

# ‘Living my truth’

by Amy Frykholm

*UNITED METHODIST minister Amy DeLong was charged by the United Methodist Church with violating the church’s Book of Discipline on two counts: 1) continuing her ministry while being a “self-avowed practicing homosexual” and 2) conducting a holy union ceremony for two women. In the trial that ended in June 2011, DeLong, a pastor in Osceola, Wisconsin, was found not guilty on the first charge (by a 12 to 1 vote) and guilty on the second charge (by a 9 to 4 vote). In reference to her guilt on the second charge, the jury asked DeLong, in conjunction with the complainant in the case and other United Methodist clergy, to produce a document (a draft is due this month) that considers how to resolve issues that “harm the clergy covenant, create an adversarial spirit or lead to future clergy trials.” The document will be considered at the clergy session of the 2012 Wisconsin Annual Conference.*

## Can you tell us about your upbringing?

I was born and raised in Rhinelander, Wisconsin. My parents were members of a United Church of Christ church. The irony of that, given all that has happened, is not lost on me—the UCC ordains openly gay clergy and approves of same-sex marriage.

When I went to college, I got involved with a United Methodist church where, for whatever reason, something clicked. I liked the church and congregation. They were openminded and taught me not just what to think but how to think. I appreciated their social justice work and the social justice work of United Methodism as a whole. I wasn’t thinking about ministry at that time, but the church became my spiritual home.

## How did you come to enter the ministry?

After college I did a master’s in theology, and I found that I had a propensity and passion for all things theological. At my church, since not every 23-year-old has a master’s in theology, I started getting more involved in teaching and worship. About that time, I joined a Disciples Bible study. I met my partner, Val, in that Bible study. We fell in love there, and it was there that my gifts for ministry were affirmed. My love for my partner and my love for the church blossomed at the same time. There was no way that I could silence that work of love, of the Holy Spirit working in my life.

## How did the holy union ceremony come about?

In the spring of 2009 I received a phone call from a couple that wanted to have a holy union. I did not know

them, but I did not do anything for them different from what I do with heterosexual couples. I met with them a few times and then agreed to do the ceremony. It was obvious that they loved each other deeply. Wisconsin had begun a registry for same-gender domestic partnerships, and this couple wanted a religious ceremony to accompany the registration. So we started premarital counseling, and eventually I performed the ceremony.

People ask me, “Why did you do this one?” The answer is that it was and is the only same-sex holy union that I have ever been asked to do. I was very open with them. I wanted them to know what the UMC says about unions and about gay people. I wanted them to know what they were getting into. I didn’t want them in the center of a controversy if they didn’t want to be, but I let them know that I had no plans to keep the ceremony a secret.

**“I will not collude with a system meant to do me harm.”**

## How did your denomination respond?

As an extension minister, I have to fill out a report every year about my ministry. I simply listed the holy union under my activities. I thought, “I don’t know if anybody even reads these.” After just a couple days I had a note in the mail asking me to meet with a bishop’s assistant. I brought with me my sermon from the wedding, the bulletin, the pictures, the invitations—everything.

I knew that I would not be apologizing for having done the wedding. I would say and have said many times since then that it was one of the greatest joys of my ministry.

I did find it ironic that I would be called in over this. I’ve never had a bishop or a leader in the church or a pastor who didn’t know that I was gay. Everyone knows Val. They ask about Val. It’s not even that they turn a blind eye. Val is very much connected to my ministry. I couldn’t help but think, “Come on, why am I sitting here now because I did a wedding?”

The bishop’s assistant put up his hands and said to me: “Self-avowed practicing homosexual”—that’s the disciplinary language. This is language that as a gay person in the church, I have wrestled with forever and ever. I said, “Val and I aren’t practicing any more.” He

said, “What?” I said, “No, we are pretty good at it by now.” He laughed.

I had not considered that there would be a trial. I simply had vowed to myself that I was no longer going to participate in the discriminatory system of the church that was designed to hurt me. I could easily have just left the holy union off the report. But there was no way that I was not going to report it.

The UMC has become so draconian in its rules. If the bishop admits to knowing that I was gay, then she gets in trouble. The system is set up so the truth will not be told. But I had decided that I am going to be truthful. I understand that there are consequences, but I will not collude with a system meant to do me harm. An official complaint had to be filed for the church to proceed with a trial. That came from the district superintendent.

## “The system is set up so the truth will not be told.”

### How did you prepare for the trial?

I gathered together 25 people to walk this journey with me. I was surrounded by love and care, good counsel and a lot of wisdom. The oldest person on my team was over 80, the youngest in her twenties. I had generations of experience. It was astonishing, the level of care. It was a precious time for me. I am in no way crushed by the church or a victim of it. Because I am living my truth and there is no more hiding, I got to experience the positive things that come with doing that.

