelphia minister was defrocked after telling her congregation she was in a lesbian relationship.