

Affirmation Congratulates the Rev. Drew Phoenix

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By Diane DeLap, Affirmation spokesperson

Affirmation congratulates the Rev. Drew Phoenix, a Baltimore-Washington Conference pastor, for his courage in stepping forward and declaring that he is going through gender transition. This is a difficult decision under any circumstances and especially given the unwelcome atmosphere prevalent in much of today's United Methodist Church (UMC). Recent Judicial Council decisions have made it possible for a pastor to deny a child of God membership in the UMC simply because they are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. In the current atmosphere of hate and distrust, Affirmation recognizes and commends the tremendous amount of courage Rev. Phoenix has displayed.

Unfortunately, we also recognize that his "coming out" may be the start of a long process of acceptance. In 2002 when Rev. Rebecca Steen surrendered her credentials as a United Methodist Church pastor in the same Baltimore-Washington Conference, it was after a long process that culminated in a series of vicious personal attacks. She, then as Rev. Richard Zomastny, approached Bishop May in October 1999 with a request for a voluntary leave of absence to complete the gender transition process. The Conference's ministry board, charged with assessing the fitness of the clergy, twice approved Steen's return from leave. Despite that, and the fact that there is no prohibition against transgender clergy in the Book of Discipline, as there is against gay and lesbian clergy, a number of Becky's clergy colleagues mounted an attempt to force her removal. Seeing that she was to face a long series of destructive personal attacks, she determined to leave the UMC.

It is our prayer that Drew's experience will be more positive. He is blessed with a supportive congregation, and received a standing ovation at the recent Annual Conference meeting. However, it is clear that opposition will continue to grow. There is already a move by some pastors in the Conference to petition the Judicial Council to overturn Rev. Phoenix's appointment, and petitions are being prepared by conservative groups to prohibit the appointment of transgender clergy. Mark Tooley, director of the UMAction of The Institute on Religion and Democracy spoke on the Albert Mohler Radio Program Tuesday, May 29th and, after noting the denomination's General Conference scheduled for May, 2008, he stated "this case of Rev. Phoenix now guarantees that the idea of transsexual clergy will be addressed in church law." In addition he notes the appeal by Baltimore-Washington clergy to the Judicial Council and says "this court could still say, in all honesty, that the denomination does not have an official policy on transsexual clergy, so a specific law will need to be ratified."

As the journey toward full inclusion of all God's children moves forward, Affirmation lauds those like the Rev. Drew Phoenix who help lead us on the way.

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As an independent voice of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer people, Affirmation radically reclaims the compassionate and transforming gospel of Jesus Christ by relentlessly pursuing full inclusion in the Church as we journey with the Spirit in creating God's beloved community. We affirm a Gospel of respect, love, justice and mercy for all. Affirmation is an activist, all-volunteer, not-for-profit organization with no official ties to The United Methodist Church.

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