

My Part in the Lesbian Gay Bi-sexual Transgender Rights Movement

Over the years I have told various parts of my participation in the LGBT rights movement in interviews with scholars, journalists, radio and TV commentators. In this memoir, I plan to write a more complete chronology and report of my activities and those of others I knew in the movement. Along the way I will reflect and comment on the rights movement, the church's reaction and my personal satisfaction with this important activity. The unique part of this effort is that I am a straight person and a priest of the Episcopal Church. The usual questions asked me were, "Why did you get involved in gay rights though you are straight? What does your church think of your involvement with gay people? Isn't the Bible against homosexual activity?"

I will answer the usual questions right off and get them behind me. I am a straight man and felt the LGBT rights movement was a justice issue, not a sexual one. I was active in the civil rights activities for African Americans. The gay rights movement also was a justice issue for a persecuted minority.

What did the church think about my involvement? Some people thought it was fine, others thought I was crazy, gay or deluded. Officials in the church never did anything official against me. I was threatened by the Bishop if I proceeded with same-sex marriage. He later backed down.

The Bible appears to say some negative things about homosexual activity. I am not a Biblical literalist. Those passages must be looked at in light of the date, the context in which they were uttered and the prejudices of people at the time they were written. None of them are the inspired word of God. Nothing in the Bible is God Almighty talking to us directly. Obviously fundamentalist, literalist and very conservative readers of the Bible would disagree. But "Frankly, Scarlet, I don't give a damn."

I have kept a scrapbook of clippings from newspapers and magazines which mention my name in connection with gay rights. I use them as a source of the chronology. However, I have memories from teen, college, seminary years and from my first jobs before I began to speak publicly about homosexual issues. I will depend on my memories for a large part of what I write.

Before I proceed, my background is important to understanding how my consciousness developed so that I could become an advocate.

Let's start with my college years, 1950-53.

My mother rushed into the bedroom where I was studying at 9:00 PM and said she had to go out for a while to get Dad. She was distraught, ran out the door without another word. The room was dark with enough light to read. A student at New York University, I looked around at the books and desk with the typewriter on it. I wondered what was going on, but returned to my book.

Two hours later, Mother came in holding Dad who looked disheveled and they rushed into their bedroom and shut the door. Soon Mother asked me to go into the comfortable living room with soft lights and I sat down on the green couch. She began to cry. She said she got to a room in the Dorset Hotel and found Dad in a heap on the floor badly beaten and bloody. She got him out and into a taxi and home. She said Dad didn't want to talk about it. I comforted her with my arm around her. She soon got up and went to the bedroom to be with Dad.

The next morning was bright and sunny. Dad came in to breakfast. His face was bruised, swollen, yellowish, and he had two black eyes. He said, "I won't talk about this." He took a cup of coffee and went back to bed. He never spoke of this frightening incident again. Neither did my mother. My guess is that he picked up a man for sex, was robbed and beaten for his trouble. Here is some of the evidence I have put together to think Dad was bi-sexual.

In the 1930's Depression years Dad was rector of St. Michael's Church in the Navy Yard district of Brooklyn. There was a big rectory and Dad would let young homeless men sleep in some of the basement rooms, the old servant's quarters. I remember Louis Estolt, Frank Malerba and a black man with a clubfoot named Ernest. Dad would tease them to their face. Frank was the Wop and Louis the Spic. Frank taught me to swim, as did my mother, Helen. Dad always hung around with young men and invited them home.

During the war years Dad worked for a company that made sail and canvas materials for the U.S. Navy. He left the employ of the church for a few years because he and Mom were broke and in debt. He rather enjoyed the work. In World War One, he had served a year in the Navy and always had an interest in things nautical. He also took services at New York's Seaman's Church Institute,

which had a ministry to seamen of all kinds. He often brought home sailors and occasional soldiers whom he met in his jobs. They often spent the night in our small apartment in the East New York section of Brooklyn. My brother Edwin and I loved to have these guys around as they told interesting stories and we worshipped all things having to do with the war raging in Europe and the Pacific. Years later I began to wonder about Dad's interest in these men, what it was all about. Was he having sex with them? I had no evidence of it.

In 2002 I heard from two old friends who do not know each other. Each told me that my long dead father had had sex with them when they were young men. One said Dad gave him a hand job, the second said my Dad blew him. I have no reason to think that these men were lying. My father was long dead. Both expressed disappointment in Dad's behavior. I could only express sympathy for what happened to them.

Even today, I feel sad that my father had to live a closeted life and could never talk to me about it with me. He died in 1967. I wonder what he would think of me now. I don't think he even knew I had been involved in LGBT rights since 1963.

Here are more experiences which led me to move toward being an advocate for LGBT rights.

Joe Besser was a gay comic in *Hellzapoppin*, a musical comedy in the 1940's. I was a pre-teen. Our family went to see the show in a large, golden, ornate theater in Times Square, New York City. The lights, the traffic and talking noise were so very exciting. I howled with laughter at Besser's campy, nelly, acting out. He uttered "Oh, saaaaaaay" with a limp wrist and swish of shoulders that collapsed me into merriment. Dad told me it was homosexual humor. The word homosexual was unclear in my mind. I had no idea he was gay. I just thought he was funny.

One afternoon I went to the movies alone at Loew's Astoria Theater when we lived in Queens, New York. The gaudy, elaborate movie palace's ceiling high above the seats was blue with twinkling stars in it. A man came and sat right next to me although there were plenty of empty seats everywhere. I tried not to pay him any attention. Then I felt his hand move over to me and touch my thigh. I wasn't sure if it was true. He moved his hand more and I became frightened, jumped up and ran out of the theater. My father told me that some men liked young boys and that I should not talk with strangers and be careful in the future.

In 1949 Dad became a chaplain on Welfare Island (Now Roosevelt Island) in the middle of the East River between Queens and Manhattan. He was chaplain at The

City Home and Bird S. Coler Hospital. My mother became the secretary to the head of the hospital. Edwin and I were still in high school. Here again there were young men doctors, orderlies and interns whom Dad befriended. Jimmy Nehring, a German orderly who has gone on to be a doctor, was around the house a lot. I know my father encouraged him, guided him to education and possibilities for the future. Sexual? Who knows? Jimmy showed no interest in women.

Gilbert Follansbee came into our lives. He was out front, nelly gay and wildly funny. He was short, stocky and slick of hair and dress. We all adored him. He said he was heir to the Follansbee Steel fortune but had to wait to be thirty before he got his inheritance. Years after Mother and Dad were dead, he moved to San Francisco. He came to visit me and said, "I want you to meet the only man you'll ever know who fucked your mother and your father." Shocked? You bet I was. I was too stupid to ask for details. I did think it was entirely possible. This was the first time I realized my long suspicions were probably true. Years later two more stories emerged to convince me that Dad was bi-sexual.

In my senior year at St. Paul's School, I boarded at the school. The room was on the second floor of a Victorian, which was a huge E-shaped building of red brick. The room had two beds, dressers and armoires. The ceilings were twenty feet high. Two huge windows looked out on a green lawn in Garden City, New York.

My roommate was Randy Naugle. He was a large boy, rather effeminate, slow, not athletic. He had black hair and a ruddy complexion. We got along just fine. I suspect they had us room together as I was the jock athlete and he was not. There were some snotty remarks to me about Randy being a faggot. I think the administration thought I would protect him. No event ever happened where protection was needed. He seemed to get along just fine. I have not heard anything about him since we graduated in June of 1949.

At New York University in Greenwich Village, New York, gay men were only known if they were acting out and nelly. One very smart man in an English class seemed to be gay and he was clearly the smartest in the class. He was outspoken and knew everything. I was intrigued by him and hated him because he was so much smarter than I was. LGBT issues were not spoken about in my hearing. I ran with straight people in the Canterbury Club of Episcopalians on campus and was on the swim team, all very straight men, to my knowledge.

