

Clergy Covenant: An Invitation

by Rev. Amy E. DeLong

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A Preface

In June of 2011, a trial court convened by The Wisconsin Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church found me guilty of conducting a holy union for a same gender couple. As a result, I was directed to “initiate a written document outlining procedures for clergy in order to help resolve issues that harm the clergy covenant, create an adversarial spirit, or lead to future clergy trials.” This work was to be done collaboratively with Linda Lee, resident bishop of Wisconsin; Richard Strait, Chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry; Jorge Luis Mayorga, District Superintendent and Complainant; and Wesley White, an ordained elder of my choosing. In the following document this configuration of people will be referred to as “The Collaboration Group.”

I am grateful for and indebted to the trial court for its creative and courageous sentence. The members of the court have shown that it is possible to respond to issues of church law in a non-retributive way. The sentence also gives voice and a place at the table to a member of a minority group that is systemically barred from full participation.

Though I cannot anticipate the many and varied reactions to this document, I hope that those already working diligently to challenge our church’s unjust policies and practices will be strengthened to continue their endeavors. I hold such hopefulness cautiously because I know that there will be those from the religious right who will use my words as springboards from which to launch further campaigns of hate against Gay and Lesbian people, and there will be progressives who will continue to be unwilling to take real risks for the cause of justice and will simply persist with their naïve and inadequate platitudes about inclusiveness and dialogue.

At the same time, I also realize that this assignment asks of me what has always been required of oppressed groups – I am being called upon to repair and improve the very system which renders me a second-class citizen. So, while I am grateful for the opportunity to speak my truth, I am distressed that once again the church looks to those whom it has harmed and continues to harm to find its own wholeness. Perhaps the theological lesson here is that only those we have oppressed can save us, because only they have seen us at our worst. (See II Kings 7:3-20; Matthew 15:21-28; Genesis 50:15-21; Acts 10)

*“Traditionally, in american [sic] society,
it is the members of oppressed, objectified groups
who are expected to stretch out and bridge the gap between
the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor.”
(Audre Lorde)*

Our Process

The Collaboration Group met four times: September 26, 2011, October 25, 2011, December 6, 2011, and March 12, 2012. (Meetings in July, August, January and February were not possible due to scheduling conflicts.)

During our time together, we established four foundational understandings with which the entire group agrees.

1. There are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and Intersex (LGBTQI) Christians serving faithfully at all levels of United Methodist Church leadership.
2. LGBTQI people are no threat to the well-being of the church or its membership.
3. Discrimination is morally reprehensible (“Inclusiveness means openness, acceptance, and support that enables all persons to participate in the life of the Church, the community, and the world; therefore, inclusiveness denies every semblance of discrimination” (**¶139, Book of Discipline**)).
4. Heterosexism (the system of advantages bestowed on heterosexuals granting them superior status and rights in a society only because of their sexual orientation) is fundamentally unjust.

The problem the Collaboration Group encountered immediately was that, while we may hold as true the above affirmations, we are working within the structure of a system that embraces heterosexism as a *virtue* and approves of discrimination based solely on sexual orientation. The current policies and practices of The United Methodist Church regarding LGBTQI persons parallel the way the church once institutionally supported racism (a system of advantages bestowed on white people granting them superior status and rights) and sexism (a system of advantages bestowed on male people granting them superior status and rights). As was once the case with women and people of color, The United Methodist Church takes Gay men and Lesbians out of the common conversation, denies our experiences and then requires us to submit to laws we largely had no voice in forming.

During one of the meetings of the Collaboration Group, it was suggested that we approach reconciliation and restoration of clergy differences around LGBTQI concerns in much the same way that Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela led the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. It was immediately evident that such an approach could not be employed. Truth and reconciliation were possible in South Africa only *after* apartheid had been officially dismantled and there was widespread agreement that such a system was morally untenable and unjust. Restorative Justice can occur only sporadically in a context where mistreatment, abuse, and harm are ongoing (as is evidenced by the trial court sentence which led to this document), but cannot be sustained without intentional systemic changes.

***Procedures to help resolve issues that harm the clergy covenant,
create an adversarial spirit, or lead to future clergy trials.***

I. END DISCRIMINATION

I think often of Paul's words to the Corinthians. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you.' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor... If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (I Corinthians 12:21-23 and 26-27).

