

**Rev. Amy DeLong's Statement
to
Annual Conference Committee on Investigation**

December 7, 2010

I recently read an article in American Profile – that’s a little insert that comes in our local newspaper and features human interest stories. This particular article was about the Tuskegee Airmen. Of course, we know that the Tuskegee Airmen were the first squadrons of all black military pilots during World War II.

At the time when they were trying to prove themselves as qualified pilots, the majority of Americans believed that these men, by their very nature, lacked the intelligence, the aptitude, the courage to serve in the military. The Tuskegee Airmen were part of an experiment to see if black men were capable of operating complicated machinery.

These men lived in a country where lies were told about black people – and the lies were verbalized loudly and often, the Bible was used to legitimize them, and the laws of our nation were formed and fashioned to legalize them. Even when the Tuskegee Airmen performed brilliantly, vicious rumors were spread about their character and their abilities in order to discredit them.

And in the midst of all this, for reasons almost beyond understanding, these men still wanted to serve their country.

This article said, “Every member of the ‘experiment’ understood that they were fighting two wars: one against fascism abroad, the other against racism at home.”

As you can imagine, this little article was not particularly in depth or content-rich – it was a quick read designed primarily as a primer for a

reader who knew nothing of the Tuskegee Airmen and their accomplishments.

But, on the last page, something caught my attention. The writer was talking about the experiences of Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson: “That summer, his plane was struck by enemy fire over southern France, and when he parachuted to the ground, ‘a German was right there with big gun,’ he recalls. He spent nine months as a POW in Poland and Germany – an experience he says was tinged with irony. ‘I was treated as an officer and a gentleman in Stalag Luft III simply because I was an American officer. There were no beatings, no torture,’ he says, referring to how some black people were treated in the United States.”

He was treated better in a German Prisoner of War camp than he was in the United States of America. When I read this paragraph to my partner, she said, “Kind of like us in the United Methodist Church.”

I am not naïve. I know that discrimination and prejudice are alive and well in our society. But, the other thing I know is that on a daily basis, the only place my partner and I, the only place my partner and I, are treated unfairly, the only place we are seen as less than equal, the only place we are called names, the only place we are forced to lie about our love for each other, the only place we fear for our safety and feel crushingly vulnerable is in the church. The only people who have been mean to us simply because we are gay are Christians and more specifically Christians who call themselves United Methodists.

In our church, lies are told about gay people. We are part of a church which teaches that gays and lesbians, as a people, are deserving of our marginalized and inferior status. We are part of a church which teaches that, as a people, gays and lesbians are too dangerous to be full, participating members of local congregations. We are part of a church which teaches the world that gay and lesbian Christians are too morally objectionable to be pastors and bishops.

We have received a bad teaching.

These lies are verbalized loudly and often, the Bible is used to legitimize them, and the laws of our church are formed and fashioned to legalize them.

The United Methodist Church has codified prejudice because too many have been afraid and have let oppression go unchallenged, tolerating the wholesale sacrifice of gay and lesbian people. Too many have adhered to church laws which they know are wrong and which violate the very spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And yet, for reasons almost beyond understanding, like the Tuskegee Airmen who still loved their country and wanted to serve it, I, and many, many faithful gay and lesbian Christians still love our church and want to serve it.

The United Methodist Church has set up a duplicitous system. I could be ordained. I could be appointed if I just promised, with a wink and a nod, to stay securely in the closet. I tried hiding, masking, concealing, fudging. I tried them until I realized the dishonesty was damaging my soul and psyche in ways I was afraid I would never be able to repair. Part of the bargain was that I would have the decency to be silent and ashamed. And I'm neither silent, nor am I ashamed.

Living out my desire to serve the United Methodist Church will no longer come at the expense of denying who I am. My love for the church will not supersede my love for my partner.

It is time to tell the truth – and it is that truth which has brought us to this day.

When we had our preliminary meeting a couple of weeks ago via conference call, I was startled by a couple of comments made about time: “So this meeting on the 7th shouldn't really take very long.” - “It shouldn't take more than about 10 minutes right?” - “In fact, is there any

reason for us to gather in person at all, couldn't we just do the Hearing by conference call."

I was also surprised and disappointed that the complainant didn't call in and didn't let anyone know he wasn't going to call in.

The desire to "phone it in", to hurry along this process, to dismiss me in the most convenient and secretive way possible is nothing new. It is a carbon copy of the very process that has been used for 38 years to throw gay people, unceremoniously, out of the church.

Allowing those of you who represent the church to not show up and to not work very hard is not my objective. I wanted to be here today. I wanted you to be here today. I wanted to see your faces and I wanted you to see mine.

You are all in my prayers as you deliberate on this serious and critical matter. If you believe my sexuality is a good gift from God and that I am of sacred worth; if you believe my loving, long-term, monogamous relationship with my partner is good and honorable and carries with it the full strength of God's blessing; if you believe I could not have, with any integrity, turned my back on those two beautiful women who wanted to celebrate their love within the context of faith; then, I invite you to come out of a different kind of closet. I invite you to come out of a closet, built by church rules, which hushes the witness of God's people, hinders the Spirit and hampers revelation. I invite you to join me in speaking up and acting on what you know to be true.

The United Methodist Church has been shockingly successful at convincing people of good faith that to be loyal to the church, they must pretend they do not see institutional injustice and do not understand its cost. Perhaps loyalty to the United Methodist Church involves addressing the hypocrisy which threatens to make it irrelevant.

Just because the United Methodist Church says that discrimination is acceptable, doesn't mean that it is. You do not have to be an active

participant in ecclesiastical bullying. Nor do you have to be a silent, and therefore complicit, bystander. No covenant should ever force you to surrender your conscience.

I expect that you will use your wisdom and creativity in making a decision. Here is one thought for you as you begin your work. It is clear that I am going to trial, so there is no sense in delaying that eventuality. Although the Book of Discipline is not set up to allow for independent acts of conscience – mine or yours – you are not prohibited from sending a statement along with your Bill of Charges to be read at trial by the Presiding Officer.

Your statement might simply express your protest and theological angst at having been put in a position of furthering a rule that is untrue to your experience of God's Grace. In addition you are welcome to join me in telling the truth about your deliberations and to publicize any statement you make.

I close with a blessing

- 1 for you;
- 2 for myself and my partner, Val;
- 3 for everyone in this blessed, blasted United Methodist Church – those who can't wait to see me defrocked and those who will be crushed if I am;
- 4 and especially for the next generation of United Methodist children who might one day recognize that they are gay or lesbian – and who will either go into the closet on their own out of fear or shame, or who will kill themselves because they have been taught that it's better to be dead than gay, or who will be forced to leave, by threat or by trial.

May God sustain us all in this season of Advent, this season of darkness, as we scan the horizon for a sliver of light – and may our public words and actions reflect the peace, joy, hope and love in our hearts.