

"Shattered, Refashioned, and Free"

by Amy DeLong

The United Methodist Church has battled over homosexuality and participated in heterosexism for more than 36 years. The General Conference of the United Methodist Church, meeting in Atlanta in 1972, voted to put these words into our Book of Discipline. "We do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching."

I was five years old – and I didn't know the church was passing legislation that would affect my life forever.

In 1984, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church, meeting in Dallas, added this language to the Book of Discipline: "Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve the United Methodist Church."

I was 17 – and I didn't know the church was passing legislation that would affect my life forever.

I also didn't know that each subsequent General Conference would add more words to further oppress, marginalize and vilify Gay and Lesbian Christians and that all those condemnations would remain in our Book of Discipline to this day.

I also didn't know that in a few short years two things would happen:

- I would fall in love with the United Methodist Church and
- I would feel called by God to ordained ministry.

Somewhere around 1987, while in college, I went church shopping. I visited the United Church of Christ, a natural first choice since I had been baptized and raised UCC (irony noted). After a few visits, I realized this particular congregation did not satisfy my spiritual needs. So, on I went to the next church down the street, the River Falls United Methodist Church. Within weeks I was hooked. I liked the people. I liked the pastor. I liked the challenge of the adult educational opportunities.

When I told my mom that I was attending a United Methodist Church, she said, "Ah, you are returning to your roots." When I inquired about her comment, she told me that she and my father had been Methodists before moving to Wisconsin. She told me of our long family history with the Evangelical United Brethren, and reminded me that she and my grandfather had both graduated from Otterbein College in Westerville, OH. She also told me that my great-grandfather was a United Brethren pastor. I have his Bible now – and glued to the inside cover is a brief, undated announcement about his first sermon.

Quickly, The United Methodist Church became my spiritual home ... a place where I was surrounded by good people doing good works and good thinking.

As I was nurtured and challenged in my faith, I discovered not only a passion, but a propensity for things theological. And in 1991, I began the Master of Arts program at United Theological Seminary in the Twin Cities. I graduated in 1993 with a Master of Arts in Theology.

After seminary, I became more and more involved in church activities and was given the opportunity to participate in leadership positions. Slowly, certainly unbidden, I began to feel an inner call to ordained ministry and as I discerned this with others, this call was repeatedly affirmed. In my mind, one of the biggest obstacles was that I would have to go back to seminary for a new degree and another two years of study.

In the fall of 1994, our church offered a new extended, adult Bible study program – Disciple I. Within that 34-week period, my life would change dramatically. First, I accepted my call to ordained ministry, applied for and was accepted to the Master of Divinity program at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, IL. Secondly, I fell in love with Val, another member of the Bible study class.

My love for Val and my love for the church were inseparable; one sprang directly from the other. And both were life-giving and sustaining, grounded in a deep sense of faithfulness and loyalty. To have abandoned either love would have meant silencing the voice of God and the movement of the Spirit in our lives.

I naively thought that I could balance and be fully present in both of these relationships. I was wrong. I was in pastoral ministry for 8 years – and in each of those years I felt pulled, almost in two – torn between the Church that I love and the Val that I love.

I tried to keep this core part of my identity hidden, and in so doing, I distanced myself from parishioners and my colleagues – afraid they might ask me questions about my life that I was forbidden from answering. I dreaded sitting down with new congregants because I knew they would ask me if I were married. I am, but I was supposed to say I wasn't – and every time I did that, I felt I was betraying Val.

I dreaded clergy gatherings for the same reasons. I remember one gathering, in particular, when we were supposed to introduce ourselves to the person next to us and ask a couple questions about each others' lives – so already I was terrified and having a minor panic attack.

As I turned to my conversation partner he immediately said to me, “Amy, tell me about the most important thing in your life.” I wanted to tell him about Val, but I couldn't. I wanted to tell him about her children whom we were raising together, but I couldn't. So I talked about my cat. Now aside from looking profoundly superficial – the most pathetic part was that I didn't have a cat at the time. My life and my loves had been reduced to telling make-believe stories about a cat I didn't have.

