

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

The Rev. Thomas Lambrecht, Church Counsel

We are gathered here today, not by choice, but by calling. That calling began in an experience of the love of God in Christ Jesus, “who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (I Peter 2:9) “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:13-14) In that experience of God’s love, grace, and forgiveness, we were joined together in the United Methodist Church as a community of love and faithfulness. We then received a special calling from God to engage in ordained Christian ministry. This calling was affirmed by the church and joined us into another community—a covenant community of ordained clergy.

“Ordained persons exercise their ministry in covenant with all Christians, especially with those whom they lead and serve in ministry. They also live in covenant of mutual care and accountability with all those who share their ordination, especially in The United Methodist Church, with the ordained who are members of the same annual conference and part of the same Order. The covenant of ordained ministry is a lifetime commitment, and those who enter into it dedicate their whole lives to the personal and spiritual disciplines it requires.” (*Book of Discipline*, ¶303.3)

“Ordination and membership in an annual conference in The United Methodist Church is a sacred trust ... We believe [that the qualifications and duties of clergy] flow from the gospel as taught by Jesus Christ and proclaimed by his apostles. Whenever a person ... is accused of violating this trust, the membership of his or her ministerial office shall be subject to review.” (*Book of Discipline*, ¶361.1)

We are called together today as part of that review process for a colleague, Rev. Amy DeLong. As you will hear, this review began with the receipt of a report on extension ministry in which Rev. DeLong disclosed that she had performed a service celebrating a Holy Union, which is a chargeable offense under ¶2702.1. In the course of an informational meeting to prepare for a supervisory process, Rev. DeLong also disclosed that she was living in a relationship with a same-sex partner, which relationship had been registered with the State of Wisconsin as a domestic partnership. On a number of occasions, Rev. DeLong has acknowledged

that she is a “self-avowed practicing homosexual,” which is also a chargeable offense under ¶2702.1.

So the Committee on Investigation has sent to us two charges. Rev. DeLong is charged with conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions in violation of ¶2702.1b of the *Discipline*. The evidence will show that on September 19, 2009, Rev. DeLong was the officiant at a Commitment Ceremony in Menomonie, Wisconsin, and performed a holy union for a lesbian couple. Rev. DeLong decided to perform the holy union, she treated it like any other marriage ceremony, and when she was asked to do the union, she met with the couple and chose to do it. The Commitment Ceremony included a welcome, opening prayer, statement of intent, blessing, scripture readings, exchange of rings, pronouncement of union, lighting of a unity candle, closing prayer and a benediction.

Rev DeLong is also charged with being a self-avowed practicing homosexual in violation of ¶2702.1b of the *Discipline*. The evidence will show that on November 9, 2009, Rev. DeLong and Valerie Ann Zellmer registered in Polk County as domestic partners and filed a Declaration of Domestic Partnership. On November 11, 2009, the Inter-County Leader newspaper contained a notice that a Declaration of Domestic Partnership had been issued to Rev. DeLong and Valerie Ann Zellmer. On February 23, 2010, Rev. DeLong provided Rev. Steve Polster with a copy of her Declaration of Domestic Partnership and a copy of the notice of the declaration from the Inter-County Leader newspaper. On May 24, 2010, Rev. DeLong sent an email to all Circuit Leaders that included a statement that “Be assured, that I (as a ‘self-avowed practicing homosexual’) and all GLBT people, have gotten the message. In the United Methodist Church we are second class citizens, back-of-the-bus Christians.”

What is really at stake here is whether we as clergy will live with integrity under the terms of a covenant that we voluntarily agreed to. Rev. DeLong had the choice of living with integrity within the qualifications and requirements of our clergy covenant, or of honorably withdrawing from that covenant when she found she could no longer live within it. Instead, Rev. DeLong has chosen to willfully violate the terms of our covenant and yet still seek to remain within it.

We engage in this process of review and accountability, not because it is pleasant work, not because we enjoy it, not because we are eager for controversy or confrontation, but to uphold the integrity of our clergy covenant for the sake of the life and mission of the church.

You will see through the evidence and testimony presented that there is clear and convincing proof that Rev. DeLong has transgressed the clear boundaries of our clergy covenant. At the conclusion of the Church's case, I believe that you, the trial court, will reach but one conclusion, that Rev. Amy DeLong is guilty of the charges made against her and must be held accountable.

I want to thank you, the members of the trial court, for responding, however reluctantly, to the call placed upon us by our baptism, our vows of membership, and our vows of ordination. We all in this room and many others have been and are praying for this trial. As none of us has to my knowledge participated in a church trial before, we are all going on to perfection in terms of how we progress through this process. Nevertheless, we hold one another in prayer, that the grace of God may sustain us through this painful time, and that the life and mission of The United Methodist Church will be strengthened through our upholding the integrity of our life in covenant together.