

QUEER CLERGY



A History of
Gay and Lesbian Ministry in
American Protestantism



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The Pilgrim Press
Cleveland

C o n t e n t s



	Acknowledgments . . .	ix
	Preface . . .	xv
<i>One</i>	In the Beginning . . .	i
<i>Two</i>	The Baptist, the Unitarian, and the Gay Archbishop . . .	13
<i>Three</i>	Roadmap . . .	27
Part I: THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST . . .	41	
<i>Four</i>	Courage Born of Rashness . . .	46
<i>Five</i>	The Church Responds . . .	54
<i>Six</i>	Modern Day Pilgrims in a Pilgrim Church . . .	62
<i>Seven</i>	Dueling Interest Groups . . .	68
<i>Eight</i>	Open and Affirming . . .	73
<i>Nine</i>	Be Practical, Be Pastoral, Be Prophetic . . .	82
Part II: THE EPISCOPALIANS . . .	89	
<i>Ten</i>	The Denial of Me as a Child of God . . .	93
<i>Eleven</i>	A Lesbian Priest . . .	113
<i>Twelve</i>	The Tide Turns . . .	125
<i>Thirteen</i>	Maverick Bishops . . .	135
<i>Fourteen</i>	A Heresy Trial . . .	148

- Fifteen* Lambasting at Lambeth . . . 155
- Sixteen* Jumping Off . . . 171
- Seventeen* The Devil Is Loose in the Church . . . 178
- Eighteen* The Windsor Report . . . 195
- Nineteen* All the Sacraments for All the Baptized . . . 214
- Twenty* Thou Art a Priest Forever . . . 221
- Part III: THE LUTHERANS . . . 225**
- Twenty-one* Dollars for Disobedience . . . 231
- Twenty-two* Early Optimism . . . 240
- Twenty-three* Broken Promises . . . 247
- Twenty-four* Extraordinary . . . 256
- Twenty-five* A Second Bay Area Trial . . . 268
- Twenty-six* We Have Not Yet Reached Consensus . . . 274
- Twenty-seven* Satan Has a Hold of You: Happy Easter . . . 285
- Twenty-eight* This Widow Keeps Bothering Me . . . 290
- Twenty-nine* Knockin' on Heaven's Door . . . 296
- Thirty* They Called the Question . . . 307
- Thirty-one* We Didn't Leave the ELCA. The ELCA Left Us . . . 317
- Thirty-two* Finding a Way . . . 325
- Thirty-three* Late-breaking Lutheran News . . . 332
- Part IV: THE PRESBYTERIANS . . . 337**
- Thirty-four* The Scruple . . . 344
- Thirty-five* Is Anybody Else Out There Gay? . . . 351
- Thirty-six* Judicial Roadblocks . . . 364
- Thirty-seven* How Do You Continue to Do It? . . . 379

<i>Thirty-eight</i>	Sophia and a Shower of Stoles . . .	387
<i>Thirty-nine</i>	Fidelity and Chastity . . .	396
<i>Forty</i>	Amendment A or Amendment B? . . .	407
<i>Forty-one</i>	WOW! . . .	413
<i>Forty-two</i>	Marriage Equality on Trial . . .	424
<i>Forty-three</i>	Rivers of Living Water . . .	435
<i>Forty-four</i>	A Slight “ECO” . . .	446
<i>Forty-five</i>	A Stole Returned . . .	450
Part V: THE METHODISTS	. . .	455
<i>Forty-six</i>	We Do Not Condone . . .	463
<i>Forty-seven</i>	Good News? Hardly . . .	471
<i>Forty-eight</i>	All Truth Is God’s Truth . . .	486
<i>Forty-nine</i>	Open or Shut? . . .	493
<i>Fifty</i>	Bishops and Clergy Speak Out . . .	505
<i>Fifty-one</i>	Just Kill Them! . . .	515
<i>Fifty-two</i>	Witch Hunts . . .	522
<i>Fifty-three</i>	How Long, O Lord? . . .	538
<i>Fifty-four</i>	It Is Time to Cross Over . . .	550
<i>Postscript</i>	Mustard Is Blooming in the Fields . . .	557
	Index . . .	562

P r e f a c e



In 1987, my small Lutheran congregation in central Minnesota was in conflict. Church leaders, who could spout chapter and verse, railed against the pending merger that would soon produce the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Their tone was apocalyptic. The church council voted eleven to one to sever all denominational ties as of January 1, 1988, the date that the apostate ELCA would come into being.

My wife was the sole dissenting vote.

When she came home after midnight in tears, I put on a pot of coffee, and we talked until the eastern sky turned pale yellow. We decided that we would attempt to rally the congregation to support the ELCA, and that marked our baptism into ecclesiastical politics. Somehow, oddly, sex seemed to be at the heart of the anti-ELCA sentiment. During the public meetings that followed, one of our outspoken opponents seemed to take particular delight in mouthing the word “homosexual.” Lutheran Social Service was demonized because they used pornographic movies in counseling, or so the argument went.

Eventually, the congregation turned around, and a congregational vote affirmed the relationship with the ELCA. The conservatives bolted and formed their own church. Our congregation experienced a rebirth: new Sunday school teachers stepped up, a fresh council was elected, and the remaining members all dug deeper to keep church finances in the black.