So many of us, clergy and laity alike, have been strangled by various versions of “don't ask, don't tell.” Such silence dis-integrates us, divides us – flesh from spirit, the truth we know from the truth we tell, our being from our doing – and it leaves us spiritual schizophrenics.

One night, while reading Parker Palmer's book, *Let Your Life Speak*, I encountered a passage that exposed the level of my dividedness and called me to a new way of living.

"The social systems in which people must survive often try to force them to live in a way untrue to who they are. If you are poor, you are supposed to accept, with gratitude, half a loaf or less; if you are black, you are supposed to suffer racism without protest; if you are gay, you are supposed to pretend that you are not. You and I may not know, but we can at least imagine, how tempting it would be to mask one's truth in situations of this sort – because the system threatens punishment if one does not.

But in spite of that threat, or because of it, the people who plant the seeds of movements make a critical decision: they decide to 'live divided no more.' They decide no longer to act on the outside in a way that contradicts some truth about themselves that they hold deeply on the inside" (32-33).

As I read these lines, I began to cry. He was writing about me. The church was requiring me to mask my truth and to act on the outside in a way that contradicted the truth I held most deeply on the inside. I realized in that moment, in a way I had not before, that the duplicitous policies and practices of the church, coupled with the amount of lying I had to do in order to preserve my job, were damaging my soul and psyche in a way I was afraid I would never be able to repair. My fear of telling the truth was supplanted by my fear of losing myself.

So, part of my journey over the past 6 or 7 years has been to tell my story as publicly and as often as I am able. It's one of the ways I work to re-integrate myself – to weave back together what the church has tried to tear apart.

In her book, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, Sue Monk Kidd says, "The truth may set you free, but first it will shatter the safe, sweet way you live." And so it has.

It is out of deep acceptance of who I am and commitment to my inner truth that led me to joyfully affirm that I am a "self-avowed practicing homosexual" (Book of Discipline language meant to deny, shame, and rend me) and to faithfully report having officiated at a Celebration of Holy Union for a lesbian couple – both chargeable offenses according to the United Methodist Church.

It is fair to say that my feelings about and relationship to the church have changed significantly. In the early days, my affection derived first from the way a particular local congregation nurtured and cared for me, and then secondly from my full immersion in our distinct history and identity (i.e., prevenient grace, open communion, the quadrilateral, Wesley's delicate and scriptural balance of piety and mercy, our commitment to social justice and our embrace of reason ...).

At its best, the Church can encourage us to understand more completely, accept more freely, speak more prophetically and act more justly. It can bind up wounds. It can comfort and confront. It can provide sanctuary and it can send us out into the world with the Good News on our lips and goodwill in our hearts.

But when it's at its worst, it can be one of the most harming and hateful places I know. And this, too, is part of our history. For far too long, the people called Methodist told our black brothers and sisters that the balcony and the backs of the buses were good enough for them, told women that their proper place was in the pew, not the pulpit.

For these sins, we have repented – and it is time to do so again.

As United Methodists, we have codified prejudice. We have disregarded the empirical evidence of science, medicine, and psychology and have glorified ignorance and irrational alarm. We have been afraid and let oppression go unchallenged, tolerating the wholesale sacrifice of gay and lesbian people. We have silently suspended our consciences and blindly adhered to church laws which violate the very spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We have subjected legions of GLBT people to harsh judgments, spiritual abuse, and hatred disguised as righteousness.

And, as a result, so many God-loving, Jesus-following, Holy Spirit-inspired people have been forced to leave; so many are required to live divided, trapped between the church and the closet; so many have died because the church has implied that it is better to be dead than gay.

Shattered, refashioned and free, I feel more called than ever to speak my truth and to persuade this beloved, blasted church of ours to care more tenderly for ones it so willfully disregards.

“We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Corinthians 6:8b-10).

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To read about the next stage of my adventures with the United Methodist Church, please refer to other parts of this website.