

**IOWA ANNUAL CONFERENCE
OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**BISHOP'S RULING OF LAW ON QUESTION OF LAW No. 1
PRESENTED DURING THE 2017 SESSION OF THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

STATEMENT OF THE QUESTION OF LAW AND DECISION

BACKGROUND AND PROCEDURE

During the 174th Plenary Session of the 2017 Annual Conference on June 11, 2017 at 1:03 PM, Lay Member Craig Scott, Ed.D., of the Chariton, First United Methodist Church, after being duly recognized, rose and verbally requested that I enter a ruling on a question of law which is substantially similar to that set forth below, and attached hereto. I reminded Dr. Scott that I may only provide a ruling on a question of law submitted in writing during the annual conference session. Dr. Scott submitted his question of law in writing by the close of the Annual Conference session, which ended on the evening of Monday, June 12, 2017. This Ruling is attached to my Report for submission to the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church. Also included with this Ruling and my Report are: Exhibit 1) the relevant Minutes of the 174th Plenary Session; Exhibit 2) a copy of Dr. Scott's signed Request for a Bishop's Decision of Law (hereinafter, "**Scott Request**"); Exhibit 3) a list of names and addresses of interested parties; Exhibit 4) a correct copy of a news article published by Iowa Annual Conference—"The Spirit is Calling Moving Inviting," <http://www.iaumc.org/newsdetail/the-spirit-is-calling-moving-inviting-5117464> (last visited on June 23, 2017), and, Exhibit 5) a news article published the Iowa Annual Conference—"Bishop Trimble Dismisses Complaint," <http://www.iaumc.org/newsdetail/the-spirit-is-calling-moving-inviting-5117464> (last visited on June 23, 2017).¹ These articles were referenced in Dr. Scott's Request for a Bishop's Decision of Law.²

REQUEST FOR DECISION OF LAW

The Scott Request is predicated on two events. Scott Request. The first was the public disclosure on June 22, 2016, at our 2016 Annual Conference, by a United Methodist elder and member in full connection, Rev. Anna Blaedel, who is duly appointed to ministry in the Annual Conference, that she, among other things, is "a self-avowed, practicing homosexual." *See* Exhibit 4 at 2. The second event was the dismissal on a complaint arising from Rev. Blaedel's June 22, 2016 statement by Bishop Julius C. Trimble, who was then serving as the resident Bishop to the Iowa Annual Conference. *See* Exhibit 5 at 2-3 (reporting Bishop Trimble's public statement regarding the matter). The Scott Request then states, accurately, that Rev. Blaedel continues to serve in the Annual Conference as an appointed elder in good standing. Scott Request.

¹ After receiving the Scott Request, my office received an unsolicited, ex parte "friend of the court" brief via e-mail, but I have not relied on the arguments or authorities contained therein in coming to the conclusions set forth below. I do not therefore, consider that brief a part of the record to be included with my report.

² The internet address provided here for Exhibit 5 is slightly different than that offered by Dr. Scott, however, I believe Exhibit 5 is the correct document cited by Dr. Scott in his Request. Dr. Scott did not attach paper copies of the articles to his Request.

The Scott Request then continues:

Therefore, in accordance with ¶¶51 and 2609 of the *Book of Discipline*, and in light of ¶¶304.2, 304.3, 310.2d, 605.7, ¶ 2702.1 (a), (b), and (d), Judicial Council decisions 920, 1341, and other relevant church law, I request a bishop's decision of law on the following:

1. Before the complaint against the Rev. Anna Blaedel was dismissed in August, did a review process conducted in accordance with ¶362, Judicial Council Decision #920, and related church law include Rev. Blaedel retracting her statement at the 2016 Annual Conference session to say that she was not really "a self-avowed practicing homosexual," include a determination of fact otherwise being made that she was not really "a self-avowed practicing homosexual," or include Rev. Blaedel being directly asked if she was a self-avowed, practicing homosexual?
2. If not, was the complaint properly dismissed in accordance with ¶362 and other relevant church law?
3. If Rev. Blaedel has not retracted her public statement that she is "a self-avowed practicing homosexual" and her statement has not been disproven by any proper review process, may her ministerial office be subject to further review under ¶362?
4. Does someone who states directly to the bishop, multiple superintendents, and multiple members of the board of ordained ministry, as Rev. Blaedel did before the entire 2016 Iowa Annual Conference, that she is "a self-avowed practicing homosexual" or an "out, out, queer, partnered clergy," and never retracts or contests the accuracy of such a statement, meet the minimum requirements for ordination and appointment under 304.3 310.2d, and 2702.1 (a), (b), and (d)?
5. Does ¶605.7 require that the bishop/cabinet report complaints dismissed under ¶362.e.1 as pertinent information required under ¶635.2m, at least upon request in the clergy session?

Scott Request ¶¶ 1-5.

RULING, ANALYSIS AND RATIONALE

Pursuant to the requirements of The Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016 (hereinafter, *The Discipline*), I am instructed to respond "with a ruling to all submitted questions of law." See "Guidelines for Bishop's Rulings on Questions of Law," Rules of Practice and Procedure, The Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church, Appendix A (last revised on October 28, 2016) ("**Guidelines**"). I must do so even "if the ruling is simply that the question is moot, hypothetical or improperly submitted." *Id.* (quoting Judicial Council Decision 799). I address each of Dr. Scott's inquiries in turn:

1. I am asked whether the proper procedure was followed by Bishop Trimble in response to the complaint filed against Rev. Blaedel, as set forth above, under Paragraph 362 of *The Discipline*. See Scott Request ¶ 1; Ex. 5. I have no authority to rule on this question. As the Judicial Council as ruled, a “bishop has no authority to make substantive rulings on judicial or administrative matters.” Dec. 799 (“Questions which are procedural or substantive matters relating solely to action in a judicial or administrative process are not proper questions to be addressed in a substantive ruling by a bishop.”). To decide otherwise would be address a question is not a matter “concerning the regular business of the Annual Conference.” *Id.*; see also Dec. 867.

2. I am asked whether the complaint, as set forth above, was properly dismissed in accordance with ¶362 and other relevant church. For the reasons and authorities set forth in my response above, I have no authority to rule on this question.

3. I am asked whether Rev. Blaedel retracted her public statement that she is “a self-avowed practicing homosexual” and her statement has not been disproven by any proper review process, may her ministerial office be subject to further review under ¶362. This request also asks me to review a judicial or administrative process, something I do not have authority to do. Dec. 799. Further, as this sub-request also asks me to determine whether Rev. Blaedel’s ministerial office is subject of further review under Paragraph 362, it is moot and hypothetical. The subject complaint has been dismissed. Dec. 799 (“The council has repeatedly noted that questions of law must relate to actual situations and must set forth the circumstances or acts upon which a specific ruling may be rendered.”); Dec. 867.

4. I asked whether “someone who states directly to the bishop, multiple superintendents, and multiple members of the board of ordained ministry . . . that she is “a self-avowed practicing homosexual” or an “out, out, queer, partnered clergy,” and never retracts or contests the accuracy of such a statement, meet the minimum requirements for ordination and appointment under 304.3 310.2d, and 2702.1 (a), (b), and (d).” This is a hypothetical question and so one on which I may not opine. Dec. 799 (“The council has repeatedly noted that questions of law must relate to actual situations and must set forth the circumstances or acts upon which a specific ruling may be rendered.”).

5. I am asked whether under ¶ 605.7 of *The Discipline*, that the “bishop/cabinet report complaints dismissed under ¶362.e.1 as pertinent information required under ¶ 635.2m, at least upon request in the clergy session.” This request requires me to opine on a procedural matter which is not in my authority to do. Dec. 799. It is also a hypothetical. See Dec. 33 (“It is not the duty of the presiding Bishop to rule upon any hypothetical question which may be propounded, nor to answer requests for information which involve no legal matter.”).

Bishop Laurie Haller