In 1952 Lillian and I married. In 1953 I matriculated at The General Theological Seminary in Chelsea Square, New York City. The square block was a garden spot in the middle of the roaring city. Entering the close from noisy Ninth Avenue, one came into lawns and gardens similar to colleges at Cambridge or Oxford in England. It was a beautiful place for worship and study.

One day one of the students in the year ahead of my class left the seminary suddenly. The rumor was that he was gay and had molested a Sunday School boy in the church where he was doing fieldwork. The administration said nothing. It seemed so unjust. He was accused, tried and convicted by the Dean and I suppose some faculty advisors. I saw for the first time how the church operated to avoid any taint of scandal.

My favorite professor at GTS was W. Norman Pittenger. He taught apologetics or how to relate the Gospel to everyday life, at least what he believed it to be. He was a big man, smoked incessantly, and had a mane of white hair. He was handsome and striking in appearance. While a critic of theology and the Bible, he was always first into the chapel to meditate and pray. He talked incessantly and was always interesting with gossip, name-dropping, theological and ethical speculation and liberal politics. He was unmarried. In good weather he sat on a bench outside the steps of the refectory before lunch. Students gathered around for banter, conversation and gossip. He was the talker, we the listeners. He was the most popular teacher who hung out in public with students

He indicated that the Gospel of Jesus taught justice and tolerance for all. He was clearly against racial segregation and anti-Semitism and he taught an openness about sexual issues. He enjoyed Lillian and me, joining us for dinner in our small apartment and then taking us out to dinner in a very nice restaurant in Chelsea.

After he retired, he came out as a proud gay man. No one was surprised. He continued to write and speak out for LGBT rights until his death. Dr. Pittenger was a powerful figure in my life, thought and openness to LGBT issues. Ann and I visited him twice in Cambridge, England, where he had retired. He died there in 1997.

In 1955 I did Clinical Pastoral Training at Bellevue Hospital in New York. This was a large, old building that was the city's basic emergency room hospital. It also had a ward for the mentally and emotionally disturbed. My supervisor was The Rev. Alvin Van Pelt Hart, a tall Texan with a drawl and snappish wit. He was an expert on the Rorschach ink blot test. He told us that the only way to know if a

person was a homosexual was if he or she told you so. No physical, psychological or chemical test could predict homosexual desire or behavior. That goes for us, too, who think we have *gaydar*. We students all suspected Alvin was gay. In the 1980's he visited me in San Francisco and told me that he had been living with his lover for twenty years.

In 1956 I became curate in Christ Church in Bronxville, New York. In this leafy suburban town of men in gray flannel suits and homemakers with kids, I had two gay men as counselees. I listened to their confusion and anxiety. I told one of them I thought that God loved him no matter what his sex life was like. I hesitantly told my boss, the rector of the parish, George West Barrett, what I had said. He astonished me by saying "Homosexuality is not the worst thing in the world." This was an important point for me as I began to see and believe homosexual sex was just the way it was for some people.

A few years later I was the rector of The Church of the Holy Nativity in the Bronx, New York. The previous rector had been forced out of the parish because it was alleged he was gay. He was also married with two children.

When we moved to San Francisco, I had some experience already in ministering with, and to, gays and lesbians.

In August of 1963, I preached a sermon in Grace Cathedral, San Francisco. At that time I held the exalted title of "executive assistant" to the Episcopal Bishop of California, James Albert Pike. At 31 years old I had the privilege of being associated with one of my heroes. Bishop Pike was an outstanding liberal who drew direct connections between the Gospel of Jesus and daily life. He spoke out on hot issues at the time: supporting birth control, attacking attempts to limit free speech and opposing communist witch hunts. As his assistant, I was a Canon of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. A Canon is a priest on the staff of the Diocese and Cathedral.

It was the first time and only time I was ever invited by the Dean of the Cathedral to preach at Grace.

In the sermon I said we must treat homosexuals as human beings, learn the complexities of homosexual behavior, be open and loving, and become friends with gay people. Do not treat them as a class, but as individuals.

The Gospel for the day spoke of the Christian concern for outcasts. It occurred to me that homosexuals were not only outcasts, but also invisible. I pointed out that

they were a silent minority in the church, ignored except as financial donors. If the sexual orientation of a priest became public, it was thought necessary to have him removed from his position. That sermon of mine was also patronizing. I naively suggested that homosexuals needed psychological help, but I did call for love, compassion and forgiveness.

I don't remember any negative feedback from members of the church that Sunday. As a result of the sermon I was invited to appear on a couple of radio stations for interviews. One was with Owen Spann with KGO radio. He broadcast from a bar and restaurant in the financial district. I was nervous and don't remember one thing I said that time.

I received one letter from a gay man who wrote. "Sometimes I go into a church when it is deserted and fall on my knees and weep, not so much for my sins but because I am overcome with despair.

"This lack of hope is what keeps me from church, I suppose, although sometimes I get an overwhelming desire to worship God, even though I often feel I must be already damned by Him."

Not long after that, I met Joe Allison of the *San Francisco News Call Bulletin*. We were in the men's room at Westlake Joe's restaurant. He asked me who I was and we began to chat. Later, he interviewed me for his column, "The Last Angry Man." His article appeared on September 13, 1963. In it I was quoted as saying, "Our attitude generally is that people with this psychic and emotional condition are some kind of animal despised of man and God and not worthy of human concern.... They seem to be too much of a threat to our own sexuality – so we despise, or even worse, ignore the community."

In addition to my interest in gay rights, I was deeply engaged in the civil rights movement. In the spring of 1964, major civil rights groups called for picketing to protest the hiring policies of the automobile showrooms along Van Ness Avenue, or Auto Row.

One Saturday afternoon, I took my oldest daughter Leigh to walk with me. A lovely picture of her holding my hand, walking on the picket line appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Later, several of us clergy sat in on April 11. We were among 250 people arrested that day. Movie actor Sterling Hayden was in the group. There was enormous media attention paid to us. The clergy got out of the jail the same afternoon. We

were convicted and fined for trespassing. The students at The Church Divinity School of the Pacific paid our fines.

The following year several of us clergy from the Bay Area went to Selma, Alabama, answering the call to clergy from Martin Luther King, Jr. In March of 1965, he asked us to join him in the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. The first one was brutally dispersed by police, arousing national indignation.

Gay Rights

One day in 1964, while I was working with Bishop Pike in his office, he handed me a letter addressed to him and said, "Please answer this and decline. But maybe you'd be interested in attending and representing me."

It was a weekend conference for clergy and homosexuals to be held at the Ralston-White Retreat Center just over the Golden Gate Bridge in Mill Valley. It was a dialogue set up to discover our mutual humanity. Gay and lesbian leaders felt the clergy could be valuable allies in the gay rights movement if we got to know each other. We listened to each other's stories of our lives, goals and ambitions.

As I heard of the pain and oppression, as well as the joys and gaiety of homosexuals, I realized here was another oppressed minority, another group of people deprived of their full humanity "in the land of the free and the home of the brave." I realized that gay rights were a civil rights issue also. I remember taking a walk in the woods with Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin. Del said she had thought she would be butch like a man and Phyllis the fem, more like a woman. Then they laughed and said they no longer lived by this stupid stereotype. They were just two women who loved each other and chose to live together.

Out of this group of clergy and gays was founded the Council on Religion and the Homosexual. Our purpose was to develop dialogue between straights and gays in local churches. We felt that if church people could meet openly gay men and women, speak with them and discover their humanity, reconciliation and communication would result.