For the next twenty years, I watched with interest as incendiary culture wars threatened to engulf the newly formed ELCA. I attended

numerous synod assemblies as a voting member, my pastor and I participated in a forum at Luther Seminary in St. Paul on a pending human sexuality statement, and I taught an adult class entitled “What the Bible really says about homosexuality,” but LGBT inclusion was never really my fight, and I was mostly an observer on the periphery, unaware of the full depth and breadth of the struggle of many gay and lesbian pioneers.¹

In the spring of 2009, my novel *A Wretched Man*, a novel of Paul the Apostle, was in the hands of my publisher awaiting release early the next year. The novel characterized Paul as a repressed gay man. In the meantime, my publisher suggested I start a blog, and I called it “Spirit of a Liberal, a blog of progressive, religious themes.” Soon, I was blogging about the upcoming ELCA Churchwide Assembly scheduled for August. A progressive Human Sexuality Statement and LGBT inclusive ministry policies were on the agenda amidst widespread anticipation that this might finally be the year for a breakthrough.

The Assembly would be in Minneapolis, just forty-five minutes up the freeway from my home in Northfield, Minnesota, and I volunteered for Goodsoil, a coalition of Lutheran LGBT advocacy groups. There I was in August wearing a Goodsoil prayer shawl and mingling with folks in “graceful engagement” in the hallways, over coffee, and during lunch. I had moved from the periphery and heard myself labeled a “straight ally.” Along with the prayer shawl, the label fit comfortably. As the final vote totals appeared on the big screens announcing a victory for the cause of inclusion, I cried and hugged along with many others.

In the months that followed, the blog went viral in Lutheran circles as I defended the historic ELCA actions and challenged the dissident organizations: WordAlone, Lutheran CORE, and Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ. As bloggers are wont to do, I often spoke with a sharp tongue. “Thanks for saying what we don’t dare to say,” a bishop’s assistant whispered later.

As I penned blog posts, I encountered stories of early pilgrims, not only in my ELCA but across denominations, and I realized there was a rich narrative of the journey toward full inclusion that hadn’t been told. Despite feeling like an interloper, a straight man writing an LGBT history, I received encouragement as I shared my idea for a book and then began the process of researching and writing in the spring of 2011. Along

the way, I encountered this comment from a young woman: “I have been thinking a lot these days of our lesbian, gay, and bisexual sisters and brothers and supporters who have gone before us to bring us to this time and place. I wish that I knew more of their names. I wish I knew more of their stories.”²

It is my hope that this book will help LGBT Christians and straight allies to appreciate our past and to remember the pioneers who have led the church to a place of welcome. To be sure, the journey has been conflicted, but with each victory, great and small, there has been celebration, and part of my motivation is to “shout it from the mountaintops” and to “tell everyone what we have done.”

Who speaks for Christians? What is *the* Christian attitude toward LGBT persons? Since the days of Jerry Falwell’s “Moral Majority” and the birth of the Christian right, it has been gay-bashing conservatives who have claimed *the* Christian voice. Even within the moderate Protestant denominations, official policy has stigmatized gays and lesbians, and many gays and lesbians perceived Christianity to be hopelessly judgmental and exclusionary and therefore irrelevant to their lives. Many have experienced the church as a source of pain rather than healing.

But recent history has witnessed a groundswell of change within the Christian church, at least within the progressive denominations, and this book is a chronicle of the Damascus-road conversions across entire denominations. Against the strident voices of Bible-thumping, headline-grabbing, self-appointed spokespersons for Christianity, moderate Christians have recently articulated a radically different message, and with words of reconciliation and welcome, the walls have come tumbling down. For many congregations, the slogan “all are welcome” is no longer false advertising.

For our purposes, *full inclusion* implies an attitude of welcome without precondition (all means all) and without limit (not just pew but pulpit).

The LGBT community is not fully included, not fully welcomed, not fully respected, not fully accepted, not fully treated as children of God unless they can participate in all roles, including the offices of ordained ministry. Many of the pilgrims we will encounter seek to answer their call to ordination, but their quest is not merely self-actualization, for they are standard bearers for an entire community. LGBT ordination

has been the linchpin, the symbol, the visible sign of inclusivity that sounds: “[t]he message [that] goes out from here to the ears of other gays and lesbians who hear the call to ministry, but even more importantly, to the whole host, the entire LGBT community. Here is a church where you are welcome.”³

LGBT ordination is about much more than the individuals invited into the pulpit; their presence proclaims a word of affirmation and acceptance to an entire community in a bold, clear voice. If gays and lesbians are welcome in the pulpit, if gays and lesbians can be both guest and host, then and only then is the entire LGBT community fully included in the life of the church. Gays and lesbians in the pulpit are the visible proof of full inclusion; anything short of that betrays a lesser welcome.

Thus, as the visible sign of full inclusion, LGBT ordination has been the terminus, the long-sought end of the journey, the signpost that says that the gay and lesbian pilgrims have arrived at their destination. Accordingly, the quest for inclusive ordination standards will also be the focus of this book.

