

CLOSING STATEMENT
The Rev. Thomas Lambrecht, Church Counsel

A clergy “order is a covenant community within the church to mutually support, care for, and hold accountable its members for the sake of the life and mission of the church.” (*Book of Discipline*, ¶1306) We are called together here today to put aside our own personal opinions on homosexuality and hold our colleague accountable to the clergy covenant to which she voluntarily agreed. The issue in this trial is in fact not homosexuality *per se*. Instead, it is about the integrity of our clergy covenant.

The purpose of this trial is to establish the truth. The truth is that Rev. Amy DeLong conducted a ceremony which celebrated a homosexual union, in violation of ¶2702.1b of the *Discipline*, as shown by documents and testimony. Exhibit 1 shows that Rev. DeLong conducted this service on September 19, 2009, in Menomonie, Wisconsin, for a lesbian couple. Rev. DeLong’s testimony was that she decided to perform the holy union, that 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. Exhibit 1 shows the commitment ceremony, including 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. All these elements are part of the United Methodist service of Christian Marriage found in the *Book of Worship*. Rev. DeLong’s testimony shows that she performed this ceremony, knowing that the *Book of Discipline* prohibited such a service. None of these facts and specifications were contested by the defense.

Regarding the second charge, the truth is that Rev. Amy DeLong is a self-avowed practicing homosexual, in violation of ¶2702.1b of the *Discipline* as shown by documents and testimony. Exhibit 2 shows that Rev. DeLong registered her domestic partnership with the State of Wisconsin on November 9, 2009. Exhibit 3 shows that Rev. DeLong’s domestic partnership was listed in the Inter-County Leader newspaper on November 11, 2009. Exhibit 8 is a record of Rev. DeLong’s statement via an email that she is a self-avowed practicing homosexual. Rev. DeLong has testified that on a number of occasions, she has openly avowed herself to be a self-avowed practicing homosexual. Most of the documents used to support these specifications were provided willingly and on her own initiative by Rev. DeLong herself at a meeting with Rev. Steve Polster on February 23, 2010.

The issue on this charge is not simply that Rev. DeLong is living in a domestic partnership. It is about how Rev. DeLong describes herself, using the words “self-avowed practicing homosexual.” Rev. DeLong initiated the disclosures about her partnership to persons in authority, as required by the *Discipline*. Judicial Council Decision 920 holds that a person who states that they are in a committed, partnered relationship has made their ministerial office subject to review. Rev. DeLong has done that. In the process that has flowed from that disclosure, Rev. DeLong has acknowledged both in an email addressed in part to district superintendents and before the Committee on Investigation that she is a self-avowed practicing homosexual. Both Rev. Polster and Rev. Mayorga testified that they interpreted her disclosure as a self-avowal of homosexual practice.

While Rev. DeLong may not describe herself as a self-avowed practicing homosexual in her own terminology, she adopted that designation in her email and in the hearing before the Committee on Investigation. She has never denied the truthfulness of that designation.

The question facing you, the trial court, is whether Rev. Amy DeLong did the things she is accused of doing, performing a service celebrating a holy union and engaging in a practice that the United Methodist Church has found to be “incompatible with Christian teaching.” Rev. DeLong has acknowledged performing that holy union service; therefore, she is guilty of this charge.

Rev. DeLong is not to be found guilty of the second charge based on her sexual orientation. The United Methodist Church commits itself to be in ministry with all persons regardless of sexual orientation. What the *Book of Discipline* prohibits is a clergy person being a “self-avowed practicing homosexual.” Rev. DeLong initiated the process through her self-disclosure. The Church believes that her self-disclosure, including before the Committee on Investigation, amounts to her acknowledgment that she is what the *Book of Discipline* calls a self-avowed practicing homosexual. She had opportunities to deny that designation, and she never did.

In fact, Rev. DeLong has refused to answer the questions put to her regarding the matters that she herself raised in her meeting with Steve Polster. ¶2708.8 of the *Book of Discipline* gives the following direction to witnesses: “Refusal to appear or

to answer questions ruled by the presiding officer to be relevant may be considered as disobedience to the order and discipline of The United Methodist Church except when refusal to answer is based on a good faith claim that answering might tend to incriminate the witness under state or federal criminal law or is based on a claim of confidential communication to a clergy person.” None of the exceptions exist. Therefore, the Church would argue that Amy’s refusal to answer the relevant questions entitles us to assume that her answers would be adverse to her case. Therefore, the Church believes she is guilty of this charge.