In 1965 several gay groups sponsored a New Year's costume ball with proceeds to go to the Council. The police were outraged. The vice squad advised us that we clergy were being used by the gay community. One asked, "Aren't your wives going to be upset by your hanging around with homosexuals?" They even asked us about our theology. They assured us they would make sure that the laws about drinking and unlawful sexual conduct were obeyed.

We arrived at the event, where police photographers were taking pictures of the 500 people who attended as they were going into the party. The police entered the party looking for lawbreakers. Our lawyers tried to block their entrance, saying it was a private party. Two lawyers were arrested for obstructing justice. When we clergy tried to block the police entrance we were brushed aside and they would not arrest us. Once inside, the police arrested two partygoers for disorderly conduct.

Now we clergy were outraged. Seven of us called a press conference denouncing the police and their discrimination against gays. They would never invade a debutantes' ball or Elks' Club costume party. We witnessed clear anti-gay discrimination and we decried what we had seen. Later a judge admonished the police for their action and all charges were dropped against partygoers and lawyers.

The picture of us clergy at a press conference protesting the police behavior has been widely used in LGBT rights displays, publicity and historical exhibitions ever since.

Media attention abounded. Articles by Gerald Adams, Richard Hallgren, Donovan Bess and Maitland Zane appeared in the San Francisco newspapers. I was featured on a radio program on KGO called "Churchmen Face the Issues" in which I interviewed politicians, clergy, civil rights leaders and many others. Radio and TV appearances with Jim Dunbar at KGO and others happened regularly for a couple of years.

But things caught up with me. I was part time Director of Urban Work for the Diocese. I was also part time vicar of St. Aidan's Church in San Francisco. Bishop Pike had encouraged other clergy and me to speak out on social, political and religious issues. He had been doing it for many years and did not want to be the only person doing so. I had spoken out in favor of the farm workers and Cesar Chavez. This offended rich Episcopalians who owned farms. I defended nudity in North Beach bars, saying there are worse sins than toplessness, offending prudish church people. I wrote an article noting discrimination against blacks in private clubs and clergy spending church money to belong to such groups, thus offending Episcopalians who were club members as well as trustees of the Cathedral and the Diocese. All of this was on top of marching in Selma and hobnobbing with homosexuals.

Bishop Pike went on sabbatical leave to Cambridge in England. The Suffragan Bishop Richard Millard was left in charge. He and the Council of the Diocese

decided to end my job as Director of Urban Work and hire a stewardship officer. I had a wife and three children and was now left with a part time salary. Bishop Pike, calling from England, arranged to pay the missing half of my salary from special funds until I could get St. Aidan's to pay me a full salary.

On Sunday, September 26, 1965, a score or so pickets appeared before the morning service at Grace Cathedral. They were mostly members of the movement to win just treatment for homosexual. An article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* said, "Cromey, along with other protestant ministers, work for fairer treatment of the gay community." A spokesman for the Cathedral said, 'It was no secret that the outspoken cleric's activities have not endeared him to the conservative members of the council.'

"A spokesman for the distinguished group of clergy and laymen who comprise the Council of the Diocese said some members greatly resented 'a cleric coming in and laying down the law.... They felt whether they belonged to segregated clubs or not was a matter of individual conscience.'" Bishop Millard said no one was trying to get Cromey. It was just a matter of changing positions and priorities.

The Living Church, an Episcopal magazine, carried the story to a nationwide audience. The magazine had published an article by me entitled "The Church and the Homosexual" in the mid sixties.

I quickly turned to my job as vicar of St. Aidan's in the new Diamond Heights neighborhood of San Francisco. Now that I had no other job, I could spend more time there as a parish priest. I continued getting people to be sensitive to the issues and concerns of gay people. We held dinner party outings with members of the church going to gay restaurants which were run by gay people and were very welcoming to straight people. We sponsored study groups and speakers on gay rights issues.

I continued to be involved in other public issues. I wrote articles about segregation in much-publicized debutante balls, jazz in church services and segregation in the San Francisco public schools. I also testified in a trial where I thought the use of marijuana was justified in religious practices just as alcohol is used in the church's sacrament. The defendant lost.

I joined other clergy in supporting gays who were discriminated against in the military, which discharged soldiers and sailors just because they were gay.

In 1967 I spent six weeks as a Fellow of the College of Preachers in Washington, D.C. I helped clergy fashion and improve their preaching. While at the college I was interviewed by a journalist from *Newsweek*. We met in the fine library of the college. A photographer took pictures and we talked for an hour.

Newsweek of February 13, 1967, devoted a long column to God and the Homosexual. It described the development of our Council on Religion and the Homosexual. The article mentioned that I had been "severely criticized by members of the Diocesan Council of California for over-identifying with the homosexuals' problems."

It went on to say, "But even among CRH advocates there is disagreement as to how far the church should go in accepting homosexuals. Episcopal Bishop C. Kilmer Myers of California, for instance, accepts CRH efforts to free homosexuals from police harassment and oppressive laws, but he does not feel that they can maintain healthy relationships like heterosexuals. For the church, Myers believes, 'homosexuality is a pastoral problem dealing with brokenness in humanity. The same as other moral maladies.'

"But the aggressive Cromey, father of three children, wants to take the church beyond conventional moral judgments. The sex act, he argues, is morally neutral. 'I also believe that two people of the same sex can express love and deepen that love by sexual intercourse.' Furthermore, he concludes, in a statement that would surely redden the face of St. Paul, 'I say that if two people of the same sex have a loving responsible relationship with each other, they have an obligation to express that love in whatever way they deem appropriate.'"

It was gratifying to see more and more articles about homosexuality in major newspapers during the late 60's. Not only in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Examiner* but also the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Chicago Daily News*.

In 1970, I resigned as Vicar of St. Aidan's Church, San Francisco. I set up a private practice as a California licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. Though no longer having a bully pulpit, I kept up my interest and involvement in LGBT rights and civil rights for all minorities.

In the early 1970's I led a series of encounter groups for gay men in the offices of SIR, the Society for Individual Rights, on Mission Street. The groups urged men to tell their stories, fear, anxieties and dreams. I asked them to role-play telling their parents that they were gay. The men told of their fears of losing their jobs,

apartments, family and friends if they found out they were gay. There were not many places in those days where men could tell their stories.

Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon invited me to attend a meeting of the Daughters of Bilitis held at their home. I was plenty nervous. Fifteen attractive women were there. They had never met a male cleric who was interested in lesbian rights. One woman called herself a lipstick lesbian as she wore conventional women's dresses, jewelry, shoes and hairstyles because she really liked to be a woman. She said she was laughed at by some of her sister lesbians because she was not butch. All the women had nothing to say that was good about their experience in the churches they had grown up in. I sure learned a lot from that evening and was honored to be there.

During the 1970's, I led many groups on a variety of topics, meeting new friends, dealing with anger and communication skills.

I led a number of workshops on human sexuality using sexually explicit films. I insisted the groups watch films with sex between same-gendered partners. The straight viewers were often very uncomfortable. The discussions that followed made many of the straight viewers see the rightness of those relationships and the injustice against lesbians and gays.

I spent 1977-78 in Germany working with drug addicts. When I returned, I began seeking a job as rector of an Episcopal church. I resumed my private practice. I needed a steady source of income as I renewed my practice with individuals, groups and couples.

I approached the Jewish Community Center when it advertised a part time job developing groups for single people. I had done that for Esalen Institute and on my own. In the interview I was told I would not get the job, as I was not Jewish. I charged that the center had a religious bias. I must say it was rather fun poking my Jewish friends and neighbors. There were a couple of newspaper articles.

In October of 1981, I was elected rector of Trinity Episcopal Church at Bush and Gough Streets in San Francisco. I was elected to bring in more people, money and programs. My marketing plan was to reach out to the LGBT community and single and divorced straight people. Few churches had that agenda in 1981. I spoke a couple of times to the then G-40 group, PFLAG, and I was known from my activism in the 60's.

