

Kinheart Co-Founder Phyllis Athey Dies

by Tracy Balm

Phyllis Jean Kinheart Athey, 31, committed suicide May 23 at her parents' home in Holland, Michigan. Athey, a co-founder of Kinheart, Inc., a women's center in Evanston, had resigned as a co-director of the organization several months ago. At the time of her death, Athey was in the process of seeking ordination in the Northern Illinois Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Athey founded Kinheart with Mary Jo Kinheart Osterman more than five years ago. The women added "Kinheart" to their names after they were joined in a Methodist covenant service several years ago.

Athey's suicide was met with shock by friends and supporters of Kinheart. "It is a great loss," one volunteer said. "Phyllis touched many people. Her death is a loss not just to Kinheart but to the whole community. It is a shock that will have emotional ramifications."

[A little more than one year ago, another key Kinheart member, Marcy Lange, also killed herself. At that time, according to one Kinheart member, Athey was a great help for others dealing with Lange's loss.]

What led Athey to take her own life? While that question may never be fully answered, it is clear that the pressures of running a community organization in addition to the stress of going through a difficult ordination process with the Methodist church took a tremendous toll on Athey. In part because of these pressures, Athey resigned her position with Kinheart and moved back to her parents' home. Other factors that may have contributed to Athey's sudden departure from



Phyllis Athey (left) with her covenant partner Mary Jo Osterman at Kinheart's 5th anniversary celebration held last fall in Evanston. Photo: Tracy Balm

Wheadon unanimously approved Athey for ordination, and then Athey was recommended for ordination by the district committee on ministry (of Northern Chicago). Athey was then recommended for ordination by the Northern Illinois

out," Athey said, "you move through a process of claiming your lesbianism, then hopefully you celebrate the good. The pride is that there is a real gift in being outside the system—you do not belong to the patriarchy, you see things others cannot see."

Later in the interview, Athey clearly stated her intentions about religion: "One of our goals is to change the church. Staying in is one way to effect change."

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Homophobia is not a biological disease which makes your physical body ill. It is a social disease which is passed from generation to generation, distorting your psyche, your relationships and your perception of reality.

Mary Jo Osterman

Homophobia is a Social Disease (1986)

Even as a young girl, Athey knew she wanted to be a minister, so she studied under the United Methodist Church because of its theology and its relative openness to women. As a teenager, Athey began to be aware of her attraction to girls rather than boys, but this only became a problem when she realized this behavior had a name—lesbianism. A 10-year internal struggle began, she said. Eventually, she gave up trying to change.

In an interview one year ago with *Outlines*, Athey described her difficulties in coping with religion's view of homosexuality.

"I believed God could do anything, and if I would just pray, and try to change, then I would change, and if I kept quiet, maybe I could change before anyone could find out," Athey recalled to interviewers Lynn Jackson and Elaine L. Franklin.

ence, and basically my experience was that I was unable to change, despite long-term, concerted, faithful efforts to do so, and at that point I had to believe that maybe God wanted me this way."

Athey told Jackson and Franklin that denying her lesbianism was to deny that God created her, so Athey made a choice she described as being a choice between life and death—between committing suicide and coming out. In choosing to take her own life at this time (by shooting herself), Athey leaves many unanswered questions about her struggles.

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Athey felt that "If the church changes, when the church changes, it will be because people like me have done this [tried for ordination as an out homosexual], because they had to look at us and tell us 'no.'"

Of her latest delay in ordination, Athey said last year: "It's been a very painful process...to lose on...a technicality that was undertaken with that kind of intent...Some important victories have been won," she said, noting that some people have changed their minds because they were dealing with her, not just an issue on paper. Athey pointed out that she had gotten farther than any other gay/lesbian candidate in this area of the country.

Although her partial success was a source of pride, Athey said she "trusted the church, and in some ways that trust was betrayed." Athey said she was also saddened by the misinformation about sexuality and homosexuality that is in the church.

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tributed to Athey's sudden departure from Kinheart are not known at this time.

Athey's struggle with religion's view of homosexuality began when she was a teenager and first felt the alienation of loving someone of the same gender. Athey's parents reportedly never accepted their daughter's lesbianism and Osterman, Athey's lover of many years, was not invited to the funeral. [It appears Osterman had no power of attorney or other legal control after Athey died.]

Athey's struggle with religion was not just internal. After receiving her B.A. in psychology and religion from Hope College in Holland, Michigan in 1978 (she was Phi Beta Kappa), She received her Masters in Divinity at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston in 1982. But because of her lesbianism, she was denied ordination. At the same time, Osterman, who has a Ph.D. and was involved in Christian teaching at Garrett, was denied renewal of her teaching contract after her sexuality became known to school officials.

As a result, the two women decided to form Kinheart, which last November celebrated its fifth anniversary with a benefit attended by several hundred women and men.

