

GENE LEGGETT 1935-1987

On December 31, 1987, one of the founding members of the United Methodist Gay Caucus, the group which later evolved into AFFIRMATION, died at Medical City Hospital in Dallas, Texas, of complications arising from chronic hepatitis. Franklin Gene Leggett was fifty-two years old.

I first met Gene (he disliked the name Franklin, and never used it) in the fall of 1970. He was an actor and teacher at the Dallas Theater Center, and I was a student in the Center's professional academy. I was surprised when I learned that this attractive, flamboyant man in long hair and hippie attire was a Methodist minister. I could tell he was gay, and I came to learn that he lived by faith. I had not been able to reconcile those two elements in my own life, and marvelled at one who seemed to combine the two so easily. That seeming ease was deceptive, the result of an intense personal struggle. Having fought that struggle—having reconciled his faith and his sexuality—he shared that reconciliation unstintingly with those around him. In my own life Gene Leggett was again and again the instrument of God's grace in helping me to achieve that same reconciliation.

Gene was born March 19, in Edinburg, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley. He grew up in the church, and seemed to his family and friends to be destined for the ministry. He graduated from Pan American University in the valley, married his childhood sweetheart, Fanny, and began studies at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. There he discovered the t-rooms. When he talked about those days he would speak of the excitement of it, and joke about spending his seminary days on his knees one way or another, but this was also when he began the struggle to understand his sexuality in light of his faith.

con't next page



GENE CONT

Shortly before he graduated from Perkins, Gene decided to speak with his favorite professor, whom he revered and emulated, about his sexuality. The professor listened thoughtfully, and then told Gene that he, too, had known for some time that he was gay. He had decided that his best course was not to act on his gay feelings, and advised Gene to follow the same course.

After graduation, Gene briefly attended Union Theological Seminary in New York while serving a small church in New Jersey. He did not complete his studies at Union, moving with his family (there were now three boys-John, Steven and Mark) back to Texas to take up the life of an itinerant Methodist minister in the Southwest Texas Conference. He served churches in San Antonio, the small town of Dilly, and Austin. All during this period he led a double life. Later on he would speak jokingly of staying out late to trick on Saturday nights and then fighting to keep awake in the pulpit on Sunday mornings. Only rarely would he speak of the steadily growing burden of guilt as he tried to maintain a family life and a minister's career while living a gay life on the sly.



Eventually, inevitably, he was found out. A member of the congregation of University UMC in Austin, suspecting the truth, hired a private detective to follow Gene. He was called into the church office, confronted with the results of the investigation, and offered a deal. If he would resign his position and seek a non-preaching appointment outside the conference, they would drop the matter and not seek church prosecution. Feeling that this would be best for his family, and not yet ready to be the openly gay spokesperson he later became, Gene accepted the deal. In 1965 he and his family moved to Dallas, where Gene started graduate studies in theater at the Dallas Theater Center.

During this period Gene and Fanny decided to divorce. Gene never spoke about it, but I know the divorce was very difficult for him. He and Fanny had been close since childhood, and remained close even after she subsequently remarried and moved with the boys back down to the Rio Grande Valley. Separation from his sons was also hard on Gene, but he seldom if ever complained, about this or anything else.

cont next page

GENE CONT

In early 1971, shortly after I met him, a minister friend of Gene's was put on church trail for immoral conduct and asked Gene to testify as a character witness at the trial. In his testimony Gene contrasted the handling of this case with the way his own case had been handled. He had not been brought to trial even though everyone knew he was gay. That statement stirred the hornet's nest. The hard-core homophobes within the Southwest Texas Conference buzzed and swarmed with plans to strip Gene of his credentials at the next annual conference.

The 1971 Southwest Texas Annual Conference was held at the Travis Park UMC in San Antonio. The full story of what took place would require a entire article, but someone else will have to write it as I was unable to be there. A number of post-Stonewall street-drag protesters were present, the mere sight of which traumatized delegates right and left. In the end, Gene was put on "involuntary location", effectively taking away his right to act as a minister within the United Methodist Church. One of his favorite stories from that conference was how, as he left the sanctuary after the vote had gone against him, a cleaning lady in the lobby told him "Don't worry honey, the Lord gave you credentials they can't even touch."

The publicity generated by all this made Gene a gay spokesperson, whether or not he desired it or felt ready for it. Typically, he regarded it as a gift, a chance for service, rather than as a burden to be borne. He had moved, along with myself and several others, into a large house on Gilbert street in Dallas. We decided to incorporate as a church, and chose the name "House of the Covenant". We operated very loosely as an unstructured open space for young gay people who had no other place to go to be themselves without hassle or intimidation. About this time Life magazine devoted one issue to the growing Gay Liberation movement, and photographed Gene outside of the house in his long hair and beard, wearing jeans and lots of ecclesiastical jewelry, carrying a six-foot tall shepherd's crook. Soon we were getting calls from all over the south central United States from gay people who were immensely relieved to know they were not alone, and overjoyed to have someone to talk with who understood.



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GENE CONT

This only brings us to the fall of 1971. Still to come in Gene's life were the Atlanta General Conference of 1972, the beginnings of the United Methodist Gay Caucus (later AFFIRMATION), the Portland, Oregon, General Conference of 1976, Gene's ministry in San Antonio to the young gay street hustlers (who referred to him in Spanish as "the old queer"), and many other stories for which there is neither time nor space now. Someday a book will have to be written, and I would greatly appreciate hearing from anyone who would like to write down their won reminiscences of Gene.

Gene spent the last five years as General Manager of TITAS, a non-profit cultural arts organization in Dallas. He has been an active and visible member of Oak Lawn UMC, and been very active in the Dallas-area chapter of Affirmation. He was looked to as a leader, especially in matters of theology and in group worship. He helped to found a men's chorus as an outreach to both gays and straights. He never ceased to look for ways to bring gays to the church, and the church to gays. His death has left a void in our community that will not easily or soon be filled.



Dallas Affirmation has started a Gene Leggett Memorial Speakers Fund, and has also requested that people around the country who wish to remember Gene would give a donation in his name to the National Affirmation Memorial Fund at P.O. Box 1021, Evanston, IL 60204. That, and a re-dedication on all our parts to the goals and principles of AFFIRMATION would be fitting ways for us to give thanks to God for the life of Gene Leggett.

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