

The UM Portal of *The United Methodist Reporter* carried a year-end review [December 23, 2011] that included a section entitled, "Homosexuality Debate". Here is the section and a response to it.

### Homosexuality debate

Wrangling over homosexuality has been a fact of UM life since the early 1970s, and the intensity of conflict only picked up in 2011.

The church's official position—upheld by successive General Conferences—is that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Church law as spelled out in the Book of Discipline also prohibits “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” from serving as clergy, and says clergy must not conduct same-sex unions.

Early in the year, 36 retired UM bishops signed a statement calling on the denomination to end its ban on gay clergy. Then in June, the Rev. Amy DeLong of the Wisconsin Conference underwent a well-publicized church trial on charges that she was a self-avowed practicing homosexual and had conducted a same-sex union.

A jury acquitted her of the first charge. Though Ms. DeLong has acknowledged she is a lesbian with a long-term female partner, her counsel, the Rev. Scott Campbell, argued that jurors did not have evidence she had engaged in prohibited sexual practices.

Ms. DeLong did not dispute that she had officiated at a same-sex union, and the jury convicted her on that charge. But jurors chose not to defrock or indefinitely suspend her, instead giving her a 20-day suspension, and ordering her to undergo a restoration process with the denomination.

### Love Prevails response:

"Wrangling" puts more emphasis upon strategies and processes of decision-making and avoids whether discrimination is taking place. Given the implacable statements about "incompatibility", "intensity" side-steps the hurt done to church and individuals by current anti-LGBT legislation.

Official positions garnered by a majority vote do not make them correct. While this is the current position of The United Methodist Church, we would reflect that this decision is one made in 4-year increments and will eventually be seen in a similar light to official positions regarding race and gender - both of which have been subsequently repented.

For those interested in more information:

Here is the text of [A Statement of Counsel to the Church - 2011](#) by 32 Bishops; and

A website for the Rev. DeLong's witness against charges made is found at [LoveOnTrial.org](#).

The first charge was about a Holy Union, not sexual orientation as suggested in the previous paragraph.

It was not just that Rev. DeLong's counsel "argued" a point, but that the Trial Court made a decision in accord with Judicial Council rulings regarding a key issue defining "practice". The church had not followed its own rulings.

While it may be a small point, the shift from Rev. DeLong to "Ms. DeLong" is noticeable and regretted.

Rev. DeLong, in fact, affirmed she had officiated at a Holy Union and does not agree to automatically reject any future requests to bless a relationship.

Please [read the trial court decision](#) and note that the 20-day suspension was not a punishment, but an opportunity for spiritual discernment regarding Rev. DeLong's leading the clergy of her conference in the development of procedures regarding intra-clergy differences. This was quite an affirmation of Rev. DeLong's gifts, not a punishment.

Meanwhile, the Rev. Bruce Robbins of Hennepin Avenue UMC in Minneapolis led an effort to have Minnesota Conference clergy pledge in writing to conduct same-sex unions. The movement spread to other conferences, with more than 1,000 active and retired clergy signing on, and many laity offering support as well.

The clergy argued that the *Book of Discipline* contradicts itself, and that they were choosing to follow its strong language against discrimination, as well as their own understanding that the spirit of the gospel argues for full inclusion of homosexuals.

But other UM clergy and laity accused those signing the statements of ecclesial disobedience, and trying to do an end run around General Conference. A handful of prominent conservative pastors in the denomination kicked off a counter-movement, and through the fall thousands of clergy and laity signed statements calling on the Council of Bishops to pledge to uphold the Book of Discipline against the first group.

Late in the year, the bishops issued a statement noting deep divisions within the UMC over homosexuality, but promising to uphold church law.

The stage is set for more church trials, and for impassioned debate and protests at the 2012 General Conference.

There are many ways to right wrongs. In this case the long-quiet progressive tradition of inclusion has begun to be heard from in increasing volume. New voice and energy is given to call and act to revoke legislation now limiting God's freedom to give gifts for leading the church.

If you are interested in seeing the contradictions within the *Book of Discipline* regarding LGBT persons, go to [The Visions and Realities of the Book of Discipline](#). Hopefully more will choose to follow the vision and fewer will hew to the discriminatory passages.

It is more than interesting that the authority of General Conference is held as a higher authority than how "love your neighbor as yourself" is to be expressed in honoring the call and gifts to ordained ministry. The church has been wrong before and is again.

We note the power of a handful of prominent conservative pastors to bolster the power of law over the presence of grace, relying on legislation rather than discernment of God's gifts and call.

And so the bishops made a decision to try to paper over "deep divisions" with a simple promise to "uphold church law" in its current form rather than lead in a process that recognizes division and works with what is behind and within the differences. Choosing one side as winners and relegating others out as losers is not a healthy way to revive a church and find a new energy of intentional purpose beyond the limits of restriction.

And why is the stage set for continued discrimination and more recrimination? False expectations are too powerful to spread in such an easy way.

Where is the process for impassioned ordained ministry from all called and gifted people? Where is the evidence of hospitality to all based on God's redeeming love, not on the person they may or may not love?