In 2005, gay New Hampshire Bishop Gene Robinson rode on the Episcopal float in the New York City Pride March along with his daughter, Ella, who later reported,

I looked over and this guy on the street was kind of cheering, and Dad and he kind of locked eyes, and the guy just burst into tears and said, “Bishop Robinson, thank you, thank you,” and just kept saying that as we went past. . . . I was, like, standing there waving my rainbow flag, and I was just dumbstruck. I forget what this means to people, whether they’re Episcopalians or have no faith whatsoever. It strikes people on so many different levels. And it reminds me that this is a big thing, and an important thing, for so many people.⁴

The journey toward full inclusion invites a continuing reevaluation of what it means to be church. Do the churches of the Reformation continue to be reforming? How does the church engage in moral deliberation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries? Where are church boundaries and who draws them? Equally profound is the question of Scripture. How is the Bible currently read, interpreted, and

applied as authoritative and normative? How shall the church understand the interplay of law and gospel? What are the relative influences of tradition, reason, experience, and Scripture?

Is this an old battle or new?

Traditionalists argue that LGBT inclusion is the crash that followed a long slide down a slippery slope away from immutable, orthodox values, away from biblical authority, and away from the core doctrines—the creeds and confessions—of the church. Such are the gatekeepers who build formidable barriers to preserve the purity and unity of God’s holy people; for them, this struggle is merely the latest attack on Christian orthodoxy unleashed centuries ago in the godless Age of Enlightenment. *Sola Scriptura* becomes the rallying cry against the church bodies perceived as too easily swayed by the shifting winds of culture.

Others see a recurrence of the struggle between law and grace. For the modern reformer, the good news of a gracious, redemptive, inclusive God of all creation swirls as a fresh breeze that blows where it will. And then there are the justice-seeking prophets. Along our journey, we will encounter many who answered Jesus’ call to *come out* of their tomb-like closets and who reimagined his life-giving cry, *unbind them*.

Though the denominations have long claimed that celibate gays and lesbians could be ordained, just don’t fall in love, the LGBT community never accepted the false distinction between being and behavior. At an accelerating pace, progressive denominations have opened the pulpit to LGBT clergy in a relationship. The United Church of Christ first ordained an openly gay man in 1972; bishops of various Episcopal dioceses have ordained gays and lesbians for decades, the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire consecrated a gay bishop in 2003, and the Episcopal General Convention in 2009 formally approved LGBT eligibility for all levels of the ordained ministry; the ELCA Churchwide Assembly of 2009 revised its ministry policies to allow LGBT clergy; the Presbyterian Church in 2011 voted to allow gays and lesbians to be ordained as ministers, elders, and deacons; and a United Methodist ecclesiastical court in 2011 rendered token punishment for a lesbian pastor who performed a “holy union” ceremony for a lesbian couple while United Methodist clergy in many regional Conferences signed LGBT-friendly petitions.

These recent policy revisions mark the end of a long and conflicted journey, and this book is a wayfarer's journal, a chronicle of the uncertain path toward full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the life of the church. Along the way, we will encounter many pilgrims who struggled with faith traditions that simultaneously nourished and diminished them, trusting the promise that all are loved by God even when their church betrayed the good news. Although conflict continues, the journey has brought the church to a place of a celebration of gays and lesbians in the pulpit, serving openly and with the full recognition and support of their parishioners in the pews, their leadership councils, and their denominations.

Without meaning to slight the gay and lesbian activists in other faith traditions, and they are legion even though their religious leadership and institutions remain oppressive, the progressive denominations known as mainline Protestant will be the landscape of our journey. Historian David Hollinger suggests replacing the term "mainline" in this context with "ecumenical," and this book will follow his view. "Ecumenical" reflects an outward-looking, nonexclusive view of Christian denominationalism that promotes or tends toward worldwide Christian unity or cooperation; indeed, ecumenism encourages collegiality with other world religions. As an example of ecumenism, the ELCA has formalized relationships with other denominations, including the other four highlighted here, as "full communion partners," which entails a mutual recognition of baptism and a sharing of the Lord's Supper, joint worship, and an exchangeability of members and clergy.

"Evangelical Protestantism," on the other hand, tends toward insularity and exclusivity as well as a more rigid biblicism. Hollinger distinguishes between "ecumenical Protestantism" and "evangelical Protestantism."

I use ecumenical because it is much more specific historically and analytically than mainstream or liberal. Mainstream is a term that is too general and can cover almost anything. Liberal, too, is a term that you can apply to culture or politics as well as theology. Ecumenical refers to a specific, vital and largely defining impulse within the groups I am describing. It also provides a more specific and appropriate contrast to evangelical. The term

evangelical came into currency in the midcentury to refer to a combination of fundamentalists, Pentecostals, followers of holiness churches and others; ecumenical refers to the consolidation of the ecumenical point of view in the big conferences of 1942 and 1945.⁵

For our purposes, ecumenical Protestantism, which comprises the third largest grouping of United States Christians behind Catholics and Evangelicals, will include these denominations:

- The United Methodist Church (UMC), with more than eight million members.
- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), with more than four million members. The ELCA came into existence in 1988 as a result of a merger of existing church bodies: the American Lutheran Church (ALC), the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC).
- The Presbyterian Church USA (PC(USA)), with two million members. The PC(USA) came into existence in 1983 as the result of the merger of the United Presbyterian Church (UPC) and the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA).
- The Episcopal Church (TEC), with two million members.⁶
- The United Church of Christ (UCC), with more than a million members.

