

An Open Letter to the Council of Bishops

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I write to you as one who has recently participated in the trial of the Rev. Amy DeLong as Counsel for the Respondent and as one who has signed a pledge to offer the full ministry of the church to all persons without regard to their gender or sexual orientation. I am also writing in response to the recent letters from a group of United Methodist pastors and lay persons urging the Council of Bishops to adopt a proactive threatening and punitive stance in an attempt to intimidate those whose pastoral consciences have long been violated. I offer this letter with the deepest respect for the office of bishop and an inkling of the heart-rending conflicts experienced by human beings called to such ministry on behalf of the church. It is out of such an understanding that I humbly offer what follows.

The letters written by my friends and colleagues fail to understand the true nature of covenant. The covenant that unites persons in ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church does not consist of a pledge to surrender our collective consciences to whatever position the General Conference may adopt at a given point in time. It is rather a commitment that we make to one another to offer our whole lives in the service of all of God's people. We are remarkably fortunate that most of the time this primary covenant does not conflict with the decisions made by the General Conference that comprise our Discipline, but obedience to the Discipline is a poor substitute for a real concept of covenant.

The Council of Bishops in its Episcopal Greetings in the 2008 Discipline makes its own understanding of the role played by the Discipline clear when it states "We do not see the Discipline as sacrosanct or infallible, but we do consider it a document suitable to our heritage." The statement goes on to offer a prayer that the Discipline will enable all persons to celebrate God's grace, exalt the meaning of faithful discipleship, align with the mission, and inspire a deeper desire to more effectively witness. Nowhere in the greetings do we find the language of threat, enforcement or even a summons to obedience. The Council of Bishops has understood the Discipline in the spirit of the Gospel and not primarily as a book of law, much to its credit.

The letters from my colleagues suggest that so many persons have signed a pledge to obey a higher understanding of covenant in the hope that the "United Methodist Church will not have the resources or resolve to enforce the church's position." I cannot speak for all signers of the various pledges, but I can assure you that my decision to be in full ministry with all of God's people has nothing to do with strategy or tactics or calculation. It has to do with a fundamental conviction of what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is calling us to be about. I would suggest that any church that finds itself in the position of "enforcing" an understanding that a large percentage of its members finds to be morally repugnant is already in deep spiritual trouble, and that any statement from leadership that attempts to intimidate clergy into violating their deeply held faith convictions will do far more harm than good.

The letters you received earlier are filled with predictions of doom and anarchy should the bishops fail to act in the ways the letters specify. The pastors' letter pleads impotence should the perceived harmful actions occur. I can only say that in places where pastors have long been preaching an expansive version of Christ's love, there are no such problems. Perhaps a letter from the bishops to all the pastors about the importance of preaching an inclusive Gospel in the midst of new dimensions would be far more helpful than the suggested approach.

My prayer is that any statement from the Council of Bishops be deeply respectful of the faith perspectives reflected in this painful controversy in our church. Perhaps the Council might be encouraged as I have been by the message of Acts 4:29-30: And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performing through the name of your holy servant, Jesus.

Grace and Peace,

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