

NORTHWESTnews

On Jan. 11, Dennis J. Parker walked down the center aisle of Christ Church Episcopal Parish in Lake Oswego, fulfilling the dream that called him to the priesthood as an 8-year-old boy who already knew he was gay.

In completing a process that included hope, pain, isolation, addiction and almost six years of seminary training, he made history in the Oregon Diocese of the Episcopal Church. He is the first gay man living openly in a relationship to be ordained in this state—and by a bishop who previously had opposed the ordination of gay men and lesbians to the Episcopal priesthood.

Parker's journey began as one of 12 children born into a devout Irish Catholic family in New Jersey. His mother hoped to see one of them become a priest. "I was always very connected to the church," he says, but "I knew the church had a different idea of who I was and could be."

By the time he arrived at Holy Trinity Seminary in Texas at age 17, Parker had decided to live a celibate life and told no one in the church or seminary about his sexual orientation. It just wouldn't matter.

Later, he learned the Dallas seminary's rector immediately had tagged him as "probably gay." At annual reviews, the man warned him not to form any "particular friendships." Parker had no idea what this meant, but he felt pressured to pull away from the friends he had made and to keep more and more to himself. A naturally gregarious person, he felt the torment of isolation, turning to alcohol to deaden the pain of loneliness and confusion.

By the beginning of his third year in seminary, Parker was well on his way to alcoholism. Living in a building with about 75 other men, his unhappiness was bound to attract someone's

A PRIEST FOREVER

Episcopal Church's Oregon Diocese ordains first openly gay man

by Patricia L. MacAodha

attention. An ordained priest inhabited the room next to his and often heard his cries and screams of anguish.

Soon, Parker was summoned to the rector's office and told he was not emotionally equipped to be a priest. He was released from the seminary program and sent home.

Shattered by the swift elimination of his planned future, Parker searched out his high school sweetheart. Within three months they were married, and he tried to forget his dream and his orientation. Though deeply disappointed that she would not get her priest, his mother never questioned him—nor did she when, two years later, goaded by the coming out of a friend, Parker divorced his wife.

First he tried diversion therapy. It was a miserable experience, and he knew he couldn't continue it. He heard a voice tell him, "If you let them take this away from you and you have no attraction to women, you'll be a dead person."

Moving in with friends, Parker fell in love with a young man just finishing high school and relocated with him to Boston, where he earned a bachelor's degree in theater arts. After the relationship ended, he returned to New Jersey and became the director of a children's theater.

In 1986, at the age of 32, Parker stopped drinking. A total of 13 years had passed since the seminary door had been slammed shut, but with sobriety, "my brain, my heart and my soul

began their search for spirituality." This time, slowly, a new door began to open.

He turned to the Episcopal Church. His new parish had a gay priest who was living with his lover. This caused a liturgical battle within the church; in 1995, Walter Righter became the first U.S. bishop in history to be brought up on heresy charges because of the ordination. He ultimately was cleared because "they found no doctrine that prohibited ordination of a gay person in a relationship."

Parker started to re-examine his long-stifled call to the priesthood. He also met Portland business owner Michael Sagun and moved to the Rose City in 1997 to begin a relationship with him.

The Oregon Diocese was not famous for its liberal attitude, and Bishop Robert L. Ladehoff had supported the heresy trial. Yet, Parker found St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church, a welcoming congregation in Northeast Portland, and began talking about his calling with the Rev. John Scannell.

In 1998, on Pride Sunday, Parker gave a sermon to the parishioners, calling on them "to stand and to witness: This is a justice issue." Uncertain of what to expect, he was surprised to find the entire audience "on its feet applauding." It was a turning point at St. Michael, forging a bond between the congregation and its queer members.

Throughout the ordination process, Parker took quiet time to talk to his mother's spirit. He



PHOTO BY MARTIN OWENS

The Rev. Dennis J. Parker (with partner Michael Sagun) wrote in his ordination invitation, "I approach this occasion with humility and an incredible mixture of joy and trembling"

told her what he did and why he did it and says he felt her presence. He knows she is proud of him for staying the course. After all, "she got her priest," he says, with just a hint of mist in his eyes. □

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