The journey has been blocked by gatekeepers along the way: the opponents of LGBT inclusion that existed in all denominations. While the term “gatekeeper” is potentially pejorative, it is actually borrowed from the writings of one such opponent.⁷

Many now celebrate, but others do not. In response to the LGBT-inclusive actions of ecumenical denominations, many in the pews are roiled up. Some withhold financial support. Some have left altogether, including whole congregations and dioceses. Episcopal dissidents have formed a rival body, the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA), and some Episcopal dioceses have bolted to the conservative ACNA.

The Episcopalians also endure condemnation from many in the worldwide Anglican Communion led by the archbishop of Canterbury. The ELCA also faces rival organizations consisting of dissidents who have departed the ELCA: the WordAlone Ministries, Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC), Lutheran CORE, and CORE's newly formed denomination called the North American Lutheran Church (NALC), which promises to "reconfigure North American Lutheranism." There are fresh rumblings of a conservative Presbyterian movement called "The Fellowship of Presbyterians"; the Presbyterians already experienced a schismatic reaction to women's ordination four decades ago.

In 1990, CBS television newsman John Blackstone concluded his report on the first Lutheran *extra ordinem* ordinations of gays and lesbians in San Francisco with this question: "Are they out of step with their church or a step ahead?"⁸

With the advantage of historical perspective, this book will consider that question.

NOTES

1. This book will generally prefer the term "gay," "lesbian," or "LGBT" (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), but "homosexual" will be used when the source document or context under discussion uses it. Beverly Wildung Harrison suggests that the term "gayness" implies "a self-affirming and self-respecting person who insists that homoeroticism is good and who wants to live a life of integrity, demanding respect that any person has a moral right to expect." Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connection* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 142. See Nicholas C. Edsall, *Toward Stonewall* (University of Virginia Press, 2003), 3, for an excellent discussion of the problems of terminology. Also see Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, rev. exp. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 177. Rogers suggests that the gay community may now prefer the term "queer," which is still seen as pejorative by many straight persons. Dr. Carter Heyward, *Keep Your Courage: A Radical Christian Feminist Speaks* (New York: Seabury Press, 2010), 13–17, offers an expansive use of "queer" to include straight allies. "Queerness is

public solidarity in the struggle for sexual and gender justice, of irrepressibly making connections to other struggles for justice, compassion, and reconciliation.” Dr. Louie Crew, who played a prominent role in the Episcopal journey and who served as a principal source for the Episcopal section of this book, suggested the use of “Queer” in the title of this book.

2. Susan Kraemer, “Wanderings in Grief and Rage,” *More Light Update* (February 1993).

3. Rev. Ruth Frost, press conference preceding the ELCA Rite of Reception of Frost and two others at the Church of the Redeemer, St. Paul, Minnesota, September 18, 2010.

4. Elizabeth Adams, *Going to Heaven: the Life and Election of Bishop Gene Robinson* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2006), 265.

5. Amy Frykholm, “Culture Changers: David Hollinger on What the Main-line Achieved,” *The Christian Century* 129, issue 14 (July 2, 2012): 26–28. Hollinger refers to gatherings of the Federal Council of Churches (forerunner to the National Council of Churches). In 1942, 375 representatives of 30 communions gathered at Wesleyan University of Ohio to consider a “Just and Durable” peace. The gathering included an impressive list of lay and clergy leaders including chairperson Presbyterian John Foster Dulles, later to be Secretary of State under Eisenhower, Charles Clayton Morrison, editor of *The Christian Century*, industrialist Harvey Firestone, and John R. Mott, Methodist and YMCA international leader and 1946 Nobel Peace Prize winner. Conservatives, and even *Time* magazine, criticized the progressive sentiments of the ecumenical gathering. National Council of Churches website, accessed June 17, 2103, <http://www.nccusa.org/centennial/marchmoment.html>.

See also David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013).

6. Until recently, the initials ECUSA (Episcopal Church of the United States of America) designated the Episcopal Church, but the Church recently began to use the initials TEC (The Episcopal Church), and this book will use that designation even though it is often anachronistic.

7. The metaphor of “gatekeeper” was suggested by James V. Heidinger II, the editor of *Good News*, the publication of the Methodist opposition of the same name, who editorialized that gatekeepers were necessary to protect the church from “those within who would accommodate the church to secular norms or harm the faithful by false doctrine,” and he was referring to the LGBT community and their advocates. Stephen Swecker, ed., *Hardball on Holy Ground* (Boston: Wesleyan Press, 2005), 3.

8. “In the Beginning,” on the website of Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries, accessed May 28, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVOz3Z7t9L0>.



IN THE BEGINNING

The poet laureate of the sixties, Bob Dylan, sang “The Times They Are a-Changin’.”

