

ADAM'S GIFT



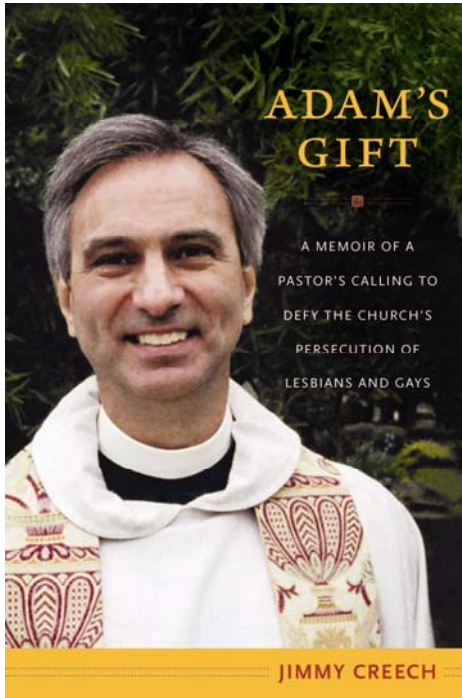
A MEMOIR OF A
PASTOR'S CALLING TO
DEFY THE CHURCH'S
PERSECUTION OF
LESBIANS AND GAYS

JIMMY CREECH

ADAM'S GIFT

A Memoir of a Pastor's Calling to Defy the Church's
Persecution of Lesbians and Gays

Jimmy Creech



Jimmy Creech, a United Methodist pastor in North Carolina, was visited one morning in 1984 by Adam, a longtime parishioner whom he liked and respected. Adam said that he was gay, and that he was leaving The United Methodist Church, which had just pronounced that “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” could not be ordained. He would not be part of a community that excluded him. Creech found himself instinctively supporting Adam, telling him that he was sure that God loved and accepted him as he was. *Adam's Gift* is Creech's inspiring first-person account of how that conversation transformed his life and ministry.

Adam's visit prompted Creech to re-evaluate his belief that homosexuality was a sin, and to research the scriptural basis for the church's position. He determined that the church was mistaken, that scriptural translations and interpretations had been botched and dangerously distorted. As a Christian, Creech came to believe that discriminating against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people was morally wrong. This understanding compelled him to perform same-gender commitment ceremonies, which conflicted with church directives. Creech was tried twice

by The United Methodist Church, and, after the second trial, his ordination credentials were revoked. *Adam's Gift* is a moving story and an important chapter in the unfinished struggle for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender civil and human rights.

Jimmy Creech is a former United Methodist minister, now retired and living in Raleigh, North Carolina. He has worked with many social-action organizations. He has received the Flagbearer Award from PFLAG National; the Human Rights Campaign Equality Award; the Saint Award presented by Metropolitan Community Church, San Francisco; the North Carolina Pride, Inc. Award; and the Lee and Mae Ball Award, presented by The Methodist Federation for Social Action. He was selected as one of *OUT* magazine's “Out 100” in 1998 and 1999.

376 pp., 17 color photographs, \$29.95 cloth trade
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Publication Date: April 10, 2011

Publicity Contact: Laura Sell
lsell@dukeupress.edu or 919-687-3639

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS



About Jimmy Creech



A native of Goldsboro, North Carolina, Jimmy Creech was an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church from 1970 to 1999. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Biblical Studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a Master of Divinity from The Divinity School of Duke University. Since the United Methodist Church removed his ordination in 1999, he has worked with many social-action organizations, including Soulforce, an interfaith movement confronting spiritual violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons; the North Carolina Religious Coalition for Marriage Equality, dedicated to defeating a anti-gay marriage amendment to the NC State constitution and to advocating for marriage equality; and Faith In America, an

organization working to end religion-based bigotry. He has received the Flagbearer Award from PFLAG National; the Human Rights Campaign Equality Award; the American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina Frank Porter Graham Award; the North Carolina Pride, Inc. Award; and the Lee and Mae Ball Award, presented by The Methodist Federation for Social Action. He was selected as one of *OUT* magazine's "Out 100" in 1998 and 1999. Creech now lives in Raleigh where he recently helped to found the North Carolina Social Justice Project.

