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## Charges in Same-Sex Nuptials

### N.Y. Clergy Protest, Vow to Wed More

By *Alan Cooperman*

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Tuesday, March 16, 2004; Page A04

A New York district attorney filed criminal charges yesterday against two Unitarian Universalist ministers for performing same-sex weddings, the first attempted prosecution in the United States of clergy for marrying gay couples.

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Ulster County District Attorney Donald A. Williams brought the charges against the Rev. Kay Greenleaf and the Rev. Dawn Sangrey, who performed 13 same-sex marriages in a scenic field in New Paltz, N.Y., two weekends ago. Williams previously filed identical charges against New Paltz Mayor Jason West.

Dozens of rabbis and ministers across New York state responded to the charges by pledging to continue performing same-sex religious ceremonies, even at the risk of arrest. As of yesterday afternoon, 83 ordained clergy had signed the pledge, which began with 20 signers last Thursday, according to Rabbi Ayelet Cohen of New York City's Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, the world's largest gay Jewish congregation.

"We absolutely are prepared to be arrested for this, because it's a matter of justice," Cohen said.

Clearly anticipating controversy, Williams issued a lengthy statement explaining his rationale for the charges. "This office fully understands, appreciates and supports the significance of separation of Church and State," the statement said, adding that "it is not our intention to interfere with anyone's right to express their religious beliefs, including the right of members of the clergy to perform ceremonies where couples are united solely in the eyes of the Church or any other faith."

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But, he continued, the March 6 ceremonies performed by Greenleaf and Sangrey are "drastically different" because they had "proclaimed their intent to perform civil marriages under the authority vested in them by New York State law, rather than performing purely religious ceremonies."

An attorney for the two ministers, Robert C. Gottlieb, said they will plead not guilty and demand a jury trial on the misdemeanor charges, which carry a possible penalty of a year in prison and \$500 in fines on each count.

"We will let the good people of New Paltz decide whether these two ministers are really criminals," he said. "They did not violate the law. Their only intention was to uphold the law, the Constitution and the right to be free from discrimination. The only

people who violated the law here are the clerks who refused to issue the licenses."

Several U.S. religious groups -- including the Reform and Reconstructionist branches of Judaism, the United Church of Christ, the Unitarian Universalist Association, and some Episcopal clergy -- routinely bless same-sex couples and favor allowing gay civil marriage. Many other denominations ban such ceremonies and vigorously oppose changing marriage laws.

National religious leaders' reaction to yesterday's news generally followed those fault lines. Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, issued a statement saying that even if the New Paltz weddings technically violated New York law, "we respect the ministers' actions as a form of civil disobedience. These laws need to change. That day is coming. We hope, we pray, soon."

The Rev. Richard Land, head of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, said that if Greenleaf and Sangrey violated civil laws, then it is not a violation of the separation of church and state to prosecute them.

"We have an obligation to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's," Land said. "If these ministers feel this is an unjust law, then I'll look forward to reading their letter from the Ulster County Jail."

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