While The United Methodist Church continues to say to LGBTQI Christians, "I have no need of you," the truth is that our inclusion is not negotiable. Our membership in the Body of Christ and in the Kingdom of God does not rest on a final tally of votes at General Conference. It rests solely on the grace of God. This is a disturbing notion to folks who want God's grace to extend just far enough to let them in, but not so far that it lets just anyone in. For those who believe the primary role of a Christian is to guard purity and obey doctrine, this central message of the Gospel – that God's love is offered generously and evenly – is terribly offensive. Even John Wesley recognized, "There are few matters more repugnant to reasonable people than the grace of God." (As an aside, at General Conference 2012, delegates affirmed in a 56% to 44% vote that "God's grace is available to all." That 44% of the delegates disagree with such a statement shows that we, in our day, are still debating the importance of John Wesley's theology of grace.)

A step toward reconciliation that the church could make would be to distinguish between prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice means a *preconceived judgment, adverse opinion or leaning* formed without just grounds or sufficient knowledge. Discrimination, however, means to make a difference in *treatment or favor* on a basis other than individual merit.

While it is certainly possible for prejudices to be transformed into acceptance, such transformation frequently takes a great deal of time and is often facilitated by personal experience, education, a new revelation from God, or a combination of these and many others things. As such, requiring minority groups to change the prejudices of the majority before equal access and treatment can be granted is an incredible burden and an impossible feat which is paramount to works-righteousness.

I can accept someone *not liking* me because I'm gay (prejudice). I cannot, however, abide being *treated differently* in church and society because I'm gay (discrimination). The "legalization" of discrimination is particularly insidious because it often causes otherwise compassionate people to abandon their own consciences and submit to laws with which they fundamentally disagree. Note that Paul, when using his analogy of the body, does not speak of feelings, but only of actions. In other words, the head doesn't have to like the foot, but it does have to include the foot.

Unlike prejudice, discrimination can be ended immediately – individually through courageous and conscientious actions which bend toward justice; and systemically through legislation which prohibits categorical discrimination. It can also be ended corporately by groups of people who decide they will no

longer cooperate with unjust laws. Failing legislative changes by governing bodies, we have the option of considering non-cooperation with directives we believe to be contradictory to the Gospel.

In defiance of its own guiding principles (“We insist that all persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured” (¶161G)), The United Methodist Church continues to implement and enforce a categorical discrimination of GLBTQI people which fraudulently deprives us of the very sacred, civil and human rights the Church theoretically claims are due all persons. Aside from dismantling a basic understanding of justice and fairness, such practices and policies signify a clear departure from Wesleyan and Christian proclamations of equality, mercy and love upon which the church was built. Our denomination is not exempt from judgment when it fails to live up to its own highest ideals.

The codification of intolerance is bad for the souls of gay people, but it is worse for the soul of the church. What is true of individuals is true of institutions – we become sick, internally damaged, when we are guided by discrimination. No valiant or holy purpose can be achieved by contriving ways to disappear an entire population of God’s people. Such endeavors only satisfy our most ignoble tendency to create dividing walls among us. Categorical discrimination mocks and usurps the prerogative of God to bless, call, and send whomever God chooses. As always, the church’s efforts to limit God’s ability to live and move and have being beyond the construct of any given time or circumstance will be futile. Love and grace, as always, will ultimately prevail.

II. EXERCISE CONSCIENCE AND HONESTY IN ACTION

It is clear that The United Methodist Church’s proscriptions have not inhibited God’s desire or ability to call GLBTQI Christians to ministry, but they have created a culture of widespread dishonesty and fear within the church. Since the very beginning of the Methodist Movement, gifted and called Gay and Lesbian people have served the church faithfully as laity, clergy and bishops, but most have done so from the confines of the closet – fudging, denying, lying about our true selves. For years, seminary professors, district superintendents, bishops and fellow clergy have been confidants and coaches for Gay and Lesbian people, helping us find the language and the fortitude to maneuver ordination and appointment processes.

The unspoken agreement, however, has been that we would not expose the duplicity of a system which requires our public silence. What makes today different from days gone by, however, is that GLBTQI clergy (or any clergy conducting same-gender unions) are increasingly refusing to be dishonest. My clergy colleagues never asked me why I presided at a Holy Union, but they repeatedly asked why I didn’t lie about it. I and many others are speaking candidly about who we are and about the ministries in which we are engaging. We are increasingly unwilling to be closeted in order to carry out the ministry to which we have been called.