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Author Photo by Natalia Weedy

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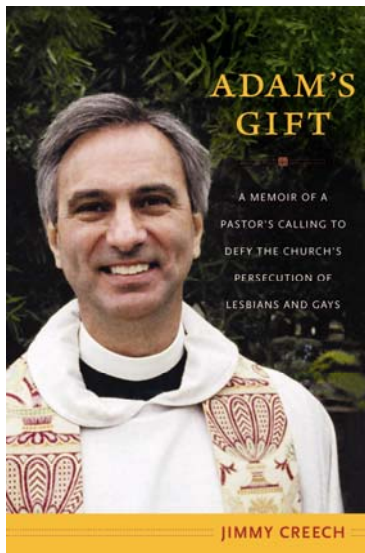
Praise for Jimmy Creech and *Adam's Gift*

“Jimmy Creech is a man who puts his life where his Gospel is! His amazing journey, as told in his memoir, is the story of a follower of Christ who, like Christ, risked his own life and ministry for the sake of the marginalized and scorned. The LGBT community will forever owe him a debt for his sacrifice and his witness to the love of God for ALL of God’s children.”—**Bishop Gene Robinson**, Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire

“I would like to express a deep debt of gratitude to Jimmy Creech. He perceived what God is up to and then had the courage to act on his conviction, no matter what the price was to himself. Thank God for the prophets in our midst. May God give us the courage to emulate them!”—**Reverend John McNeil**

“*Adam’s Gift* is not simply the dramatic, true story of one man’s courageous and sacrificial stand against denominational practices that lead to the denial of full inclusion for lesbians and gays. It is also an intimate and powerful look at the current struggle between the forces of light and dark for the heart and soul of the Christian church.”—**Reverend Dr. Mel White**

“Eleven years in the making, the author’s valiant, first-person narrative examines the conundrum of religion vs. reason. . . . An inspirational example of unbiased humanitarianism.”—**Kirkus Reviews**



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Jimmy Creech's Events Schedule

April 2, 2011

5:00 p.m.

Workshop, Southeast Regional Unity Conference

<http://studentorgs.unc.edu/unity/>

April 7, 2011

5:00 p.m.

Public interview with Gustav Niehbuhr followed by conversation about religion and LGBTQ advocacy; booksigning

Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

<http://lgbt.syr.edu/>

April 8, 2011

12:00 pm

Luncheon and Speech followed by Booksigning

Hendricks Chapel, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

<http://hendricks.syr.edu/>

7:00 p.m.

Lecture and Booksigning

University United Methodist Church, Syracuse, NY

<http://www.uumcsyracuse.org/>

April 10, 2011

3:00 p.m.

Reading and Booksigning

Quail Ridge Books & Music

3522 Wade Ave, Raleigh, NC 27607

<http://www.quailridgebooks.com/>

April 25, 2011

7:00 p.m.

Reading and Booksigning

The Regulator Bookshop

720 Ninth St Durham, NC 27705

<http://www.regulatorbookshop.com/>

April 27, 2011

Reading and Booksigning

7:00 p.m.

The Internationalist Bookstore

405 W. Franklin St, Chapel Hill, NC 27516

<http://www.internationalistbooks.org/>

April 30, 2011
2:00 p.m.
Reading and Booksigning
McIntyre's Books
Farrington Village, 2000 Farrington Village Center, Pittsboro, NC 27312
<http://www.farrington.com/village/mcintyres.asp>

May 1, 2011
4:00 p.m.
Reading and Booksigning
LGBT Center of Raleigh
317 Blake Street Raleigh, NC 27601
<http://www.lgbtcenterofraleigh.com/site/>

May 14, 2011
10:00 a.m.
Reading and Booksigning
Clifton United Methodist Church
3416 Clifton Ave. Cincinnati, OH 45220
<http://www.cliftonumc.com/>