I had a lot of friends in the church who were as surprised and delighted as I was to become a rector again. Many people from my private practice were happy for me. My many gay and lesbian friends were also supportive. In December of 1981, some 500 people showed up at Trinity for my installation.

In my sermon, I announced that Trinity was going to be a welcoming church to the LGBT community. There was some criticism and much support for my views.

With a mighty pulpit and ready hand at writing letters to the editor, articles to newspapers and articles to magazines, I continued my support for LGBT rights in church, society and civil law.

I supported Peter Tachel's efforts outing Church of England Bishops and priests in 1994. I had regularly urged gays and lesbians to out themselves as a way of freeing themselves and move through the self hatred that afflicted many homosexuals. One lesbian said it was harder to tell her mother that she was a churchgoing Episcopalian than to tell her she was a lesbian.

Gay men in particular came to Trinity. In a year church attendance tripled, money increased and we developed new programs on sexuality, communication skills and a feeding program for the neighborhood hungry. One older woman was heard to say, "Well, we didn't mean those people." The men quickly took their place in the leadership of the parish. Some joined the altar guild, usually the domain of women.

Some lesbians also joined. Her woman-friend sang in our choir, so Karen came to hear her sing. Karen liked the church very much. Her choir friend soon left but Karen stayed. She asked if she could be the first woman to be a thurifer, the person who swings the incense pot. She become a thurifer.

One day she and Donald were horsing around the parish hall and she climbed on his shoulders and he carried her around the room. She proclaimed, "Donald, you are the only man that will ever be between my legs." Karen went on to serve on the vestry and then went to seminary, was ordained a priest of the Episcopal Church. She has served as rector of a prominent Silicon Valley parish and then a small parish in the foothills of the Sierra.

The issue of same gender marriage came up. A male couple came to me and said they wanted to have a service of blessing of their relationship in the church. I said OK, let's do it. I felt, and still strongly feel, that homosexuals who want a marriage or blessing of their relationship should certainly have one. In 1982 this

was an emerging issue for the church to face. The church on the national level is still moaning and groaning about it.

I saw this service as a quiet ceremony with just a few of their friends. The couple sent out invitations that announced their “wedding.” It was one of those already-printed kind. They were not tidy about the distinction between a wedding and a marriage. I failed to see any difference either.

Some kind soul sent one of the invitations to Bishop Swing. He wrote and told me not to perform such a service at Trinity. At this point choosing not to alienate the Bishop further, I allowed the young men to have the ceremony in the courtyard of the church just outside the church doors.

The Rev. Professor Norman Pittenger, retired from the General Theological Seminary, was giving some lectures at Trinity. He agreed to conduct the service, as he was leaving for England the next day.

The service went fine. A spy from the Bishop’s office was present and reported that I had obeyed the letter of the law. This was the first of our three major skirmishes on this issue.

AIDS

Charles was the first member of Trinity to die of AIDS. I met him in 1984 during my third year as rector. He was young, handsome and full of himself. He had dark curly hair, blue eyes and even features. He was tall and well built. We had lunch on Polk Street, at La Trattoria where we sat outdoors on the porch overlooking the “romantic” bus stop at Polk and California. I often ate there. I loved the pasta and fresh clam sauce they made. He told me that he was involved as publisher of *The Sentinel*, a now defunct gay weekly newspaper.

He proudly said, “I am involved with the Big Brother movement. I take a kid out to lunch and spend the afternoon with him.”

“Yes, I notice you in church with him from time to time.”

“He is a nice kid and I like spending time with him.”

It crossed my mind that he might try to be sexual with the boy. I know most gay men are not interested in kids but would rather be with gay men their own age. My prejudices die hard.

I asked him about what he thought his future might be.

He replied, "I want to go into politics. Mayor Dianne Feinstein is a friend and has encouraged me. Conservative gay men are needed in government."

He told me, "I am from Florida and acquainted with the Delmans. Gretchen's family is from there." Dennis and Gretchen Delman were long time members of Trinity.

I discovered that Charles lived in an expensive, nicely furnished apartment. He invited Ann and me to dinner there with Diana, a woman friend of his who also attended Trinity. We had a delightful time. He told us he wanted to marry Diana and settle into a straight life.

Charles was in business with Tom Murray, an old friend of mine, who has since died of AIDS. I wrote a column for *The Sentinel USA*, as it became known. I called it "Straight Talk," appropriate for a straight man writing in a gay newspaper. I saw it as a way to attract new members to Trinity. It was good public relations and free advertising. I was not paid for my work. Charles and Tom struggled with the weekly paper, just about making it a go.

Charles came down with AIDS related illnesses. He was weak, often bedridden. He developed pneumocystis, which in those days was clearly fatal. He tried to keep up some work but finally had to quit. This happened in the early days of the disease when there was little known about treatment.

He assured Tom everything would be all right as he had had *The Sentinel* take out a \$40,000 life insurance policy and he had signed it over to settle debts should he die. Charles made generous financial pledges to Trinity and never paid on them. Tom told me that Charles was collecting Aid to the Totally Dependent, that he got money from home, and that a boyfriend was paying the rent on the apartment.

Charles became very sick and was in the hospital at the UC Medical Center. He had a private room, but no medical insurance. He told the doctors that he wanted all heroic measures and interventions made to prolong his life. I visited him several times in the hospital. He was unconscious for days, with tubes and tanks keeping him barely alive.

He finally died after a long and, I am sure, painful illness. We had a funeral for him at Trinity. Mayor Feinstein came and read the Old Testament lesson. Other

political figures were present. As publisher of *The Sentinel* he had been known by the civic leaders.

During Charles's illness and death, his friend Casper, identified as an emergency room doctor from Dallas, was a "grieving widow." It was he who owned the apartment in which Charles lived. He often visited Charles in the hospital and lived in the apartment while the Charles was in the hospital.

After Charles's death Casper came to see me in the church office. He wanted to make a donation to the church and put flowers on the altar in memory of Charles. He said he had run out of cash and asked if I would cash a check for \$500. He wrote out the check for the flowers and another for the church and the cash advance. I went with him to the bank, deposited his check in my discretionary fund and gave him \$200 in cash, keeping the rest for the church. Guess what? The checks bounced and we have never heard from Casper again. This is a man I had known for six months. He visited Charles in the hospital when I was there. He wept copious tears at the funeral. Of course I advanced him the money. Boy, did I feel like a fool.

Tom Murray came to me after Charles's funeral and told me that Charles had signed over the promised insurance policy to his parents, nieces and nephews without telling Tom. Tom went to court and got some of the money but not the amount expected from the joint policy taken out by *The Sentinel*.

Diana disappeared after Charles's death. We often wonder if the scoundrel had given her the dreaded AIDS.

In 1985, Burton Weaver became the organist and choirmaster at Trinity replacing Wyatt Insko. Wyatt could see we were reducing salaries and cutting back. He was teaching full time so he decided to take a break from church music.

Burton had been the musician at St. Luke's Episcopal Church just six blocks away from Trinity. He was called to be in charge of the music at historic Trinity Church, Boston. Discovering he was an alcoholic, he returned to San Francisco, entered an alcohol recovery program and emerged clean and sober but rather demoralized. He came to Trinity San Francisco as supply organist and was so good so fast that we hired him on the spot. Grandiosity was a term Burton often used when spotting a person full of himself, with puffed up ambitions and little grip on reality. Thinking about Charles, I'd say the term grandiosity fit him perfectly.