As more and more clergy are honest about our sexual orientations and gender identities, and as more and more clergy openly perform same-gender unions, I doubt there will be a corresponding increase in church trials. I suspect that most cases will be conveniently ignored. This has been the standard operating procedure for years. In my case, every person in the chain of command (from people within the Board of Ordained Ministry to my Bishops) knew I was gay and partnered ... every person.

Those instances which simply cannot be overlooked will be dealt with “administratively.” This often secretive process allows church leadership to feel satisfied that somehow the *Book of Discipline* has been upheld without requiring them to address the fundamental injustice of the church’s polity. Attempts to avoid church trials, as evidenced by proposed legislation to General Conference 2012, are not meant to help gay folks. Such attempts are meant to serve the most suspect interests of the institution by tamping down controversy and shielding the church from public exposure of its proscriptions against sexual minorities.

I heard and confirmed a statement made by retired Bishop Joe Sprague. When asked if he thought the active bishops of The United Methodist Church would ever sign a statement calling for the full inclusion of GLBT people – like the one retired bishops recently signed – he said, “I believe that 80% of the Council of Bishops would support a statement like that.” “However,” Bishop Sprague went on to say, “I don’t know what the courage quotient is right now, but I can only think of a few active bishops who would sign such a document.”

On November 10, 2011 the Council of Bishops released a letter and through it, we learned that Bishop Sprague was incorrect. There are, in fact, no active bishops with the courage quotient to speak out. All 80% of those bishops who long for the full inclusion of all people in the life of the church signed a document that states they support the Church’s oppression and persecution of LGBTQI people.

In a time when the world seems to be torn apart with division, inequity, injustice, hatred and violence, as Christians we bear responsibility to give witness to a ‘more excellent way.’ ... As bishops chosen, consecrated and assigned by the Church, we declare once again our commitment to this covenant we have made. As the Council of Bishops we will uphold the *Book of Discipline* as established by the General Conference (November 10, 2011 “Letter from the Council of Bishops”).

What a stunning abdication of conscience and integrity by the church’s highest officials. Our bishops could have raised up a deeply rooted scriptural understanding of fairness and equality, grace and acceptance (*Scripture*). They could have embraced our faith’s and our denomination’s long history of ministry for, with and to all people (*Tradition*). They could have pointed to evidence offered by science and medicine, psychology and sociology which overwhelmingly agrees that a same-gender orientation is as common and as natural as left-handedness (*Reason*). They could have held in their hearts all the LGBTQI people they know ... people whose stories they’ve heard and whose faithfulness they have witnessed (*Experience*). At the very least they could have acknowledged that a good many of them disagree with church law as it relates to Gay and Lesbian people, but they couldn’t even bring themselves to that elementary level of honest discourse.

Perhaps the bishops engaged in lively debate in a closed session. If so, their letter does not reflect such a conversation. We did not receive a missive which promotes “a more excellent way” but instead a letter (signed as a unanimous body) which forwards regressive and false sentiments designed to ensure the civil and religious disenfranchisement of God’s LGBTQI children. They chose to present a fictional united front and committed to blind allegiance to the *Book of Discipline*.

The letter written by our bishops is an example of what is endemic of all levels of the church – the easy betrayal of one’s convictions in the face of conflict and the disingenuousness of sympathetic, deedless words offered in the context of oppression. In a January 2011 article, Presbyterian pastor Rev. Jim Rigby wrote, “Dr. Walt Herbert, emeritus professor of English at Southwestern University … used the term, ‘weeping executioners’ to describe those who express concern for the oppressed, but will not leave their place in the hierarchy of oppression” (*Our Nation of Weeping Executioners* is available in full at CommonDreams.org).

A friend recently sent me a link to the website for the late United Methodist Bishop Melvin Wheatley. I found the following paragraph in his biographical section:

In 1980, Wheatley sent shockwaves through the denomination when he broke ranks with his peers and refused to endorse the official position of The United Methodist Council of Bishops which states, in part, that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” Wheatley said, “I will not accept [this statement]. It states as an absolute fact what is an insufficiently documented opinion: that gay persons can’t be Christians. The statement violates the laws of logic because one positive exception destroys a negative absolute. I personally know not one, but at least 50 Gay men and Lesbians who are Christians… I take Jesus Christ very seriously in making judgments, and the more seriously I take him the stronger is my feeling that this statement is an inadequate representation of Christianity” (www.melvinwheatley.com).