May 15, 2011
10:30 a.m.
Sermon
Clifton United Methodist Church
3416 Clifton Ave. Cincinnati, OH 45220
<http://www.cliftonumc.com/>

June 25, 2011
3:00 p.m.
Reading and Booksigning
Durham County Main Library
300 N. Roxboro St., Durham, NC 27701
<http://www.durhamcountylibrary.org/>

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An Interview with **Jimmy Creech**, author of *Adam's Gift: A Memoir of a Pastor's Calling to Defy the Church's Persecution of Lesbians and Gays* (Duke University Press, 2011)

Why did you write Adam's Gift?

Church teachings and policies have done and continue to do great harm to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, denigrating their humanity and justifying legal and social discrimination. I wrote *Adam's Gift* to challenge these teachings and policies with the hope that it will contribute to the movement toward full and equal human and civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Explain the title – what was Adam's gift?

Adam was the first person to self-identify to me as gay and to reveal to me the pain of growing up in an atmosphere of hatred and contempt, especially in the church. Until then, I had given little thought to the experience—if not the existence—of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. I had no awareness of the suffering the church caused them. I believed homosexuality to be a moral perversion. But Adam was someone I had known and respected for three years before he came out to me. His character and grace shattered the stereotypes I had about “queers,” challenged me to examine my negative attitudes, and seek deeper knowledge and understanding. His gift was the truth about himself which changed my life and ministry.

But doesn't the Bible say homosexuality is a sin?

No, it does not. Homosexuality, along with heterosexuality and bisexuality, is a sexual orientation, an innate personality trait that is normal, natural and healthy. There was no understanding of these sexual orientations by the writers of the Bible. Consequently, it is dishonest to claim that the Bible says anything about homosexuality. Within the entire Bible, there are a very few—I believe there are only four but others claim seven—references to same-gender sexual activity in the Bible. In each of these references, the sexual activity is condemned because it is related to idolatry and violence. It is not legitimate to use these references to condemn loving relationships between people of the same gender or to claim that homosexuality is a sin.

Why has the church persecuted lesbian, gay and bisexual people?

The early Christian church was profoundly influenced by Greek dualistic philosophies that defined physical reality as fallen and sinful, and the spiritual as good and godly. Consequently, sexuality was a major problem for the early church “fathers.” They considered sexual behavior to be a necessary evil, its only acceptable purpose being procreation. Hence, sexuality (consider only as carnal

desire) and spirituality (to which love was related) were separated. This abhorrence of sexuality ultimately led in the 13th century to the church establishing canon law that prohibited any and all sexual activity that did not have the potential for procreation. While this prohibition was not specifically designed to target gay people, same-gender sexual activity was prohibited by definition as a sin. Thereafter, people accused of or caught engaging in same-gender sexual intimacy were punished, often tortured and brutally executed. People who engaged in same-gender sexual activity were stigmatized as dangerous to the social order (criminal), as well as heretical. In the 19th century, when the new science of psychology discovered sexuality to be an innate aspect of the personality, a no less damaging perspective of gay people developed that defined homosexuality as a sickness. Whether understood as a sin, a crime or a sickness, the negative social attitudes toward same-gender sexual orientation are rooted in a flawed theology that was established in the early years of the Christian church. Homophobia was created and sustained by church teachings and policies, and has poisoned the larger culture ever since.

Why are you an advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people?

As a pastor, I understood that my primary responsibility was to enable people to fulfill the Great Commandment: to love God and trust God's love for them, to love themselves and to love others. After Adam came out to me and I began to examine the teachings of the church, I discovered that the church was teaching lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people that God didn't love them and to fear God's condemnation, to hate themselves and to refrain from or feel shame for loving another intimately – teachings and policies of the church which did severe spiritual damage and were in conflict with the teachings of Jesus.