The parish secretary at the time was Donald Fehrenbach, an out-of-the-closet gay man who had spent thirteen years training to be a Jesuit in the mid-west. He left the seminary, moved to San Francisco and tried various churches. He finally came to Trinity because he knew he could be himself and not hide his gayness. He liked good music and liturgy. When the AIDS epidemic finally was recognized for what it was, *Time* and *Newsweek* carried cover stories on the disease. Donald was frightened for himself and his gay brothers. We discussed the disease a lot. I sniffed, "You'll see. It will pass just like the scare over genital herpes, just a couple of years ago." Wrong. Donald mentioned quite regularly the value of my predictions. Donald had been infected with the disease and died several years later.

Project Open Hand

Ruth Brinker was five feet five and a bit chunky, not inappropriate for a woman in her sixties. Her gray hair surrounded sparkly blue eyes. Her even features broke into an easy smile. She dressed tastefully in pretty dresses and sometimes in suits, even when she cooked.

"Hi, Robert," she called out as I walked through the basement hall of Trinity. The walls were tan with a greenish border. The high ceilings gave a sense of space without being cold. In fact I'd say the hallway was warm and welcoming. Close to the wall and high up were large round pipes carrying the heat.

Ruth greeted me coming out of the kitchen. "Hello yourself, Ruth. How's it going?"

"I've been thinking. I know a number of gay guys with AIDS. They tell me they have trouble preparing meals. They're too weak. I've been bringing some dinners to two of them." Ruth had been preparing food for Meals on Wheels, taking food to the elderly. No one had yet thought about the men with AIDS.

"I think we should start getting food to these sick guys."

I said I thought it was a good idea. "Why not use the Trinity kitchens? Let me know how you make out."

Two weeks went by and Ruth made an appointment to see me in my office. She told me she was feeding twenty men a day already and the requests were still pouring in. I was shocked. She and a friend cooked the dinners, and then delivered them to the sick men at their homes. She had recruited a few people to help.

"We have already lost three men. We served them their last meals. The conditions in the apartments are deplorable sometimes. Dirty floors, unkempt beds and bathrooms, dirty dishes in disgusting rooms. They have no one to care for them. Especially in the Tenderloin."

The Tenderloin is a neighborhood of downtown San Francisco where there are a lot of cheap and run-down studios and one-bedroom apartments. Some men with AIDS end up there when their money runs out. They have to live on welfare and Aid to the Totally Dependent, ATD.

Ruth was not a popular person around Trinity. She had been involved in the earlier feeding program that folded when the vestry abruptly closed it down after neighborhood complaints and some of the parish membership felt it hadn't been run properly. Ruth was a bit casual in getting budgets and costs accounted for. But she was always dogged in her pursuit of feeding the poor and the elderly. I could tell she was going to put that determination into developing Project Open Hand, which is what she dubbed her operation to feed people with AIDS.

I wanted to offer to have Trinity be the sponsor of Project Open Hand and have it be part of the outreach of Trinity. I sensed the vestry would never go for it. People didn't trust Ruth. The parish was in financial trouble, so I chose not even to try to get the vestry involved. We were not visionary enough to take on such a project.

Ruth said, "I have made contact with a Zen Buddhist group and they have given me some money to underwrite Open Hand." I was relieved. I agreed that she could continue to use the Trinity kitchen.

Ruth began to get publicity, talk on the radio and TV talk shows, raise money, cook, and recruit volunteers for food preparation and delivering the meals. It wasn't long before a hundred men a day were being fed dinner. Ruth added sandwiches for their lunches the next day. Project Open Hand was a roaring success. Ruth was still running the operation out of her handbag.

One member of the vestry was a lawyer. Ruth had said something in public that seemed to say Trinity was the sponsor of Open Hand. The lawyer got the vestry to authorize him to write a letter to the *Bay Area Reporter* disassociating the parish from the project. I was furious. I did not want it to become public that Trinity was appearing not to support Project Open Hand. I called the editor of the *Bay Area*

Reporter and told him such a letter was coming in and would he please lose it. He did.

This same lawyer kept saying that the kitchen was not up to code. If someone got sick because of the food, the church could be sued. He notified the city Health Department. By now Project Open Hand was a popular roaring success, an important source of feeding the sick gay men of the city. The inspector from the Health Department would come in look around and say, "Yep, the kitchen is not up to code." He'd then leave and we would never hear from him again.

Our vestry member was a straight man who was quite uncomfortable that we had so many gay men at Trinity. He didn't want us involved with Project Open Hand. He became a Trinity graduate.

Ruth finally pulled together a board of directors, hired cooks and bookkeepers and the feeding program put on huge fundraisers. Ruth was the quiet, gentle star. She was always gracious but clearly focused on getting the job done of feeding the sick. After a few years, Project Open Hand moved out of the inadequate Trinity kitchens to its own larger building with up-to-date and technologically sound food preparation resources. Today, Open Hand feeds many thousands of meals a day and has moved to its third site.

Funerals and AIDS

Soon after the death and funeral of Charles Roberts, we at Trinity began to learn of members of the parish who had also contracted the disease. We began to get requests from people in the neighborhood and wider community for one of the clergy or me to come and visit sick men at home or in the hospital. Many of these requests were from men who had long ago left the church but now were sick and wanted a return to their religious roots. Traditional religious teaching, especially, in the Roman Catholic and fundamentalist churches, were sex negative. That is, no sex outside of marriage, and extremely condemning of homosexuality.

The AIDS epidemic rocked gay people all over the world, especially in major American cities. San Francisco suffered horribly and so did Trinity. From 1983 until 1990 we had 72 memorial services for men who had died of AIDS. Of those, fifty were members of Trinity. Many of their names are mentioned below.

The clergy and lay people of the congregation ministered to the sick persons. We brought them communion, healing oil and healing hands, food, trips to the hospitals and doctors.

It also meant we ministered to the patient's lover and his parents, sometimes to grandparents and sometimes his children. Talks, visits to hospitals and homes and planning and conducting memorial services filled our days.

There was so much pain and sorrow in our Trinity community. Not a week went by when we were not notified that someone had been diagnosed, was in the hospital, needed a home visit, had died, needed a memorial service. Burton Weaver, then organist, choirmaster and parish secretary, and I would look at each other and one of us would say, "We are getting awfully good at these services." Half in jest and all too true.

Larry Stork was stricken. He and his beloved Steve Roger had taken Ann and me in as close friends. One would sidle up to us at church and whisper, "Come to dinner tonight at 6:00PM." We would go, laugh, drink cocktails -- Ann drank Calistoga -- gossip and eat a hearty dinner prepared elegantly by Steve. They invited us up to Ox-Bow in the Delta, their country place on the water, where we did more of the same and swam in the river besides.

Larry taught history at Lowell High School. He'd dress in period costume when discussing the American Revolution or the battles of Napoleon. He got sick, was in and out of the hospital and recovering at home when he suddenly just died. What a shock. What sadness. A great memorial service was held at Trinity. The church was packed with friends and students. Due to Larry's mother's fears and homophobia, AIDS was only mentioned once and quietly during the service.

Ted Boya, an Episcopal priest from Texas, came to Trinity. In Houston his Bishop would not allow him to function as a priest because he was gay. At Trinity he celebrated the Eucharist, preached, taught classes and was a good friend. He was very popular in the parish. He went on to take a full time position at Grace Cathedral. He got very sick and had a lingering death. I was an emotional wreck at the funeral for him at Grace. Not yet forty, Ted died with his vast gifts not fully explored.

In the 1980's the Diocese of California sponsored an AIDS conference. I was not happy with it. The church is called to take care of the sick. That is what the church is supposed to do. Yet the church and Diocese and Bishop did not recognize and support homosexual men and women as full human beings. They were, and are, suspect because of their same gender sexual expression. By focusing on AIDS, the Diocese of California avoided dealing with the more complex and

controversial problem of homosexual rights. I thought the church wanted good publicity without having to take a stand on LGBT rights.