Bishop Wheatley’s actions, thirty years ago, remind us what fearlessness looks like and convict us of all the ways we fail to act thusly.

I think the church’s trial of me may have brought an end to clergy trials for reasons of sexual orientation and same-gender unions. This is not because gay people have left, not because clergy are unwilling to conduct same-gender unions, not because church-sanctioned discrimination has ended, not because trials are an abominable way for people of faith to resolve conflict, but because trials are bad for business, and the church is going to make them disappear.

As I talk to people throughout the connection I most often hear trials like mine likened to two other historic events. One is the 1692 Salem Witch Trials, and the other is Nazi Germany where under Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code hundreds of thousands of Gay men were sent to concentration camps, their prison garb marked with a pink triangle.

I am intrigued by the perceived similarities between The United Methodist Church’s discrimination of GLBTQI folks and Hitler’s Germany. Surely the most striking comparison is that all systems of oppression are dependent on the acquiescence of the masses. While it is true that connections can be made between otherwise disparate events (especially when those events have roots in scriptural justification), I find myself more interested, in this particular instance, in how the modern struggle for GLBTQI liberation is *unlike* the Holocaust.

In Germany, in 1940, to have shown support for Gay Men and Lesbians, for Jews and for Gypsies might have meant death. And yet, people did it. Showing profound courage, many risked their lives to offer tangible, life-saving help. But today's struggle for full and equal rights does not require nearly that much courage. In the United States, in 2012, breaking the silence, standing in opposition to ignorance and intolerance, disobeying unjust laws, refusing to participate in and profit from unjust systems because of a misguided understanding of covenant will likely not get you killed. (I am sensitive to the fact that this is not true in all parts of the world.)

While engaging in these activities of resistance on behalf of GLBTQI people does require significantly less courage than defying Hitler, our fears do not seem to lessen proportionally. Our progressive allies have the unceasing ability to scare themselves into non- or insufficient action. Whether it is fear of punishment from the system, or of losing credentials or credibility, or whether it is simply fear of the criticism and disapproval that might come from taking a stand, the result is the same – self-saving silence and calculated passivity.

“In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”
(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

III. ESTABLISH A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF OUR CLERGY COVENANT

In the *Book of Discipline*, the term “covenant” is used a lot without a clear definition for what is meant. Given the variety of clergy gifts, it does however seem to have more to do with support, mutual relationship and commitment to ministry than with a standard that may not be violated. ¶303.3 makes this relational understanding of covenant clear. It is interesting that the exact phrase “clergy covenant” appears only once in the *Book of Discipline*, in the context of explaining why clergy don’t take oaths during church trials (¶2710.3).

The term “clergy covenant” was repeatedly used by the prosecution during the church’s trial of me to imply that any violation or variation from of the *Book of Discipline* must be regarded as an offense against all other clergy. There is no such understanding in any of the references to “covenant” contained in the *Book of Discipline*.

In my experience, the term “clergy covenant” gets most consistently employed as an instrument for reprimand and punishment, but seldom as a celebrative one. For instance, how often do we hear the accusation, “He has broken the clergy covenant,” but we never hear, “She has been presented with this year’s Clergy Covenant Award for best showing us how to live in honest, supportive relationship.”

Nearly all professional organizations have a clearly established Code of Professional Ethics. That is not true for clergy in The United Methodist Church. Instead, we work without any functional or articulated Code, and then in moments of crisis turn to the only thing we have, which is an undefined, ambiguous term like “covenant.” Additionally, we need to avoid the temptation to regard the current *Book of Discipline* as a de facto substitution for a Code of Ethics. To do so would be like usurping the Hippocratic Oath with each new finding in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

The liability of working without an established Code of Ethics became clear during the Church's trial of me when potential jurors (all United Methodist Elders) were dismissed from service if they affirmed that their deliberations might be informed by a higher authority than current church law.