As I got to know more lesbian, gay and bisexual people, I became deeply aware of the cost they paid because of the church's teachings and policies. I was told by a gay man that he knew he was going to hell because he was queer. He said he learned that in church and he didn't want me to talk to him about God. I learned the suicide rate is much higher for gay people than for nongay people. I experienced families breaking apart when a family member announces that she or he is lesbian or gay. The church was doing nothing to help; it was only reinforcing and promoting the fear, self-hatred, shame and despair.

At the same time, I witnessed genuine love and commitment in the relationships of lesbian and gay couples, relationships that epitomized the ideals of marriage as well as any nongay couple I'd known. I was especially inspired by the love and care of gay couples when one of the spouses was dying because of AIDS—the tenderness, patience and sacrifice were extraordinary. I also got to know lesbian, gay and bisexual people I never suspected to be gay who were healthy and productive model citizens. The humanity and inherent dignity of the gay, lesbian and bisexual people I got to know after Adam came out to me transformed my mind and heart. As a pastor, I could not ignore their pain and suffering.

With this new understanding, I felt compelled to publicly challenge the teachings and policies of the church both to end the persecution and to make it possible for the church to regain integrity with the teachings of Jesus. Over time, my advocacy expanded to include full and equal human and civil rights.

What has been your experience as an advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people? Do you have any regrets?

It's been difficult—and, it's been extraordinarily enriching. I've experienced painful losses and profoundly gracious gifts. The difficulties and losses came from those in the church who are adamant that gay people should not be welcomed and affirmed. It hurts to see people who represent the church and claim to speak of God's love be unjust and do harm to others.

I lost the opportunity to be a pastor in North Carolina, but gained the opportunity to work with the North Carolina Council of Churches. I was put on trial in Nebraska and lost my opportunity to continue as the pastor at First United Methodist Church in Omaha; but, because of that, I realized a calling to a national audience as an advocate for the full acceptance and affirmation of gay people. I was put on trial a second time and my credentials of ordination were taken from me; and yet, I'm no less compelled to continue until the persecution ends and full human and civil rights are granted to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Gifts of empowerment have come to me from those I've known who have braved the fear and hatred of the church to stand with integrity and dignity for justice and truth, both those who were gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender, and those who were their allies. It's been an honor to be their colleague in the movement toward justice and equality.

I'll never minimize the pain and loss, but I'll also never diminish the richness of the experience.

How did your advocacy affect your family?

My family has been unconditionally supportive of my advocacy to end the persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. No one has complained because of the difficulties and losses, although there were many. Patrick was in high school when I began to publicly challenge the church's teachings and policies that harm lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. He was supportive and bravely endured the publicity. Upon graduation, he began to pursue his own life goals and was no longer impacted by the controversy. My wife Chris and daughter Natalia gave up much—friends, comfort and financial security—when we went to Nebraska. But, the new friends in Omaha, along with the adventure of a new environment and the challenge of a just cause, gave them new perspectives and opportunities. In Omaha, Chris was able to teach social work on the university level for the first time; and, at Central High School, Natalia discovered her love for photography, which would eventually become her vocation. The difficulties and losses brought us closer. It wasn't just me, it was us as a family that was engaged in the advocacy. I'm most grateful for their love and support. I could not have survived without them.

Are you hopeful that the persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people will end and that they will be fully accepted and included in society?

I am hopeful. Significant progress toward equality and acceptance has taken place since I closed the last chapter of my book, both in some denominations and in society. What made this possible—and what gives me hope—is the growing ranks of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who have the courage and integrity to let themselves be known by their

families, friends, neighbors, colleagues, customers and everyone else with whom they live their lives. They are the ones who are creating the extraordinary change in the ordinariness of their daily lives. Religion-based bigotry continues to do spiritual violence to them and deny them full and equal civil rights, but those who are resolute will be rewarded.

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THE INDEPENDENT WEEKLY

[May 16, 2007 News](#) » [Q&A](#)

Jimmy Creech

Facing up to faith-based bigotry

by [Jim Baxter](#)



Jimmy Creech

Jimmy Creech is executive director of [Faith in America](#), a new organization founded and funded by Mitchell Gold, CEO of the successful Taylorsville furniture company Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams.