Also in the 1980's, Bishop Swiney, the Roman Catholic Archbishop and the then mayor of San Francisco, Dianne Feinstein, opposed legislation recognizing domestic partners and the marriage of gay men to each other. This came at exactly the same time as men were contracting and dying of AIDS. Instead of supporting gay men to get into committed relationships, the power of church and state claimed to be protecting heterosexual marriage by opposing same sex marriages.

Some men have survived and have lived with the HIV virus for many years. Fr. Rick Kerr, once a priest associate at Trinity, is an HIV survivor since 1982, although he has been too sick to work very much. Many members and friends are HIV positive and live on, often weakened and unable to work full time anymore. Thank God, the massive numbers of deaths and funerals have diminished considerably.

The Oxygen Hose

One day, George called. I didn't know him. He said his lover was on his AIDS deathbed. Tim was not a church member, but knew of Trinity and our work. He'd come sometimes on Christmas and Easter. Would I come and give him last rites?

I didn't tell him that we really don't give last rites in the Episcopal church. That anointing with oil and prayer is for healing not for oiling the skids into heaven. But this was no time to quibble. I just went.

I walked the few blocks down Franklin Street to the brown stucco new building which could have been uglier if the architect had thought about it, where George and Tim lived.

The elevator languidly lifted me to the third floor. The apartment was dark and hot in the mid-afternoon. The hospital bed was close to the floor. Tim was unconscious, breathing his death rattle heavily. Amber plastic bottles of meds were arranged neatly on the bedside table. An oxygen tank whispered close by the bed. The plastic tubes reached up and into Tim's gray nose.

I chatted with George and asked him if had anything specifically he wanted me to do or say. He said no, just say a prayer and do whatever.

I unscrewed the gold oil stock with the white cotton inside that absorbed the healing oil. I dipped my right thumb in the oil, knelt down and made the sign of the cross on Tim's head. I repeated the prayer:

Tim, I anoint thee with oil and lay my hands upon thee in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, that all thy sickness and pain being put to flight, the blessing of peace may be restored to thee.

Usually I pray that health and peace be restored to the person. But Tim was so close to death that I figured peace was the best we could expect at that juncture.

George sobbed quietly, standing behind me. Tim lay motionless. I recited the Lord's Prayer, and George joined in haltingly.

As I got to my feet I noticed I had been kneeling on the plastic oxygen hose going to Tim's nose. I stifled my chuckle, said my goodbyes and left. I didn't think to be horrified until I was walking back up Franklin Street back to the church. George called the next day to tell me that Tim had died. He didn't ask me to take the funeral or to have it at Trinity. Do you think he noticed? I wonder if he had spotted me on the hose?

Here is an extraordinary letter written to me by Harry Kelly recalling the issue of AIDS and the same gender marriage situation in the late 80's.

"Dear Robert,

It's an extraordinary story. As they all were.

James was a cradle Episcopalian who had had job in a Roman church for a couple of years. He sat in the choir loft and knitted through services. He let go of that job to do a European tour.

My route to the Episcopal church was unusual. From the moment it occurred to me that I was an Episcopalian to my reception took one week. James was hired to sing for one Sunday. I decided I could go to early mass in the Roman church and then come hear him sing. I walked through the door of Trinity and by the time I hit the pew I realized I was an Episcopalian. This was not the result of talking to anyone about it, of going through a political and spiritual struggle about it, or searching for something I was missing in the Roman church. I don't think it had much to do

with Trinity's embrace of gay people either. It didn't feel like a spiritual revelation. It was simple, clear, and very quiet. I believe it was God deciding I would not survive the future that was coming without being an Episcopalian and being a member of Trinity.

I spoke to you after the service and explained what had happened to me. You asked, "What do you know about the Episcopal church?" I answered that I read a great deal and probably knew as much as about half the congregation there. You looked at me for a minute while you debated and then said, "Next Saturday we're having an all day set of classes for those who missed classes that prepare you for becoming Episcopalian. If you feel it's right for you, you can come to that day. The Bishop will be here next Sunday. You can be received then."

This didn't strike me as strange at the time. A few years ago when I visited you with Wayne, I asked you, "What were you thinking?" You responded that people came and went in the way they did and that ultimately you didn't think it had much to do with how you prepared them and you thought it was quite possible that with me this had as much chance of working out as with anybody else. So one week after coming to an Episcopal service for the first time I was received by Bishop Swing.

James and I got married as a result of his diagnosis. Not long after the diagnosis, you and Ann invited us to dinner at your house. At dinner James said, "I hate that my big day in church is going to be my funeral." You responded immediately, "I think not. I think it's time Harry made an honest man of you. What about having your relationship blessed in church?"

I was adamant that this would not be a mere "blessing" but a marriage service out of the Prayer Book. You had no problem with that. We were married in about 1986. I am terrible about dates and I can't find anything with the date on it. But I left San Francisco in 1989. I remember celebrating the end of the decade in New York. After James' death I had decided to spend a year in San Francisco before moving to Manhattan.

*Time passed. You called one day and asked if we would be willing to be interviewed for a newspaper article. You said it might stir things up a bit, but we had absolutely no problem with that. And so we were **interviewed**. The article is what made the poop hit the propeller. The headline was something like "Episcopal Church Blesses Gay Couple." But I personally believe that the thing that really riled people was the picture of James and me. He was staring straight at the camera in a strong and amused way. I was staring at him with absolute devotion. It*

wasn't the kind of picture you would expect, of two guys in skinny ties trying to look straight. And it wasn't a picture of two gays looking like they were doing this because they were gay, gay, gay and this was their right. It was a picture of two men who were deeply in love and didn't think twice about letting people see that. And I think more than anything that picture was the big problem for people.

You received a letter of presentment from Swing. I came to visit you and you assured me that it wasn't my problem and I didn't need to do anything about it. Not my style, Cromey.

I called the Bishop's office and the secretary answered. I asked to speak to the Bishop and she said, "Who is this?" I told her to tell him it was one of the troublemakers at Trinity. I was put straight through. I did my research and found out that he was a West Virginian who had done all his deaconing and priesting in West Virginia before becoming Bishop. He also had attended Virginia Theological Seminary (God bless him...why does no one talk about how Virginia did so much to create the divisions in the communion training the officers of the war on gays?)

The Bishop said he would be happy to meet with me to talk about James and my relationship and love but that he would under no circumstances allow me to discuss you or the letter of presentment. Being a West Virginian, I merely thanked him for being willing to meet with me.

On the day of my appointment with him I went to the Cathedral and stayed there for about four hours praying. I don't think my audience with Swing would have gone well without that preparation.

I entered the Bishop's office. We said our hello's and then I said, "Bishop Swing, you are demanding that I not be Christian." He was miffed and asked, "What makes you say that?"

"I am to be a peacemaker. You won't allow me to make peace since I can't discuss Robert and your letter of presentment." Now he looked annoyed. He leaned toward me and asked, "Kelley, what is your game?"

"I intend to get up in the pulpit at Trinity next Sunday and apologize to the Episcopal Church for getting married."

Now he looked shocked and confused.

"Let me explain," I said. "I grew up in Lewisburg, West Virginia...." (You have to understand how few people from West Virginia you met in San Francisco in those days.) "But my grandmother was a belle from Richmond. From my earliest days she used to say to me, "Now, Harry, a gentleman is a man who never offends anyone -- unintentionally." Talk like this is Southern. We know that it is funny, but we also take it very, very seriously. It's hard to explain to you Yankees how deeply these ideas are ingrained in us. So I continued with Swing. "Here's the thing. I never intended to offend anyone in the church. I didn't think it through. Consequently my grandmother will turn over in her grave if I don't apologize. She will haunt me. Honestly, I might have done the same thing if I had thought it through, but I didn't and so I unintentionally offended all sorts of people and I have to apologize."