The early years of the decade had witnessed the successes of the civil rights movement—Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream speech” in 1963 followed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Inspired by the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique*, the women’s liberation movement was in full bloom.

But it was a dark decade, too, with thousands dead on the battlefield in the most unpopular war in the nation’s history and the assassinations of King and the Kennedy brothers.

As the tumultuous decade rushed to a close, 1969 witnessed the inauguration of Richard Nixon, who later claimed a “silent majority” of support for traditional values; Neil Armstrong walking on the moon and proclaiming “one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind;” flower children sprawled on fields and meadows as Woodstock became the icon of the generation; and the largest antiwar demonstration in U.S. history as more than a quarter million protesters descended on Washington, D.C., in November.

The year was also about Stonewall and the birth of the gay liberation movement.

On June 28, 1969, New York City police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, but their plans went awry; the gay community fought back, and for several days riots and protests filled the streets. One of those arrested reported,

We all had a collective feeling like we'd had enough of this kind of shit. It wasn't anything tangible anybody said to anyone else, it was just kind of like everything over the years had come to a head on that one particular night in the one particular place, and it was not an organized demonstration. It was spontaneous. That was the part that was wonderful.

Everyone in the crowd felt that we were never going to go back. It was like the last straw. It was time to reclaim something that had always been taken from us. It was something that just happened. All kinds of people, all different reasons, but mostly it was total outrage, anger, sorrow, everything combined, and everything just kind of ran its course. It was the police who were doing most of the destruction. We were really trying to get back in and break it free. And we felt that we had freedom at last, or freedom to at least show that we demanded freedom. We didn't really have the freedom totally, but we weren't going to be walking around meekly in the night and letting them shove us around—it's like standing your ground for the first time and in a really strong way, and that's what caught the police by surprise. There was something in the air, freedom a long time overdue, and we're going to fight for it. It took several forms, but the bottom line was, we weren't going to go away. And we didn't.¹

This book is about the gay rights movement within the church that parallels that of secular society, but the movement toward *full inclusion* in the church was and is more than merely a reaction to popular culture; progressive religious activism actually predated and encouraged Stonewall and its aftermath. Stonewall and the gay liberation movement was closely entwined with concurrent developments within ecumenical Protestantism. To the charge that religious progressives merely exhibited a knee-jerk response to secular cultural trends, the record suggests the opposite—religious leaders were at the forefront, the first small voices crying in the wilderness to prepare the way.

This book shall use the metaphor of a journey, a journey toward full inclusion that slowly meanders across America for over forty years. Along

the way, we will encounter numerous brave pioneers, and we will listen to their stories of conflict and celebration.

Before we begin, we must mark our starting point. A journey *toward* full inclusion implies a journey away *from* a situation less than inclusive. Where does our journey start? What was the *status quo ante*, the way things were before the journey?

Our childhood God despises homosexuals; our church family denies our very existence; our traditional theology openly condemns us; our denominations and churches believe we are sick individuals who choose to alienate ourselves from God by refusing to ask for forgiveness for our sinful ways.

This is my experience, from the heart of a wounded Christian lesbian, unable and unwilling to relinquish my Christianity, looking for an overflowing cup in the midst of a seemingly endless drought.²

At mid-century, homosexuality was considered sinful by the church, criminal by society, and disordered by science. For the folks in the pews, homosexuality was an unsavory stew of sin, sickness, and criminality.

And unmentionable. Except for the occasional fire and brimstone sermon that railed against the temptations of the flesh, often with a healthy dose of titillation, discussions of homosexuality were as taboo as the behavior itself. It was “the love that dare not speak its name.”³ Many families had a “funny” uncle, a brother or cousin who disappeared into the debauchery of the metropolis, or a “Bohemian” daughter, but such matters could only be whispered about and never openly discussed. Gays and lesbians in the churches were invisible and closeted, pushed underground by friends, family, and often self-condemnation.

Similarly, congregations and denominations had no stated policies toward homosexuals. None was necessary. Gays were invisible. Gays were nonpersons. Gays had no status and no identity and no existence beyond the demonization of the hellfire sermon. Gays were unknown in the vast majority of congregations; it was only a select few inner-city ministries that encountered gays as real flesh and blood human beings. And it was there that the threads of sin, sickness, and criminality began to unravel.

Upheaval caused by World War II mobilization resulted in gay ghettos in numerous American cities. Gays who received the infamous “blue discharges” from the Navy during the war had clustered in San Francisco where the Navy dumped them—to avoid the embarrassment of returning to small towns but also due to the allure of the burgeoning gay community— “after they’ve seen Paree”—and all that. Others, mustered out after the war with honorable discharges, lingered in the cities for similar reasons. Other military processing cities included Los Angeles, Seattle, Atlanta, New Orleans, Boston, and New York, whose bohemian Greenwich Village had long been a gay haven.⁴

As post-war America settled into the comfortable culture of Ike, *I Love Lucy*, and the birth of rock and roll, the traditional, unquestioned premise of the church was that homosexuality was sinful; no, it was worse, it was abominable. Homosexuality and Christianity were mutually exclusive terms, and there was a basic incompatibility between being gay and being Christian. Opposites. Oil and water. A wide chasm separated Christianity and homosexuality, Christians and gays. A homosexual chose to indulge in sinful and disgusting sexual behavior and thereby cut himself or herself off from God and from the church. The long tradition of the church was clear; the Bible was unambiguous. Wicked Sodom lent its very name to male penetration of another male. Men who lay with other men were abominations. God’s wrath was revealed against shameful lusts, unnatural relations, and indecent acts. The effeminate and the sodomite were lumped together with thieves, adulterers, and drunkards.

