

## RELIGION

# Flaming faggots

*The ordainment of "practicing" homosexual priests may lead the U.S. Episcopal Church to its second trial of heresy in 300 years*

by Bob Roehr

**H**eresy. The word conjures images of medieval woodcuts, of anguished sinners tied to stakes while purifying tongues of flame lap from stacked faggots.

So why then is the Episcopal Church, one of the most progressive mainline denominations, about to stage only the second heresy trial in its 300-year history in the United States?

Two words: flaming faggots. Conservatives within the church are using the ordination of "practicing homosexuals" as a wedge issue against their opponents.

The Rev. Barry Stopfel is the object conservatives would like to smite down. He is pastor of St. George's, a prototypical Episcopal-looking stone church in the New Jersey suburb of Maplewood. He is not looking for controversy; he just wants to be a good priest.

A priest's being gay, in and of itself, isn't a problem for the Episcopal Church. A 1976 resolution by the General Convention, a governing body of the church, declared that "all persons are children of God." Today more than a hundred openly gay or lesbian people serve as priests.

No, the problem is that the middle-aged Stopfel is presumed to be a "practicing" homosexual. He and Will Leckie have been together since they met in seminary a decade ago. Leckie is an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ.

The Episcopal Church discourages sex outside of marriage. The Catch-22 is that it doesn't recognize gay marriages—yet. A group is studying that question and may possibly recommend the blessing of same-sex unions to the General Convention that meets in 1997.

The conservatives can't go after Stopfel. His parish adores him. Within the church hierarchy, he is accountable only to the bishop of Newark, John Spong, who is one of the church's most steadfast supporters of gay men and lesbians.

So they aimed their wrath at Walter C. Righter, the retired bishop of Iowa. It was Righter who ordained Stopfel as a deacon, the preliminary step to priesthood, in 1990, when he was assistant bishop in the Diocese of Newark.

Ten traditionalist bishops moved in January 1995. They filed what is called a "presentment" demanding Righter be tried before the Court for the Trial of a Bishop for violation of church law.

"Simply put, we are convinced that the Episcopal Church clearly teaches that it is not lawful or appropriate to knowingly ordain a practicing homosexual," wrote William C. Wantland, bishop of Au Claire, Wis., in his letter for the 10.

The position is eerily reminiscent of "don't ask, don't tell," the policy which bans gay men and lesbians from serving openly in the military. Neither objects to theoretical homosexual persons, so long as they remain celibate and quiet, denying basic aspects of their humanity.

The traditionalists have called Righter's actions a "breakdown of authority" and vowed to "bring to trial all those who have knowingly vio-

lated the teaching of the church." That list includes sitting bishops in Chicago, Washington, Newark and other large dioceses. The 10 convinced a quarter of their nearly 300 fellow bishops to sign on.

Righter sees the charges as "harassment, not of me, but of the church." He notes that both the House of Bishops and the General Convention rejected motions to censure him over the ordination.

James M. Stanton is bishop of Dallas and spokesman for those bringing the charges. He argues that "every Convention in the last 20 years has passed some kind of resolution reaffirming the traditional teaching of marriage and marital fidelity."

By that token, he charges, practicing homosexuals are in violation of church doctrine and shouldn't be ordained.

Kim Byham, spokesman for the Righter faction, disagrees. The former national president of Integrity, an organization of gay and lesbian Episcopalians, points to a canon adopted by the General Convention in 1994. It prohibits discrimination in the selection process for ordination and specifically includes "sexual orientation."

Furthermore, says Byham, the 1994 convention considered a moratorium on the ordination of homosexuals, but rejected that proposal by a 4-1 margin.

R. William Franklin sees the issue as "very important" to the church because it has "a proportionally large gay and lesbian population," and seemingly has had for a long period of time.

Franklin, professor of church history at the General Theological Seminary, the national seminary of the Episcopal Church, cites a book published last year, *Boston Bohemia* by Douglass Shand-Tucci. It documents a gay subculture in the Episcopal Church in Boston in the 1890s.

Then, in the 1950s, began "the much broader issue of the church absorbing cultural change," Franklin explains. Race came first, then ordination of women and, over the last 20 years, issues surrounding sexuality.

"The question now," Franklin says, "is that gay and lesbian people would like to live open lives. Conservatives say that is not possible."

The very act of seeking the trial came as a shock to many. The only previous trial for heresy was in 1924, when a retired bishop of Arkansas "converted" and began preaching that communism had superseded Christianity.

The Episcopal Church "tends to work these issues out through the elective process of conventions," says Franklin. "What this conservative group has done is try to pre-empt that by forcing a trial, which is not in our tradition."

He sees "old-line Episcopalians reacting negatively because they see it as not Episcopalian."

Perhaps the issue will be sorted out somewhat on Feb. 27, when the court meets in Wilmington, Del. Six hours of argument are scheduled on church doctrine. If the body finds that there is in fact a prohibition on the ordination of "practicing homosexuals," then Righter will go to trial on May 13.





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