For me, covenant is a rich theological concept about promise and mutual relationship. Its roots are in the Latin word *convenire*, to come together. Unfortunately for GLBTQI people and our allies, the word "covenant" is often used in an abusive way, as a threat to persuade people, of otherwise good conscience, into conforming to discriminatory policies. It has become a mandate that requires participation in a conspiracy of silence, transforming even our friends into mute bystanders to ecclesiastical bullying.

The Collaboration Group quickly learned that we do not have a common understanding or vision of the clergy covenant as a system of mutual support and accountability when we took turns sharing our understandings of its meaning. None of us turned to the *Book of Discipline* for the correct definition, as one does not exist there. Instead, our answers were deeply personal, reflecting our own particular values, insights, and desires. Our understandings of clergy covenant were multiple and divergent.

And yet, when it comes to issues of law and legislation we pretend to have a single, clear, consistent definition. This error can lead those in authority to act without the restraint that would naturally follow if the church were to openly acknowledge the deep divisions that exist among us.

As we work to define *our* covenant, we must:

1. Recognize that conflict is not to be avoided, but worked through with grace and honesty.
2. Create a definition – not for everyone, always – but for *us, now*. This requires avoiding generalized or coded religious language which reinforces an individualized interpretation of what covenant means.
3. Establish a Professional Code of Ethics which includes intentional relationship-building and modes of accountability.
4. Confront imbalances of power and avoid the perils of majority rule (i.e., the tyranny of the majority).
5. Seek protection of and equality for the vulnerable/minority by ending participation in discrimination (specifically against GLBTQI people).
6. Engage external assistance for an internal work of covenant-defining. Just as John Wesley had a variety of mentors from throughout the Christian community (his own Church of England, Roman Catholic, Moravian, etc.), it may be necessary for us to look beyond our own tradition for guidance (including members of the GLBTQI community and possibly the larger inter-faith community).

*"72 years ago, my African American preacher-father attended the
'Methodist Unification Conference' in Kansas City (1939).*

*He returned home with a sense of deep regret because the Conference 'unified'
three branches of Methodism by developing a 'covenant' that
placed 90% of black Methodists in the racially segregated Central Jurisdiction.*

*There was a time when some neighborhoods had 'covenants'
that kept black people from buying homes in that neighborhood.*

Covenants that exclude are unworthy of what it means to be the Church."

(Rev. Gil Caldwell in a post-trial written response to accusations that I had broken covenant)

Action Item: An Invitation

Identifying that discrimination, duplicity and disagreement about the meaning of clergy covenant have contributed to an adversarial spirit is easy. Knowing how to repair the resulting broken relationships is much more complicated. This document to the Wisconsin Annual Conference cannot adequately set out procedures for the restoration because a broad representation of clergy has not had a part in creating or owning it. Such work must be done collaboratively with clergy who are willing to have a high level of investment both in the process and the outcome.

The Trial Court decision which sentenced me to this work presumed that the church is blinded by current disciplinary language to the extent that it cannot see a way forward. We are in deep need of developing and implementing new ways of living and being together. This, of course, includes the thorny and demanding work of resolving unspoken and deep-seated issues of power, distrust and fear which continue to block our desires to be different than we are.

The Constitution of The United Methodist Church declares that the Annual Conferences “shall have reserved to it the right to vote … on all matters relating to the character and conference relations of its clergy members” (Section VI, ¶ 33, Article II). To that end, I propose that the clergy of the annual conference enter into deep conversation with one another in order to work toward a clearly articulated clergy covenant. This is not an undertaking that can be accomplished on our behalf, but one which demands the best that the whole body has to bring to it.

It will be crucial to the process to develop relational tools and opportunities among the clergy so that they have a significant base of contact with one another. If there is no personal, relational energy to hold us together, there will be no basis on which to go any further than we have so far come.

The question for the clergy of the Wisconsin Annual Conference becomes: ***Is deepening our understanding of our covenant worth spending money, time and energy on as a central piece of our common life and the life of United Methodism in Wisconsin?***

If the answer is “No,” then the policies and procedures we already have will simply need to be followed to their logical conclusion. The United Methodist Church will continue to tear itself apart and become increasingly irrelevant to its members and society, while destroying the souls of the LGBTQI folks and their allies who remain faithful.