I said, "Here's the thing. We can't afford to lose him. We're doing funerals almost weekly. The loss of Robert Cromey will not only devastate our parish. It will traumatize the entire gay community. I know you think of him as a parish priest, but we don't. We see him as a leader of the gay community. He speaks for us when we can't. He performs endless funerals for parishioners and for people completely outside of the church. He makes time for pastoral support. He is an essential figure in the life of gay San Francisco now."

"What do you think will happen if I inhibit him?"

"There will be a wedding of ten couples on the steps of the Cathedral. That's how big this moment is."

He stared at me for a long, long time.

"Can you get Cromey to apologize, too?"

"I certainly can," I answered. You've probably conveniently forgotten this part of our adventure together! "Let's write his apology right now." Bishop Swing and I wrote the apology you were to sign. Right before we finished, I said, "Bishop Swing, you've left one thing out. If you want people to take you seriously here, there has to be some kind of consequence. Why don't you tell Cromey that he can't preach during Lent?" And we both agreed this was a good idea since he would be able to tell people he had silenced you for a while.

I came straight to your house and told you that I had seen the Bishop and that we had written an apology for you to sign.

"I will not do it." You were grim.

"Yes, you will. Because I'm going to get up in the pulpit and explain that I'm asking you to apologize, that it's all coming from me, that we can't afford to lose you, that it's a Southern thing, and that not to apologize would mean that I'm not only going to lose my husband but my parish priest and it would devastate me."

You signed.

All this happened six months after the wedding. I am very, very clear about this. Swing maintained that it wasn't the fact that you had performed the service that really bothered him, but that you had made a media circus of it. I explained that you had not done it, that James and I felt it could be part of James' legacy. (I think we sort of made this up, actually, since you had phoned us and asked if we wanted to do the interview. And of course none of us saw it as "stirring things up." We saw it as having nothing to hide.) It may not be loud in your memory since I didn't ask your permission for doing any of this. I knew that two West Virginians in a room alone would have a better chance of working things out than anyone else. West Virginians are mountain people. People move to the mountains so that they can be close to and far from their neighbors at the same time. Individuality is prized, but community inclusion is also revered. I knew how to speak the language. I knew how to be forceful, cagey, challenging and quirky all at once -- and in those days this was essential West Virginian expression. Also, Swing had received literally hundreds of letters damning the wedding. It was a big news story.

Then again, perhaps I was just lucky.

But the big thing is that all this happened six months AFTER the wedding when the article came out. And that you had to sign an apology.

There was other fallout as a result of the article. We were targeted by hate groups, in particular WAR, the White American Resistance. Our names, phone number, and address were recorded on their hotline (all pre-internet). We would be threatened outside the apartment. Rocks were thrown. Windows were shattered. I actually was let go from a job. I didn't bring this to you because I just didn't have energy to fight it since James was in rapid decline. James parents were enraged and refused to deal with him for quite some time. It was very hard to convince them that he was going to die, and in fact, the weekend he died I had to place call after call to them to get them to come over to our apartment where James had chosen to die. They arrived about an hour before he died.

Our wedding was what a wedding should be. (1) Out of the Prayer Book. We were Episcopalians doing what Episcopalians are supposed to do as their relationships deepen and they make a commitment to go on with it until death do them part. It wasn't about civic inclusion. It was about spiritual community. James and I saw our wedding as being about two things, first commitment and love to each other, but second, undertaking a new way of service to the community. (2) A celebration of us, but also of the way of life of the community. A wedding is not just for the couple getting married. It's also a way the community grows and deepens. I'm not talking about the gay community here. I'm talking about the Trinity community at the time, and about the Episcopal church, at least locally. I heard for years and years afterward about how Episcopalians reading the article felt thrilled about being Episcopalians and (3) It was about finding our way through James' soon-to-come death. Jesus himself says that marriage has to do with death (not everyone's favorite quote; in fact, almost no one remembers it's in there).

"This is an extraordinary history. I'm not at all surprised that you don't remember how extraordinary it was. But I know why. Every week brought an equally extraordinary circumstance. Everyone's history and story in that time was beyond time and space as we know it.

James died on Palm Sunday. On Maundy Thursday I was helping another parishioner get his boyfriend home from the hospital so that he could have Easter at home. He was very, very ill. It wasn't easy to arrange. Trinity members gathered early Easter morning. I don't remember if there was a priest present or not. I kind of think it was Armand who went with communion, but I'm not sure. And he died at the end of the service. One week to the day after James. That was our life then. No one understands what I'm talking about when I tell them I went to a hundred funerals in those days. Simply because the idea of it is too bizarre, too strange, too incomprehensible. And as soon as we were done with one, we had to plan the next hospital visit, the next intervention with a grieving, vindictive family, the next political action.

Once a friend's boyfriend died in the hospital while we were away for a mere hour. They moved the body and couldn't produce it for us. "Come with me," I said and began asking for directions to the morgue. We found the morgue (people were quite happy to direct us!). No one was in it. I began unzipping body bags until we found who we were looking for. "Say goodbye quickly," I said, "before they find us here." That's what it was like.

Much love to you Robert.

Harry”

I would only add to this that the Bishop and I had lunch at my “club”, the Elite Cafe just down Austin Alley, a block from the church. This was after Harry’s visit with him. We had a long talk. He suggested I go ahead and do the blessings but don’t make them public. I agreed, as I never made weddings or blessings public.

Somebody else did.	Earl Williamson, 4/88
List updated as of available information, 12/8/09	Terry Covert, 8/88
Charles R. Robert, Jr., 9/85	John Colton, 1/89
Kenneth Wilkes, 2/86	John Abney, 1/89
John Henry Overall, 4/87	Robert Barge, 5/89
Daniel Hallock, 11/87	Frank Philip Sison, 5/89
Robert Pennstrom, 2/87	Russell Nichols, 7/89
Thomas Matthews, 5/87	Ernie DeVille, 8/89
Larry Ovesik, 1/88	Leigh Putnam, 10/89
Gary Starliper, 2/88	Greg Williams, 12/89
James Meade, 3/88	Robert McGuire, 1/89
Will Wright, 8/88	Ron Minotto, 2/89
Allen Champney, 1/88	Charles Grimaldi, 4/89
James Souza, 2/88	Terry Sweeney, 5/89
Michael Click, 2/88	Charles Haux, 5/89
Richard Schutz, 2/88	Ray Coe, 8/89
	Ted Knipe, 8/89

Tom Buckingham, 11/89	Ted Boya, 6/92
Scott Howell, 12/89	Thomas J. Bartasavage 7/92
Clinton Johnson, 2/90	Mel Tatsapaugh, 12/92
Bill Wilkerson, 5/90	Michael Smith, 8/92
Doug Mosher, 1/90	Charles Hill, 8/92
Daniel Olkoski, 2/90	David Robinson, 3/93
Richard Feigner, 11/90	Art Daniels, 4/93
David Reeves, 12/90	Richard Davenport, 5/93
Al Alspaugh, 1/91	Richard Russell, 3/93
John Palmer, 11/91	Julio Piedfort, 3/93
Paul Scott, 4/91	Gilbert Pinero, 4/93
Steve Hagaman, 1/91	William Boyce Miller 10/93
Larry Stork, 12/91	Peter J. Arnold 11/93
Paul Okendo, 1/92	Preston Mosely Jr., 12/93
James Mulligan, 6/92	Peter Marshall Bell, 11/94
Bill Ridenhour, 1/92	Wayne Love
Gary Ramsey, 4/92	Darrell Duarte

1990's

During our stay in Oxford in 1988, I wrote by hand with a ball point pen 199 pages of the first draft of my book which became "In God's Image: The Need for Gay/Lesbian Equality in the Eyes of the Church." Ann and I were in Oxford for a

month while Ann was a National Endowment for the Humanities scholar. I went along for the ride.