So, too, in civil society. Homosexuals were outlaws. Criminal codes included antisodomy laws. Stoked by McCarthy era fears,

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and local police departments cooperated in compiling lists of known or suspected homosexuals, their meeting places and arrest records, even their friends and associates. The postal service kept track of the recipients of questionable material. Shortly after becoming president, Eisenhower signed an executive order officially designating sexual perversion a bar to federal employment.⁵

Local governments routinely harassed the gay community through arrests at gay bars and sweeps of parks and other areas frequented by

gays; colleges and universities fired gay educators. In 1955 in a well-publicized purge, antigay hysteria swept Boise, Idaho; by its end, dozens of men had lost their jobs, been imprisoned, or been run out of town.⁶

Meanwhile, the scientific community articulated theories of psychological deviance. In the 1940s and 1950s two streams of thought developed within the psychiatric community, both flowing from Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis. Perhaps the most succinct statement of his views came in a personal letter to the concerned mother of a gay man. “Homosexuality is surely no advantage,” he wrote:

“But it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function produced by a certain arrest of sexual development. Many highly respectable individuals of ancient and modern times have been homosexuals. . . . It is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime, and cruelty too. . . . By asking me if I can help, you mean, I suppose, if I can abolish homosexuality and make normal heterosexuality take its place. The answer is, in a general way, we cannot promise to achieve it. In a certain number of cases we succeed in developing the blighted germs of heterosexual tendencies which are present in every homosexual, in the majority of cases it is no more possible, . . . What analysis can do for your son runs in a different line. If he is unhappy, neurotic, torn by conflicts, inhibited in his social life, analysis may bring him harmony, peace of mind, full efficiency whether he remains a homosexual or gets changed.”⁷

The negative stream of psychoanalysis focused on the notion of “an arrest of sexual development” over against “normal heterosexuality,” and the goal of the analyst was to cure, often using extreme measures. Medical theories looked to the home and early childhood to explain the sexual maladjustment of the homosexual. Deficient nurture produced deviant behavior—it was assumed—a pathological hidden fear of the opposite sex that was caused by traumatic parent-child relationships.

Responsible medical journals often published questionable articles that largely went unchallenged. “[S]uffering, unhappiness, limitations in functioning, severe disturbances in interpersonal relationships, and con-

tradictory internal tendencies . . . are all present in the homosexual.”⁸ In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association classified homosexuality as a “sociopathic personality disturbance,” later softened to “a non-psychotic mental disorder” in 1968.⁹

But Freud’s views also invited a more progressive attitude, based upon the growing view that homosexuality was immutable, that homosexuals should be seen as victims worthy of compassion rather than punishment, and that appropriate therapy could lead to a well-adjusted life even for the unchanged homosexual. This latter stream that flowed from the Freudian headwaters was largely promoted by religious, especially ecumenical Protestant, counselors.

Liberal Protestantism embraced science, and the postwar emphasis on “pastoral counseling” as a vital role of the minister encouraged the best and latest psychological insights and counseling techniques. In 1943, the founding minister of New York’s Riverside Church, Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, had been the first clergy leader to suggest that clergy counseling should include concern for homosexuals.¹⁰ Seventeen years later, in 1960, Fosdick noted, “A good minister cannot now escape personal counseling. . . . It is in the air.”¹¹

Thus, if science said that homosexuals were who they were and did what they did because they were “sick,” then for some progressive counselors the appropriate response should be compassionate understanding and treatment rather than punishment. Such counselors were far from questioning the basic assumption of sinfulness, but the notion of disordered sexual development became the scissors to cut the filament between homosexuality and criminality. If homosexuality was developmental, then therapy, not condemnation, was the proper response of counselors. From the vantage of the twenty-first century, this attitude may seem archaic and certainly the science has matured,¹² but the movement from punishment to treatment was an important progressive step.

These early religious counselors were also quick to recognize the corrosive effects of guilt on the emotional well-being of their gay patients, and “clergy, by virtue of their moral authority, held the unique power to absolve homosexual’s guilt.”¹³ As Freud had noted, the prospect of abolishing homosexuality and replacing it with heterosexuality was not likely, and many within the religious counseling community soon moved to

accommodation and adjustment without expectation of conversion or cure. The foundation named for George W. Henry and ably managed by executive director Alfred Gross provided the paradigmatic example of a pastoral counseling ministry to the gay community:

A janitor's closet turned counseling office . . . housed the George W. Henry Foundation. The Henry Foundation was a shoestring operation founded in the late 1940s. At its shaky helm was an aging man named Alfred Gross, who presented himself at various times as a counselor, an Ivy-league trained ethicist, and an ousted Anglican priest. (He was a very interesting guy.) The foundation stayed afloat because of its connection to George W. Henry, a well-known psychiatrist, and by the patronage of prominent supporters, including a number of clergy in the Episcopal Diocese of New York. Gross and his clergy supporters provided counseling services to "men in trouble with themselves or with the law," many of them sent for court-ordered counseling after being charged with sex-related misdemeanors. Most of these clients were gay, and the Henry Foundation was in the business of helping them achieve a "successful adjustment."¹⁴

Recognizing the practical futility of a cure,

Gross and other counselors emphasized a "realistic" approach . . . [that] addressed the unhealthy manifestations of homosexuals' guilt and sought to facilitate their change to a discreet homosexual lifestyle that avoided legal and social scrutiny.

