

A word of thanks to those 111 clergy

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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As I work today, my mind travels to the [United Methodist clergy who came out as LGBTQ before the General Conference, to challenge the denomination's policy which bans the ordination of "practicing homosexuals."](#) While the number is stunning, I keep thinking of each individual person who has risked their livelihood and calling, for this historic moment.

As clergy, we're asked to hide a great deal of ourselves, because our personal lives are a matter of constant public scrutiny. I remember the first time it happened to me—when I realized that I needed to hide. I went to see "Boogie Nights." I didn't really look at the movie description. I was just bored, and it was playing. At the end of it, however, I hid my face while coming out of the theater. I was so nervous that someone from my church would see me.

From that moment, I've hidden things. Nothing spectacular (unfortunately, I'm not that exciting). But when a person's political views differ from mine, I calculate the risk of owning up to my divergent opinions. When some members of my church believed that I was paid too much, I hid when I went out to eat. When I doubted certain aspects of my faith, I wrestled with them in secret.

I'm not a brazen careerist or even a stealth politician. It's just that so much of being a minister means choosing our battles. Part of the job entails trying to figure out when to be wise as serpents and when to be as gentle as doves. It means negotiating how to be all things to all people to save some. When faced with difficult decisions we ask, "What's worth the headache? Who's going to leave the flock over this? Could this destroy the church? Could this destroy me? What would Jesus do? Should I risk the short-term battle or can I come up with a long-term solution? Is this my ego, or is this truly a matter of conscience?"

Sometimes we sin with our omissions. Sometimes we learn to hide who we are and put on masks. It is not usually because we're dishonest, at least not at first. But then

our lives can become fractured as we try to live up to the expectations of a hundred people. And it is just *so much easier* to say nothing at all. To keep hiding. To keep pretending.

So to hear the courage of these pastors, who have come out, to stand in solidarity with one another and with LGBTQ parishioners, families and loved ones, makes my heart soar. For many Methodist ministers, it's particularly difficult, because they can't just move out of their geographic location. They cannot simply uproot to a more liberal area of the country when things get difficult. That often means that they're stuck with colleagues for life, even when those colleagues have been toxic. Some might lose their livelihoods. Some might face disciplinary actions. Some might have to live with the disapproval or shunning from people they love—and that's no small matter when a person has the heart of a pastor.

I am bursting with gratitude for their witness and strength. They have set aside the masks that pastors have been forced to wear for centuries. They have proclaimed God's love for all. They have let the kids in their congregation know that God loves them, no matter what their orientation might be. They have taken life-altering risks and made it personal, in order to move a denomination forward.

I thank them. And, I hope that we will match their courage. May we have the strength to uphold them--financially, emotionally, and prayerfully--in any hardship that may come their way.