If the answer is “Yes,” if there truly is a yearning for a restored and new relationship among clergy – beyond charging one another and having winners and losers, beyond perceived purity and false unity – then a new and intentional process and supporting structure are needed. To this end, I invite the Clergy Session of the 2012 Annual Conference to consider the following:

- Authorize funding for and the development of a Conference Clergy Covenant Team.
- The Conference Clergy Covenant Team will be charged with the task of developing a Clergy Covenant employing the six itemized points on Page 8.

- The Conference Clergy Covenant Team will be comprised of 12 members. District Superintendents will discern 2 clergy from each District who have the gifts to aid in the development of a Clergy Covenant for the benefit of clergy solidarity and congregational leadership. One retired clergy will be selected by the Retired Clergy Association. Additional members of the Team will be Rev. Amy DeLong, Rev. Jim Cotter (or another member of the Trial Court), and Rev. Wesley White (from The Collaboration Team).
- The Conference Clergy Covenant Team will work together at least monthly. Participation in the Team will involve a substantial commitment of time and creative energy and must be regarded as a first priority.
- Conference-wide communications and regular progress reports will be an essential ingredient in this process as we seek transparency and create feedback loops which elicit participation from the broader clergy community.
- The Conference Clergy Covenant Team will return to the 2013 Clergy Session for approval of its proposed Clergy Covenant.
- We request a starting fund of \$15,000 to cover travel, meeting costs, and communication expenses. Should more monies be needed, additional funding will be sought from the clergy on whose behalf work is being done, congregations that recognize the benefit a Clergy Covenant would have for them, the Board of Ordained Ministry, and the United Methodist Foundation. An accounting of this money will be made as part of a report to the Clergy Session.
- There will be accountability regarding the Clergy Covenant that is approved by the 2013 Clergy Session. The Conference Clergy Covenant Team will oversee an evaluation of its implementation and report back to the 2014 Clergy Session regarding any needed changes as a result of lived experience with a Clergy Covenant.
- A similar evaluation will be made to the 2015 Clergy Session and the 2016 Clergy Session will evaluate whether or not additional Clergy Covenant work is in order.

There have been blessings aplenty in the process set in motion by the bold and creative decision of the Trial Court. May there be even more blessings that come from this invitation.

*“Brothers and sisters of the trial court,
 this is not a violation of covenant, but rather a vindication of conscience.
 These are not the seeds of schism but the sowing of our salvation.
 We are not engaged in the abrogation of accountability, but in the creation of community.
 God is bringing forth something new in our midst.”
 (Rev. Scott Campbell, Closing Arguments in the Trial of Rev. Amy DeLong)*

Glossary of Terms

Bisexual: Sexual, emotional and affectional attraction to both men and women.

Choice: A false assumption that most people can choose to be heterosexual or homosexual.

Coming Out: Sharing one's sexual orientation with others – an important step in self-acceptance and in fostering emotional, physical and spiritual health.

Conversion or Reparative Therapy: An attempt to convert a homosexual person to heterosexuality by religious conversion or psychological counseling. These therapies have been discredited by the American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association as unsuccessful and destructive.

Gay: A homosexual man, or any homosexual.

Gender Identity: The inner sense of being male or female, which is sometimes in conflict with one's biological gender.

LGBTQI: Abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and Intersex.

Heterosexism: The system of advantages bestowed on heterosexuals granting them superior status and rights in a culture and institutions of society only because of their sexual orientation.

Heterosexual: Sexual, emotional and affectional attraction to members of the opposite sex.

Homophobia: The irrational fear and hatred of same-sex sexual behavior and attraction. The fear of someone thinking you are gay.

Homosexual: Sexual, emotional and affectional attraction to members of one's own sex.

Internalized Homophobia: A sense of shame and self-hatred about one's own homosexuality caused by being taught that same-gender orientation is wrong.

Intersex: A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. (One in every 100 births has bodies which differ from standard male or female. One or two in every 1000 births receive surgery to "normalize" genital appearance.)

Lesbian: A homosexual woman.

Questioning: Individuals who are questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Sexual Orientation: Enduring emotional, romantic, sexual or affectional attraction to another person, ranging along a continuum from exclusive homosexuality to exclusive heterosexuality. Most scientists agree sexual orientation is the result of a complex interaction of biological, genetic and hormonal factors.

Transgender: Individuals whose gender expression and/or gender identity differs from conventional expectations based on the physical sex they were born into. Some may align their outward appearance and inner identity by altering their behavior, name, manner of dress, or by hormone therapy or surgery.