In line with its mandate to provide "practical aid," the foundation offered job and housing placement, legal assistance, and limited financial aid in addition to referrals for counseling. Such services were aimed to help with the client's "adjustment," a reference that did not mean that clients would be cured to function as heterosexuals.¹⁵

A few early Christian books challenged the presumptions of sin, sickness, and criminality. *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (1955) by Derrick Sherwin Bailey was followed by UCC pastor Robert Wood's *Christ and the Homosexual* (1960). Leading Christian publications

in the seventies included *What about Homosexuality?* (1972) by Episcopal Canon Clinton R. Jones, Catholic Priest John J. McNeill's breakthrough *The Church and the Homosexual* (1976), and *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* (1978), a collaboration of Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott.

After the 1950s witnessed liberal Protestant ministries that treated the homosexual with compassion and dignity through therapy, the raucous 1960s saw progressive religious leaders move into the political arena to advocate for repeal of sodomy laws, elimination of the use of entrapment to arrest homosexuals for solicitation, and arbitrary and indiscriminate arrests for lewd behavior. Such leaders remained a distinct minority within their denominations, but public advocacy by a few caught the attention of the press and the public. In 1964, the Episcopal Diocese of New York supported legislation to repeal New York's sodomy laws.¹⁶ In 1965, an article appeared in the prestigious and influential *Christian Century* that suggested "the law . . . should not penalize private immoralities which cannot be proved contrary to the public good."¹⁷

Meanwhile, in San Francisco, an ecumenical clergy group met to confer with local gay leaders, and the meeting grew into an organization called the Council on Religion and the Homosexual (CRH). On New Year's Eve, 1964, a benefit ball was scheduled to raise funds, but more importantly, to publicize the new organization to local homosexual communities. Several of the clergy attempted to coordinate with the local chief of police, but they were not well received. The vice squad wanted to know why the clergy were "getting mixed up with a bunch of queers."¹⁸ Finally, the clergy received assurances that the police would not interfere with the event, but they were deceived. At the benefit ball, six persons were arrested, including three lawyers who refused to allow the police to enter. Lutheran pastor Chuck Lewis kept the flashbulbs on his camera popping as he photographed the police, and his assistant Jo Chadwick stashed the film negatives in her bra. The ensuing press and public outrage was a watershed moment in public and religious awareness of official abuse of the gay community. "By serving as witnesses and spokespersons to the abuses suffered by San Francisco's sexual minorities, the churchmen strategically used their moral privilege, granting the legitimacy of the 'cloak of the cloth' to the homophile movement. . . . The ministers' public stand took the

conversation out from behind the closed doors of the pastor's study and placed it onto the front pages of morning newspapers."¹⁹

Historian John D'Emilio stressed the importance of the CRH, which "provided the spark that ignited debate on homosexuality [within the churches. CRH was] able to take advantage of the theological ferment and social activism that infected American religion in the 1960s in order to press for reconsideration of Christian attitudes toward same-sex eroticism."²⁰ We will encounter CRH again as we journey forward.

The ecumenical Protestant denominations had discovered that gays and lesbians existed beyond the demonized caricatures of hellfire preachers. By the late 1960s or early 1970s, each of our denominations began to wrestle with LGBT issues with halting steps that reflected uncertainty and internal disagreement. Policy statements affirmed human sexuality as a gift from God that enriched the intimacy of relationships and was not solely for procreation. While never quite reaching the point of including LGBT sexuality, the hint was there. All denominations uniformly rejected criminal penalties for gay behavior. The notion of sickness, disease, or arrested sexual development came under question, as it was in the scientific community.

Not surprisingly, the question of sin was always the most controversial element of policy statements, which often questioned, but never quite rejected, traditional moral condemnation of homosexual behavior. That's where the voices in the pews chimed in. When the denominations met in national conventions, their ultimate legislative authorities, resolutions were adopted that restrained or overruled progressive impulses of committees or task forces. Legislative policy statements were laced with traditional, biblical admonitions.