There are some among you, the trial court, as there are among the audience seated here today and the church at large, who disagree with, or at least question, the requirements of our clergy covenant around the issue of homosexuality. Our task in this trial is not to resolve those questions or disagreements. For that purpose, the General Conference meets every four years to hear arguments and entertain proposals to change the terms of our covenant.

Arguments that may be persuasive in a legislative arena do not have force in this judicial setting. Your task is to simply determine whether or not the provisions of the *Book of Discipline* were violated. All arguments that do not relate to the truth or falsity of this basic question are ultimately irrelevant in this setting.

“Church trials are to be regarded as an expedient of last resort. Only after every reasonable effort has been made to correct any wrong and adjust any existing difficulty should steps be taken to institute a trial.” (*Book of Discipline*, ¶12707) Every reasonable effort to resolve the allegations has been made in this case, with no satisfactory resolution of the issues, leading us to this trial. However, the trial process is not the appropriate place to resolve our disagreements over the issue of homosexuality. We are to be guided by the *Book of Discipline* and our clergy covenant. Until such time as the terms of that covenant are changed, we are all bound to live by that covenant. We are therefore called together by our clergy covenant to hold a colleague accountable to the requirements of that covenant.

It is always difficult for us, who are pastors and have a pastor’s heart of love and compassion, to do anything that might remotely be considered “judging” another. We much prefer to show compassion and understanding, find the understandable part in the other person’s perspective, and work together to build relationship. Being on a trial court puts us in the difficult position of having to render a black-

and-white judgment about factual issues in a legal context. The Board of Ordained Ministry and the Clergy Session make judgments every time they and we vote on the status of a candidate for ordained ministry. This is part of the life of our church, as well.

Jesus, himself, engaged in many acts of judgment with regard to the Sadducees and Pharisees and teachers of the law that he was often in conflict with. I also think of the man who was healed after spending 38 years by the side of the pool of Bethesda. Jesus found him later and told him to stop sinning, or worse things would happen to him!

Holding a colleague accountable is an act of love. I would surmise that everyone in this room is grateful for a person in our lives at one time or another who called us to account for something in our lives that needed to be corrected or dealt with. My wife often does that for me! Holding Rev. DeLong accountable to the covenant to which she willingly agreed can also be a redemptive act, if received in that spirit.

This act of accountability is also for the good of the Church, in maintaining the integrity of our covenant. If we begin to ignore the covenant or believe that we do not have to live within that covenant's parameters, we open up the Church to chaos and eventual schism or disintegration. The tragedy of the Book of Judges, the generations after Joshua's generation that entered the Holy Land, was that everyone did what was right in their own eyes. Episode after episode of idolatry and moral depravity are recounted as the consequence of disobedience to the covenant instituted under Moses. Our covenant is not carved in stone, like the Ten Commandments were, but the integrity of our covenant is just as important to the health of our Church body as the integrity of the Mosaic covenant was to the people of Israel.

As a connectional church, we are governed by a covenant that ties us together. The issue of this trial is whether we will allow a person who disagrees with the covenant to unilaterally disobey it. Such disobedience tears that covenant asunder. It puts the individual above the covenant. It opens the door for any pastor to wreak havoc upon the covenant that we share. Suppose a pastor decided that his or her local church was not supporting the local food pantry enough. This pastor, having been unsuccessful in getting the local church to

designate greater support to the food pantry, then started stealing cash from the offering plate in order to give it to the food pantry. The pastor's goals are noble, but by placing themselves above the covenant, they have cheapened that covenant and torn the fabric of our Church. They would rightly be held accountable for violating the covenant, no matter how good their reasons might have been.

While we have a long tradition of civil disobedience in the United Methodist Church as a means of seeking justice, such civil disobedience is done with full knowledge and acceptance of whatever consequences flow from that action. If Rev. DeLong disagrees with the covenant that she previously agreed to, she has recourse to trying to change it. But to intentionally disobey the covenant is a totally inappropriate approach to resolving that disagreement. The resulting anarchy would only be detrimental to the Church, no matter how justified the person might feel in pursuing their perception of right in this case.

As you make your decision today, you have the opportunity to uphold the integrity of our covenant life together, or to preside over the disintegration of that covenant, and the Church under which it is formed. Thank you for your attentiveness and your commitment to Jesus Christ and the Church. May the Holy Spirit guide you in your decisions, for the sake of the life and mission of The United Methodist Church.