While some representatives of the Methodist church may have questioned Athey's ability to serve, Athey never lost faith in her goal—to become an ordained Methodist minister. This month, the annual meeting of the Methodist Northern Illinois Conference would have voted on Athey's ordination—after years of delay during which time Athey became one of the most visible lesbians in the United Methodist Church.

Rev. Louise Mahan of the Broadway United Methodist Church has known Athey since before the founding of Kinheart. Mahan explained the complicated Athey had to go through in her quest for ordination.

First, a candidate must be approved by his or her local church. Athey's church was Wheadon United Methodist Church in Evanston—also the home of Kinheart since its founding. Mahan said

mended for ordination by the Northern Illinois Conference Board of Ordained Ministry. Mahan explained that this meant Athey made it all the way to the place where she would be voted on by the entire conference executive session. That was the status in March, 1987.

Then, some clergy and laity asked Methodist Bishop Jesse DeWitt of Northern Illinois to rule on whether the Board of Ministry had approved Athey legally. He ruled it was not legal, and a judicial hearing on the matter was scheduled. The judicial committee, comprised of several Bishops from around the country, ruled that the Board did act legally and that Athey was a legal candidate. By then, however, the June, 1987 annual conference had passed, and Athey would have to wait another year for a conference vote—which would have been this month.

During her ordination struggle, Athey and some of her supporters were sent vicious hate mail by those opposed to her ordination.

"It was really hard on her," Mahan said, "She was trying to be the perfect lesbian therapist, the perfect lesbian candidate for ordination, and part of the perfect lesbian couple."

"She was such a strong, incredible woman. She had so many gifts. It is such a loss," Mahan said.

While Athey continually challenged the Methodist church to accept lesbians and gays as ministers, she and Osterman worked many hours making Kinheart Women's Center a safe place for lesbians and women questioning their sexuality. Hosting "women only" and "lesbian only" nights meant women could feel comfortable with other women coping with similar problems. Athey was a counselor with Kinheart, and she co-authored (with Osterman) two handbooks published by Kinheart—*The Lesbian Relationship Handbook* and *The Church and Homosexuality*.

Internalized homophobia was a struggle for both Osterman and Athey, as they both spent years confronting society's harsh view of lesbians. In a 1985 interview, Athey stated her pride in being a lesbian. "In the process of coming

Franklin.

Athey realized there were two options: a) God couldn't change it, or b) God doesn't want to change it, and therefore it's OK to be this way. Both options presented conflict, because God is thought to be able to change anything, and homosexuality is "evil."

By this time, Athey had enrolled in Garrett and began to write about her struggles in term papers, what she referred to as her "bargaining" stage. "If you begin to perceive you can't change...then you begin to bargain—with God, and with yourself—that somehow you're going to make up for being a lesbian...trying to be the perfect student, person, etc.," Athey said. "Of course, that doesn't work very well."

Athey began to learn of different ways to interpret the Bible. "Because I'm a United Methodist," she said, "one of the tests of theology is experi-

Athey, born on Jan. 23 in the same small town in which died, is survived by her covenant partner Osterman, her sister LuAnn Athey, and her parents, Bryan and Ruth Athey.

A memorial service for Athey was held on Memorial Day at (Kinheart). As stated above, Athey's parents did not allow Osterman or Athey's other close friends any access to Athey's body or the service held for Athey May 27.

Donations in Athey's name should be sent to Kinheart, 2214 Ridge, Evanston, IL 60201. Athey's parents have established a memorial fund in Phyllis Athey's name at Hope College.

[The Chicago Sun-Times, in its obituary about Athey May 25, refused to print that Athey is survived by Osterman, saying instead she was Athey's "friend." The paper was given this information by Kinheart.]

Methodists Don't Budge on Ordination of Gays

by William Burks

The United Methodist Church's General Conference in early May voted to retain its policy of refusing to ordain "self-avowed practicing homosexuals," but the church authorized a study of homosexuality to be presented at the next conference four years from now.

While gay and lesbian Methodists are disappointed that the church defeated a proposal to allow ordination of gays and lesbians, some observers said they are relieved that the conference defeated several attempts to move the church toward an even more conservative stance on homosexuality.

The General Conference, the church's policy-making body, meets every four years. This year's meeting was held in St. Louis and consisted of almost 1,000 delegates, half clergy and half laity. The more than 9 million members in the church nationally make it the third largest denomination, after Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists.

Mike Troyer, who heads the Chicago chapter of Affirmation, a support and advocacy group for gay and lesbian Methodists, said at the end of the day-long session dealing with gay and lesbian issues, members of his organization stood in a circle, held hands, and sang "We are a gentle, angry, people."

A number of other Methodists and four bishops—including Northern Illinois Conference Bishop Jesse Dewitt—joined in standing and singing with the gays and lesbians at the conference.

The Rev. Louise Mahan, pastor of Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago and president of the Board of Ordained Ministry here, said she believes maintaining the status quo on ordaining homosexuals "was probably all we could hope for. My fear was that they would make it worse."

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