- In 1966, the ALC (Lutheran) national convention approved a statement called "Sexual Integrity in Modern Society." The statement affirmed that "sexuality is God-given and good," but also reiterated the traditional view that homosexuality was "contrary to God's will" while emphasizing that the church should offer "help and healing for warped sexuality."²¹
- In 1967, the Episcopal General Assembly adopted a short statement urging legislative reform of laws relating to homosexuals.²²

- In 1968, the General Assembly of the UMC (Methodist) similarly urged legislative reform.²³
- In 1969, the Social Action Committee of the UCC approved a resolution that went further than any other denominational statement, urging the church to: “learn to cherish, and not merely condemn, those whose sexual need and loneliness may prove importunate—though unmarried, unmarriageable, widowed, or homosexual.”²⁴
- In 1970, soon after Stonewall, the LCA (Lutheran) national convention adopted by an overwhelming voice vote a statement that said, “homosexuality is viewed biblically as a departure from the heterosexual structure of God’s creation.”²⁵
- Finally, a Presbyterian committee issued a statement in 1970 entitled “Sexuality and the Human Community” that suggested that sexual conduct, even if outside the formal marriage bond, might appropriately and responsibly contribute to the intimacy and mutuality of a committed relationship.²⁶ However, traditional admonitions were affirmed by the next General Assembly. The resolution adopted by the commissioners confirmed the church’s “adherence to the moral law of God as revealed in the Old and New Testament, that . . . the practice of homosexuality is sin.”²⁷

When progressives sought policies promoting LGBT interests, there was always a “yes, but” faction. This was especially true as the various policy statements were often watered down by convention delegates by adding a “yes, but” statement that reiterated traditional views.

Yet, it was not purely political, as even the progressives struggled with notions of sin. While the church promoted compassion and understanding, it was always against the assumption that homosexual behavior was sinful. As we are about to embark on our journey, there were few voices that dared disagree with this basic, traditional premise. Social statements often hesitantly stepped up to the door, peered in, but never quite dared to enter, and convention delegates routinely slammed the door shut.

Later, we will hear the story of lesbian Episcopal priest Ellen Marie Barrett and the bishop who ordained her, Paul Moore Jr. For now, one

crystalline moment in that story needs retelling. Bishop Moore wrote of this exchange that occurred during a session when he faced hard questioning from the priests and parishioners of his diocese. After a tense hour, a critical priest finally raised *the* question that the bishop knew would come, and the room fell silent:

“Bishop Moore,” he asked, “do you think homosexual activity is a sin?”²⁸

Bishop Moore was right, that would be *the ultimate question* the church would wrestle with for the next forty years.

NOTES

1. Michael Fader, quoted in David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 160.

2. R. S. Umoja [pen name, UMC clergywoman], “My Cup Runneth Over,” *Open Hands* (Spring 1991), 17. She is also cited in Gary David Comstock, *Unrepentant, Self-Affirming, Practicing: Lesbian/Bisexual/Gay People within Organized Religion* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1996), 183.

3. An oft-quoted phrase dating to the late nineteenth century and associated with gay lovers Lord Alfred Douglas and Oscar Wilde.

4. Comstock, *Unrepentant*, 3.

5. Edsall, *Toward Stonewall*, 278.

6. *Ibid.*, 279.

7. *Ibid.*, 244.

8. B. S. Robbins, “Psychological Implications of the Male Homosexual ‘Marriage,’” *Psychoanalytic Review* 30 (1943): 428–37. Also cited in Edsall, *Toward Stonewall*, 245.

9. Edsall, *Toward Stonewall*, 247.

10. Comstock, *Unrepentant*, 4.

11. Harry Emerson Fosdick, “The Ministry and Psychotherapy,” *Pastoral Psychology* 11:101 (1960): 13, cited in Heather Rachelle White, “Homosexuality, Gay Communities, and American Churches: A History of a Changing Religious Ethic, 1946–1977” (PhD diss., Princeton University Department of Religion, September 2007), 28.

12. As early as 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of pathological disorders. Since 1975, the American Psychological Association has urged its members to work to remove the stigma of mental illness associated with sexual orientation. More recently, the American Psychological Association has debunked the notion of reparative or conversion therapy. See Gregory M. Herek, PhD, “Facts about Homosexuality and Mental Health,” on the website of the University of California, Davis, Psychology Department, http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/facts_mental_health.html, © 2012. The article relates the history of policies of the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association toward homosexuality and also contains an exhaustive bibliography.

13. White, “Homosexuality, Gay Communities,” 44.

14. Heather Rachelle White, Comments at the LGBT-RAN Annual Dinner, May 31, 2008, on the website of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Religious Archive Network, accessed May 16, 2013, <http://www.lgbtran.org/Papers/WhitePresentation.pdf>.

15. White, “Homosexuality, Gay Communities,” 40, 44.

16. The Roman Catholic Diocese opposed the repeal effort, and repeal failed. White, “Homosexuality, Gay Communities,” 54.

17. White, “Homosexuality, Gay Communities,” 58.

18. *Ibid.*, 74.

19. *Ibid.*, 74.

20. John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 192–85, 202, 214–15.

21. White, “Homosexuality, Gay Communities,” 96.

22. *Ibid.*, 91.

23. *Ibid.*, 91.

24. *Ibid.*, 99.

25. George Dugan, “Lutherans Urge Open Mind on Sex,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1970.

26. White, “Homosexuality, Gay Communities,” 100.

27. From the *Minutes* of the 1970 General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., cited in White, “Homosexuality, Gay Communities,” 117.

28. Paul Moore Jr., *Take a Bishop Like Me* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 161.