### Were there any surprises for you in the process?

When the outcome of the trial was announced, I was surprised by how much I had already let go of no longer being the Reverend Amy DeLong. I had already grieved over the potential loss of my credentials and did not expect to wake up the morning after the trial and still be a United Methodist minister. I had done so much preemptive grieving that I had to adjust when the trial was over.

The trial court also surprised me. They chose to look at this situation and make a decision that was groundbreaking and creative, not punitive—a decision bent toward restorative justice. People have said to me, “They just slapped your hand,” but that misses the important and profound work this group did.

### What was the outcome of the trial?

The outcome doesn’t lend itself to media sound bytes. On the charge of being a “self-avowed practicing homosexual,” I was found not guilty. The word *practicing* has not been thought out very well and that became apparent in the trial.

For example, someone actually had to ask me if my partner and I engaged in genital contact. I was very clear that I would not answer such intimate questions in a setting meant to do me harm. I will not be defined in

such reductionist terms. The shame of asking is on the church. No heterosexual couples are ever asked if they still engage in genital contact in their marriages. The prosecution kept asking if I was a “self-avowed practicing homosexual,” and I kept saying, “I would never talk about myself this way.”

I was found guilty of having conducted a holy union. They had all the evidence for that. The couple whose union I performed took the stand. The trial court had the church bulletin and all the materials. There was no question that this ceremony had taken place.

The trial court asked, “What could bring some healing to this situation?” They could see that I was found guilty of blessing a couple—an offense of love.



### What was asked of you as a result?

They asked me to work in collaboration with my bishop, an elder, the district supervisor who brought the charges, and the chair of ordained ministry to produce a document that would help prevent further clergy trials and that would aid in resolving this conflict. I had 20 days for discernment to decide if I wanted to be a part of this process. But I knew I wanted to be a part of it.

The first thing I did was send a letter to all of those who had, in a sense, been sentenced with me to ask if they also wanted to participate. I said that if any of them did not, I would accept my suspension instead and I would not reveal why. All of them wrote back to say they were willing.

A lot of our group’s conversation has focused on the words *clergy covenant* in the Book of Discipline.

### Why that term?

The sentencing document refers to “issues that harm the clergy covenant.” That phrase was also used a lot in the trial—as if we all understand what it means. The Book of Discipline only mentions it once, and that’s in relation to why clergy don’t take oaths. There was a sense that I did something that broke the clergy covenant, but that covenant is never defined.

I asked everyone at the table to define *clergy covenant*. All five of us had vastly different answers, not even overlapping in some cases. It was clear to me that

the phrase has the potential to be used to bludgeon people into conformity without a clear meaning.

**What does *clergy covenant* mean to you?**

To me the covenant is to minister to all people, to live out the example of Jesus and to help people recognize the presence of God in their lives. In both my relationship to my partner and in performing this union, I upheld that covenant. Potential jurors at the trial, elders, were dismissed from service if they answered yes when asked about whether they are governed by a higher authority than current church law. That is stunning. These laws change every four years at the UMC General Conference. Thousands of resolutions come in to change the Book of Discipline.

**What is the core of your ministry?**

I found the core of my ministry when I decided that I was going to be authentic and tell the truth. That would guide my ministry, knowing that I will have all kinds of opposition. Working out of that sense of integrity, knowing that I am a beloved child of God—that is my core.

**What do you think the ideal role of marriage is or should be in our society? Should there, for example, be a separation between secular marriage and Christian marriage, as some have proposed?**

I have wrangled with this question, and I don't know the answer. I have been given authority through my ordination to offer blessings to folks who love each other. We know that marriage is one of our most evolving institutions. There was a time when it was primarily an exchange of property; at other times it has been an exchange of labor, a "helpmeet" model. In this culture, it has become primarily about love: two consenting adults who love and care for each other and want to spend their lives together.

I know in other cultures there is a real separation between the legal arm of marriage and the church. But in America, pastors become an arm of the state. Should we get out of that business? I think that would be great. Pastors know that you get tons of requests for weddings from people who have no commitment to the church.

**Why do you stay a United Methodist?**

When people ask me that, I say, "because I was a Girl Scout, and as a Girl Scout you learn to always leave a place as good as or better than you found it." I don't know anyone who makes a commitment to an organization because it already is exactly as it should be. Discrimination and injustice are beneath us, and we need to do better.

**What is your reasonable hope for change in the United Methodist Church?**

My experience is that hope is never reasonable. My hope is that we will honor all that God has created, and that isn't reasonable at all.