

# Standing Up for Justice in the United Methodist Church



by Mary Ann Barclay

**I came out as a lesbian while attending seminary in Texas.**

It might not be your average queer coming out story, but the introduction to queer, liberation, and feminist theologies created a space in my mind and spirituality for me to finally own who I am. It was an incredibly liberating experience to come out, but also a complicated one. I'd been in the ordination process to become a minister in the United Methodist Church for about five years already and had completed half a Master's degree to get there. However, the UMC has yet to eradicate its discriminatory policies which keep LGBTQ people from being ordained. Having tasted the long-awaited freedom of being out of the closet, there was no way I could even force myself to go back in for the sake of the church or my career. For a while, I thought I had no other option, but with time I realized I was giving in to injustice too easily.

The institution of the church is said to be grounded in the belief that our ultimate salvation is found in love, care for the marginalized, and creating a more just society as witnessed in the person of Jesus. I stick with the church because on its best days, that's what I see in it. However, as the UMC continues to discriminate against LGBTQ folks, it's harder to recognize its best side. After graduating from seminary, I decided not to

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give in to this discrimination that so goes against the grounding of the church, and refused to leave the ordination process. I decided that I would be out, authentic, and moving forward to become a minister with my personal identity intact.

In April of 2013, I was voted on by Austin ministers, despite my declaration of being a lesbian, to continue to the largest body that votes on individual's ability to be ordained. One individual on the committee thanked me for giving them the opportunity to say yes. Had I given in to injustice and removed myself from the process before I could be rejected, this body of ministers wouldn't have had the opportunity to stand up for justice and vote me forward. This was an important lesson that would prep me for what was to come.

My next scheduled interview for the continuation of my ordination process was scheduled to occur in January of 2014. However, before that could happen, I was wrongly removed from the ordination process by the body of folks who had yet to even meet me. This occurred in June – more than 6 months from when they were supposed to sit down with me. I was emotionally prepared for the rejection that I felt would ultimately come from the “rules” of the UMC, but I was not prepared for the dehumanizing refusal to even interview me. Shame on me, perhaps, for expecting discrimination to be so orderly.

Since June, I have had immense support, guidance, and assistance from churches, allies, other queer Methodists seeking ordination, nonprofits working for inclusion, and lucky for me, people who know how to fight for justice. Over the last few months, the wrong that was done by the body who removed me from the ordination process without ever meeting me, was corrected. Thanks to the work of other justice-seekers, a small pinch of justice has been served, and I am back on track. I will now have my interview this summer. While I celebrate this

opportunity to be true to myself, to what

I believe the church is supposed to be, and to my values of love, justice, and relationship, others question why I am wasting my time.

When I am interviewed, the UMC discrimination policy will remain. It is very unlikely that they will allow me to be ordained. So why would I bother pursuing the interview? What's the point?

Discrimination in any form, but especially in formal policy and practice, demands that justice-seekers do not avoid pointing out its harm. As a friend of mine once reminded me, as justice-seekers and truth-tellers, our success is not dependent on the outcome ultimately decided by others, success is solely dependent on whether or not we seek justice, speak our truth, and maintain our integrity. I will likely be rejected in my interview this summer, but I'm determined to give my denomination a chance to “say yes” to me. If they say no, it is on their own conscience and it is up to them to justify the discrimination they participate in and how it fits into their understanding of a loving God. But it is on me to stay true to who I am in the face of injustice – a queer AND a minister.

For all of us who are marginalized by formal or implicit discrimination, it's easy to be dragged down by legislation that doesn't pass, allies that disappoint us, or efforts that seem to be in vain. But I'm learning that justice and truth aren't only manifest in the end-results that liberate us, they're manifest every time we stand up for ourselves and for each other. Our success is bound up not in the people or policies that oppress, but in our collective selves. ❖

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