

Heather Rachelle White
Comments at the LGBT-RAN Annual Dinner
May 31, 2008

Before I say a few things about this paper, I first want to acknowledge my debt to LGBT-RAN. If ever an online directory of scattered archival sources has made a difference in someone's life, it has made a difference for me. I discovered the LGBT-RAN when I was in graduate school, as I was flailing about for a dissertation topic. (I should tell you what I was researching before I started writing about LGBT religious history: The dissertation I didn't write was about chapel cars. Yes, chapel cars—they were train cars, converted into mobile chapels, and priests would travel along with the locomotives and offer communion at all the stops along the train route. I'm very glad I didn't write that dissertation.)

When I started thinking about writing on LGBT religious history, I sent Mark Bowman an email inquiring about the LGBT-RAN. It was in October 2004, and my email said something like: "Dear Mark, I'd like to arrange a visit to the archives..." I apparently hadn't read the LGBT-RAN website very well, and Mark patiently informed me that there *were* no archives; the website simply provided links to holdings in *other* institutions' archives. But he offered to meet with me, and speaking with him and John D'Emilio, whom I also met around the same time, converted my dissertation topic and me. They were the first connections among many that shaped the document that became my dissertation, a shape that is still changing, as this manuscript is becoming a book.

Following those connections led me to some unexpected places, and one of those places is the subject of the first chapter of my project, the paper that was awarded this prize. I didn't plan to write this paper, because I had planned to open my project in 1964 with the founding of the Council on Religion and the Homosexual. But I followed comments made in some of my oral history interviews and references dropped in archival sources—and they led me to a janitor's closet turned counseling office that 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."

What did it mean for a homosexual to achieve a successful adjustment in the era of "Leave it to Beaver", the Cold War, and the atom bomb? When homosexuality was widely perceived to be a mental illness? And how were ministers, of all people, involved in this "adjustment" process? These are the questions my paper addresses, and the answers surprised me.

The first surprise was to find out how much church leaders had to say about homosexuality decades before Stonewall and the rise of the gay rights movement. Much of their attention to homosexuality came with their concerns about heterosexuality and their anxieties about “sexual problems” that might undermine healthy marriages. We might say that homosexuality lurked in every bedroom, and psychiatrists, psychologists, and the clergy counselors were invested in thwarting its reach into otherwise healthy, happy heterosexual couples and the budding psyches of their children. So ministers—and particularly those offering clergy counseling—had much to say about homosexuality.

The second surprise was to discover that, for some counselors—like the ones affiliated with the Henry Foundation—viewing homosexuality as a mental illness challenged their conception of homosexuality as a sin. If homosexuality was an illness, it wasn’t a choice, and homosexuals shouldn’t be condemned for a condition that wasn’t their fault. Instead, they should be treated.

Treated? Here is a third surprise. Much of this treatment was what we might expect—efforts to therapeutically change same-sex attracted people into “well-adjusted” heterosexuals. But for some clergy counselors—and again, particularly those affiliated with the Henry Foundation—treatment amounted to a different intervention, more or less a plea: “be discreet!” A well-adjusted homosexual should *not* catch the eye of a policeman, if you know what I mean.

Writing about the Henry Foundation and church discussions about homosexuality during the postwar period introduced me to fascinating and surprising paradoxes. The stories I found and the actions of the people involved didn’t easily fit into categories of “liberal” or “conservative” as I understood them. They also challenged ideas about what was “religious” and what was “secular;” what was “tradition and what was “progress.” Yet this past—the past of clergy counseling, the Henry Foundation, and the well-adjusted homosexual—somehow contributed to the later widespread debates over homosexuality in American churches.

I certainly won’t attempt to chart that route tonight. I will just say that I, for one, am happy to have arrived here at this dinner tonight. (My own route may be as roundabout as the ones I examine historically, with my chapel cars-turned LGBT religious history dissertation topic!) I’m very happy to be here, and I’m honored and grateful to receive this award.