

Truth telling

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [April 14, 1999](#) issue

Throughout those tortured months leading to the impeachment trial of President Clinton, one point of national agreement stood out: truth telling is good; lying is bad. Martin Luther made that point in his Small Catechism, in explaining the eighth commandment: "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light."

United Methodists should keep Luther's admonition in mind over the next few months as they begin to elect delegates for their quadrennial General Conference in Cleveland in May 2000. A recent church trial in the Northern Illinois Conference found, by a jury vote of 10-3, that one of its clergy members, Gregory Dell, violated church law when he conducted a service that recognized the union of two gay members of Dell's congregation in Chicago. After hearing Dell insist that his pastoral conscience demanded that he perform the ceremony, the jury told him he could retain his ordination only if he promised not to do it again--a moralistic bludgeon not unlike the one wielded by Martin Luther's tormentors at the Diet of Worms.

Other United Methodist clergy besides Dell are defying the church rule that forbids a minister to grant religious sanction to gay and lesbian couples. United Methodists are divided on this issue, which is why so much emotion surrounds the election of 992 delegates (half laity, half clergy) in upcoming annual conference sessions. During these elections, voters could put the problem in a different perspective if they would acknowledge that what is at stake is not what they think about homosexuality but what they believe about truth telling.

Many, if not most, heterosexuals find it difficult to understand why gays and lesbians would want to go against society's sexual norms and declare themselves as homosexuals. I confess that it has taken me a good many years to overcome my own puzzlement: Why suffer so much public prejudice and family resistance in order to select someone of one's own gender as a permanent partner? It just didn't make

any sense to me. But I have changed, at first because I thought tolerance was a virtue, and then because people I knew and cared for testified to their desire to be accepted as gay or lesbian.

It makes both theological and practical sense for the United Methodist Church to provide a service in which gays and lesbians publicly pledge fidelity to another person--not in a "marriage" ceremony, but in a ceremony of "holy bonding." Isn't the church called to support fidelity among all its members? Are we not a people who endorse truth telling over lying? Don't we argue that we cannot be truthful about our neighbor unless we are truthful about ourselves?

There are many gays and lesbians who want to be part of a religious community--one-third of Gregory Dell's congregation, for example, are openly gay or lesbian--and who rightly argue that when they are excluded from the opportunity to make a public statement in favor of fidelity the church is failing to provide them with proper pastoral support.

Truth telling is not relative, but it is often culturally conditioned, revealed as error only with the passage of time. Somewhere buried deep in the University of Chicago's archives is a copy of my master's thesis--a (carefully researched) condemnation of a Methodist law which dictated that only "innocent" parties in a divorce could be remarried by clergy. A few years later the church's General Conference changed this law with the simple explanation that "innocence" in human relationships is not so easily determined.

David Blewett, a leader in promoting better Jewish-Christian relations, cites Luther's Small Catechism in a recent paper he circulated to emphasize the importance of truth telling in the Lutheran tradition. He points to the painful fact that Luther's anti-Semitism, blatantly expressed in his 1543 treatise "On the Jews and Their Lies," violates the eight commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. " For all his contributions to the Reformation, Luther's false witness against the Jews is a sin that will forever taint his place in history.

The Methodist Church of the 1950s into which I was ordained was still officially segregated by race. Sad to recall, the denomination was so obsessed with preserving institutional unity--"our people are not ready," was the mantra of the time--that it failed to take a leadership role (except in certain courageous individual cases) in denouncing the ugly stain of segregation in society, much less in cleaning

up its own house.

Most secular law already forbids discrimination in both gender and sexual preference, while many progressive communities provide partner support for gay and lesbian employees. The very least that the United Methodist Church can do is correct its own institutional errors. The denomination that took so long to admit its systemic sin of racism is now being asked to do nothing more than endorse fidelity in personal relationships. For a church with a long pietistic tradition, that should be a slam dunk.