I ran into Bert Hermann, owner of Alamo Square Press, in the post office. I told him of the manuscript. He took a look at it and said he would publish the book. I was very excited that some of my work would turn into a book

After editing and additions, “In God’s Image” was published in 1992. I felt immensely proud helping the publisher unload the boxes of books from the delivery truck. I looked at the green and gray books with my picture on the front cover and felt a keen sense of accomplishment. I was proud of my work and delighted this part of it was now in printed form.

The book was reviewed favorably in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and in a number of other places. I did readings in San Francisco, Boston and New York. The 5,000 copies sold and there are just a few left, which I purchased from the publisher. I call the book my PhD thesis. It is a summary of my involvement in the lesbian/gay and AIDS crises at Trinity and in San Francisco.

Financed by a Texas Episcopal gay man of some means, I sent it gratis to all the Bishops of the Episcopal Church and many of the Deputies to the General Convention of the Church that meets every three years. Our hope was to influence the church leaders to make it legal for homosexuals to be ordained in the church and to allow same gender couples to marry in the church. Debate on those issues still goes on at the high levels of church politics.

We sent out 300 copies of the book but only five Bishops or deputies wrote a note of thanks or reaction. Was it bad manners? Were these folks inundated with unsought reading material? Was the subject matter too controversial? Perhaps all three are the reasons why. My job was to send out the book. Their job was to respond – or not. Most didn’t.

However, as a matter of fact, gay ordinations and marriages now go on in local areas, especially in the big cities. The Dioceses in the conservative parts of the country still have bans restricting the lives of gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered Christians. The consecration of Gene Robinson as Bishop Coadjutor of the Diocese of New Hampshire is an example of the persistent movement of lesbians and gays into full and equal status in the life of the Anglican Communion. Many church people differ on what is justice for homosexuals but the gradual movement for full integration is taking place. The older and conservative leadership will evolve into a more humane and caring position.

It was enormously satisfying to have the book published. It gave a certain dignity and legitimacy to my work, at least in my eyes. People seem delighted and surprised that I had published a book about my work. I received letters from all over the country saying it was helpful. One writer said that the book had helped him come out to his parents. Another writer said he had given it to his fundamentalist mother who looked at gayness in a new way. A liberal San Francisco doctor friend said he was ashamed to admit that he knew so little about homosexuals.

I got the usual criticisms that my book contradicted the word of God as found in the Bible. Others said my ideas were perverting the minds of the innocent. Still others accused me of being gay and only pushing the homosexual agenda. Nothing new there.

In the 1990's we performed a number of marriages/blessings of same sex couples. One of which was televised nationally.

One of the nicest things the late Robert Kitzman ever said to me was that I was a fine Biblical scholar. "No matter what the Biblical text, Cromey can always turn it around to be a sermon on gay rights."

Ed and David

Things had been quiet on the same-gender marriage situation at Trinity. We did a number of them during the 90's. We did not publicize them. The couples didn't either. Other churches allowed such weddings to take place. They were occurring more frequently.

The city of San Francisco passed domestic partners legislation that encouraged homosexual couples to have their relationship regularized so that the partners could receive various city benefits like medical insurance. Mayor Willie Brown and members of the Board of Supervisors presided over hundreds of couples getting married. TV and newspapers covered the ceremonies extensively. In the San Francisco Bay Area such events soon became commonplace.

Ed and David, bright and attractive attorneys, reserved the church and one of our clergy to have their relationship blessed and to be married at Trinity. They did the prescribed pre-marital counseling with Fr. Michael Backlund, an assisting priest at Trinity. Ed and David asked, "And, oh, by the way, is it OK if ABC television

films the ceremony?” Michael, knowing of the earlier flaps with the Bishop about having such weddings, asked David and Ed to have a séance with me about it.

We chatted in my office and I said I did not want to have to raise the whole business again. I had agreed not to have publicity. Ed looked me directly in the eye and said, “The gay rights movement advances in increments. This wedding can be an important increment in the fight for homosexual rights.” He had me. I said OK, but I wanted to talk with the Bishop.

The Bishop summoned Ed, David, Michael and me to his office at Grace Cathedral atop Nob Hill in San Francisco. I took along Dave Wharton, my Senior Warden, Dave Wharton, an attorney. Various Diocesan officials surrounded the Bishop. The Bishop asked questions about the pre-marital counseling and the procedures and the TV. He feared that the TV would make a mockery of the ceremony. Ed, David and I had talked with the producers and felt they were sincere in wanting to present the ceremonies as important steps in the movement for lesbian and gay people to honor their relationships.

The Bishop was clever. He did not say, “You may not have the ceremony at Trinity.” What he said was “I don’t want this to happen.” He reiterated this point. I thanked him and departed, saying we were going to have the ceremony at Trinity.

The interviews were exciting. A team came to Trinity and did a long interview with me sitting in the choir pews. I said I wanted this marriage performed on the TV because it was not a matter of marriage, it was a matter of justice. Gays and lesbians must claim their full rights in church and society.

The cameras and interviewers followed Ed and David around town as they chose flowers, tried out the canapés and tried on their wedding garments. These were shown on the TV with an amused air.

The ceremony was held on Saturday, October 12, 1996. It was very formal and serious. Vows were exchanged, rings given and received and a gentle kiss ended the ceremony. Fr. Michael Backlund performed the service and preached. He was slated to do this long before the ABC TV controversy sprang up. I gave the final blessing.

There was a good crowd of invited guests, members of Trinity and a representative of the Bishop. She is a priest who has a lesbian daughter.

The TV show itself was aired nationally on ABC's "Turning Points" show on November 7, 1996, and aired again on Valentine's Day, 2000. Four couples were shown preparing their ceremonies and then the ceremony itself. Two Jewish men had their service performed by a rabbi who was not identified. Two lesbian couples were also shown. David and Ed's ceremony was held in the large and beautiful Trinity Church. It had the air of grandeur of a main stream Christian Church. A week or so after the show aired, I saw the Bishop at a dinner party. He said he thought the show went very well and the church looked good. I think he was relieved that the TV people took the Episcopal part very seriously whereas it could have made the church look silly.

The reaction in the parish and community was very positive. Members of Trinity hardly batted an eye. We had been doing these ceremonies for years. A few phone calls and letters of protest came in, but they were to be expected. I heard nothing more about all this from the Bishop. At Christmas that year we had the Bishop and his wife join old friends, John and Julia Poppy, Ed and David, Ann and me for a small dinner party. After some initial discomfort we had a grand evening together.

Here, the Bishop showed his genial good manners, moving from differing opinions to social amiability. I once said that I never wanted to get too close to the Bishop personally as I could not then criticize him and his actions very comfortably. He and I disagree about what the role of Bishop should be. He sees himself as a church politician working behind the scenes. I want my Bishop to lead the way publicly in the great issues of church and state.

So at this writing in 2013, fifty years after I began to support LGBT rights, so much has happened. Same sex marriage is now legal in California and New York and many other states. The military, police, firefighters and most businesses integrate homosexuals into their ranks. Lesbians and gays are judges, politicians and, most important of all, parents of children.

I know that I played only a small part in this movement for justice. Most of the power for change came from the LGBT community itself. Their organizing, money and tireless effort brought about these profound changes in the United States and throughout the world. Much work needs to be done in Africa, Russian, the Islamic and Arab world where prejudice and violence against homosexuals prevail. We are grateful for how far we have come, but clear that more change must occur for all LGBT people to be fully free.

The Rev. Robert Warren Cromey
A priest of the Episcopal Church,
retired and living in San Francisco

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