

The United Methodist New Service carried a [year-end review of 2011 LGBT "flashpoints"](#) [December 16, 2011]. Here is their report and a response to it.

Gay, lesbian ministry still 2011 flashpoint

The Rev. Amy DeLong is nearing an important deadline after being found guilty this summer of violating the denomination's ban on blessing same-sex unions.

By Jan. 1, DeLong must present a [draft that outlines procedures for clergy to help resolve issues that "harm the clergy covenant, create an adversarial spirit or lead to future clergy trials."](#) She has been collaborating on the document with Wisconsin Annual (regional) Conference leaders, including Bishop Linda Lee.

DeLong's [church trial, from June 21 to 23 in Kaukauna, Wis.](#), was just one of many flashpoints this year in the ongoing debate about how the church should minister to gays and lesbians.

Over the past few months, DeLong's collaboration group members have discussed at length how they define the word "covenant," DeLong said recently. "Our understandings of covenant were incredibly varied and multiple and incredibly divergent," she said. "I don't feel like I've broken the clergy covenant at all. I feel like I've honored my clergy covenant to be in ministry to all people."

Others disagree. "This is not some insignificant violation of the terms of the Book of Discipline," the Rev. Thomas Lambrecht, the church's counsel in the DeLong case, said [during the trial's closing arguments](#).

Love Prevails response:

There was never a dispute that Rev. DeLong officiated at a blessing for the loving relationship of two women. She self-reported this ministry. At issue was the church's legislation banning such blessing.

Rev. DeLong has completed her first draft by the January 1, 2012 deadline. Note that this was an opportunity given by the trial court in lieu of any punishment. The trial court recognized the [discontinuity in the Book of Discipline](#) regarding ministry with gay and lesbian people. They also recognized Rev. DeLong's gifts and asked her to lead the clergy in clarifying a resolution to their intra-clergy differences regarding the current legislation of LGBT ministry. [\[Read the decision\]](#)

The church trial was a culmination of nearly 40 years of discriminatory legislation and set a new benchmark on responding out of a restorative justice framework rather than simply going by the book. This is more than a flashpoint; it is a significant shift in accepting God's freedom to call and gift individuals into ordained ministry and to set them free to minister.

The phrase "clergy covenant" is not well documented in the Book of Discipline. It is usually used to condemn, but never as an affirmation. Have you ever heard of an award for best exemplifying the clergy covenant? It will be important for the church to decide again what is most important - ministry or restriction of it.

Disagreement with the freedom to minister has always been alive in the church. In the past we have disagreed with ministry based on race and gender categories and eventually repented of such restrictions. The church lost its case on the basis of its own teachings about love and ministry. The trial court said we need to change from focusing on the letter of the law to practicing our best methods of drawing people closer to God through the living Spirit of Jesus Christ.

The Book of Discipline, the denomination's law book, says all people are of sacred worth but also states, "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."

The book bans "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" from being ordained or appointed to serve in the denomination. It also says marriage is to be between a man and a woman and forbids United Methodist clergy from officiating at same-sex unions.

However, in February, 36 of the denomination's 92 retired bishops called on the denomination to eliminate its ban on the ordination of gay clergy. The statement prompted varied reactions from active bishops as well as the denomination's unofficial evangelical and progressive caucuses.

Starting with annual conference season in the spring, more than 1,000 United Methodist clergy in the United States signed pledges to bless same-sex unions. The pledges marked a new turn in the longtime debate, said the Rev. Robert J. Williams, chief executive of the United Methodist Commission on Archives and History.

The pledges, in turn, sparked a countermovement by other United Methodist clergy and lay people urging the bishops to make clear that they will enforce the Book of Discipline on this issue. As of Dec. 9, more than 2,600 clergy and 12,800 laity in the United States have signed petitions to the bishops.

The church currently speaks out of both sides of its mouth and a church so divided will have a hard time projecting a positive ministry inviting people into a larger picture of God's grace.

The *Book of Discipline* and decisions of the Judicial Council have been all too clear about what it means to practice one's sexual orientation - they have reduced love in all its many manifestations to that of the genital. We know love is more than this reduction. Each General Conference we have added to anti-LGBT legislation regarding a narrow understanding of marriage and blessing of relationships. Simply because they are the current law doesn't mean they are either true or just.

The action of the bishop's counsel is not an "however". Their call is at the heart of the matter, anti-LGBT legislation results in loss of effectiveness as Bishops are drained of energy by upholding Church Discipline while regarding it as contrary to the gospel's core. Likewise Bishops are caught between care for the Church by reappointing an effective gay or lesbian pastor and care for the Discipline by charging them under current legislation.

That there was a variety of responses to an important statement is no surprise. Instead of trying to further legislate by a majority we might use this opportunity to listen again to a Living God not bound by our prejudices.

When non-violent resistance surfaces against unjust laws, we know that they are on their way out. Now it is simply a question of how many people will be hurt before the church repents of its latest attempt at enforcing an unrealistic purity code. This is a turning point - toward a more loving church and away from a more limited one that only ministers to a part of the human family and creation.

Even if 7 million lay people out of 8 million or 44,000 clergy out of 45,000 are comfortable with enforcing current discriminatory legislation, it doesn't mean that such an approach will stop the continued reduction in church vitality. Arbitrarily restricting God's call to and gifting for ordained ministry is a long-term losing proposition. This is not a matter for majority votes, but risking a following of the Spirit into new expressions of God's steadfast love with all, including gay and lesbian Christians.

The Council of Bishops responded in a Nov. 10 letter that urged churches and families not to “reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends,” but also said the bishops would uphold church law.

Only General Conference, the denomination’s top lawmaking body, can change the Book of Discipline, and unofficial caucuses of varying views will be out in force next year advocating their perspective. At least 13 of the 59 U.S. conferences also approved resolutions this year petitioning General Conference to change the language related to homosexuality.

Since 1972, the topic of homosexuality has surfaced every four years at General Conference. Delegates consistently have voted to keep the Book of Discipline’s stance on the issue.

The bishops continue the discontinuity in the *Book of Discipline* by talking out of both sides of their mouths. Upholding the current legislation is a rejection and condemnation of lesbian and gay Christians. To not recognize this reality raises the question of what else the teachers of the church are failing to recognize, much less affirm.

No matter if all the U.S. and Central Conferences desire to keep the current discriminatory language of the Book of Discipline, there will be no lessening of next generations coming to understand their orientation to be toward members of their own gender. Legislation, even church legislation, cannot adequately deny the reality of people's lives without denying the reality of God in people's lives. This is not a matter for caucus pressure or fears in General Conference delegates.

Can God call and invest gifts in anyone God decides? Of course. It is time to trust that God is larger than our limiting responses.

Consistency of voting doesn't mean more than we have repeated the past. It has no bearing on the shifts of recognition that new occasions and opportunities for ministry call for new responses. We hope and are working toward ending 40 years of wandering in a theological wilderness that has denied the freedom of grace to overcome law based on prejudice, fear, and inadequate information.