"Last year, Jimmy Creech and I realized that an organization just didn't exist that was focused on educating people about religion-based bigotry," Gold said at a press conference.

Gold is 56, gay and Jewish. Creech is 62, not gay and Christian. Together, they've launched an advertising campaign to educate Americans about "the misuse of religious teachings to discriminate and isolate gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people."

"During my 29 years of ministry, it became clear to me that the fundamental reason for the discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people is religion," said Creech, a former Methodist minister who lost his minister's credentials in 1999 after performing a marriage ceremony for two gay men in Chapel Hill.

"As someone committed to the Christian church and the ministry, I felt it was incumbent upon me to begin to challenge the misuse of religion," he added.

Faith in America's campaign, "Call to Courage," will use newspaper ads, billboards, yard signs, bumper stickers and direct mailings to start a discussion among people living in the early presidential primary and caucus states. They started in Iowa, where the first newspaper ad ran on May 6.

What's the reaction been so far?

I was braced for a flood of e-mails and phone messages left on our toll-free number, just angry and hostile and upset about what we're doing. Surprisingly, the great majority of responses we've gotten have been positive. Of course, at the same time, I've gotten calls like "You're really doing a disservice to blacks and women by equating gays to their struggle." But the conversation has been initiated, and that's what we wanted to do.

You have an event coming up at the end of the month?

May 31, we're having a Town Hall meeting in Ames, Iowa, at the Ames City Auditorium. It's right downtown. In fact, it's the building that houses the city council, the police department, everything. I'm going to facilitate it and it's my hope I can keep it focused on the rights and protections guaranteed by the Constitution.

You have invited the head of the civil rights commission for Iowa to participate, as well as the Rev. Irene Monroe, an African-American lesbian and religion columnist.

While we are a diverse people and some of us interpret the Bible in a certain way, that doesn't give that part of us the right to deny others their rights or protections. We're saying you can interpret the Bible that way if you want to, but you don't have the right—based on your interpretation—to deny any group of people their full citizenship. I'm not going to debate interpretation. That's a no-win.

The next stop after Iowa is...?

We have Reno, Nev., Greenville, S.C., and Manchester, N.H., on the horizon, but we want to learn from our Ames experience. We're going to evaluate what we've learned: what worked, what didn't work. Then we're going to be organizing in those three communities, and that will take place in July or August.

Do you really think this is going to work?

I think that is has already, in terms of what we want to do. We want to create a national conversation about religious-based discrimination and about the need to separate people's religious beliefs from the laws that impact everyone. We can hold on to religious beliefs for ourselves, but in this democratic society, there's a line that's drawn regarding how you can use those beliefs. You cannot use those beliefs to harm others. If we can get that conversation going, it's going to be helpful.

<http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/jimmy-creech/Content?oid=1201947>

THE QUIET AMERICAN HERO

BY LISA KENNEDY PHOTOGRAPHED BY PETER ROSS

When you first meet the Reverend Jimmy Creech, it doesn't strike you. After all, he's a Methodist minister. He's unassuming. He's straight, and he's married. But Jimmy Creech has a belief. And he's willing to give up everything—even his pulpit—because he believes that gay men and lesbians have a place in the church. We say, "Amen."

Don't get me wrong: Our hero loves us. But, alas, we are not the sole objects of that love. We are merely the beneficiaries of his authentic ideas, of his greater, deeper, abiding affection. Not that our boy would be very happy to be called a hero, believing as he does that heroism is the thing. Knowing that the heroic is available to us all and, indeed, must be the responsibility of us all. So while his title may be in question, his love isn't. That this is a love story puts it in a kind of peril these days, fond as we've grown of the dark, the hateful, the contentious. Not that this tale is without the dark, the hateful, or the contentious. But for it to remain true, this must be fundamentally a story about love.

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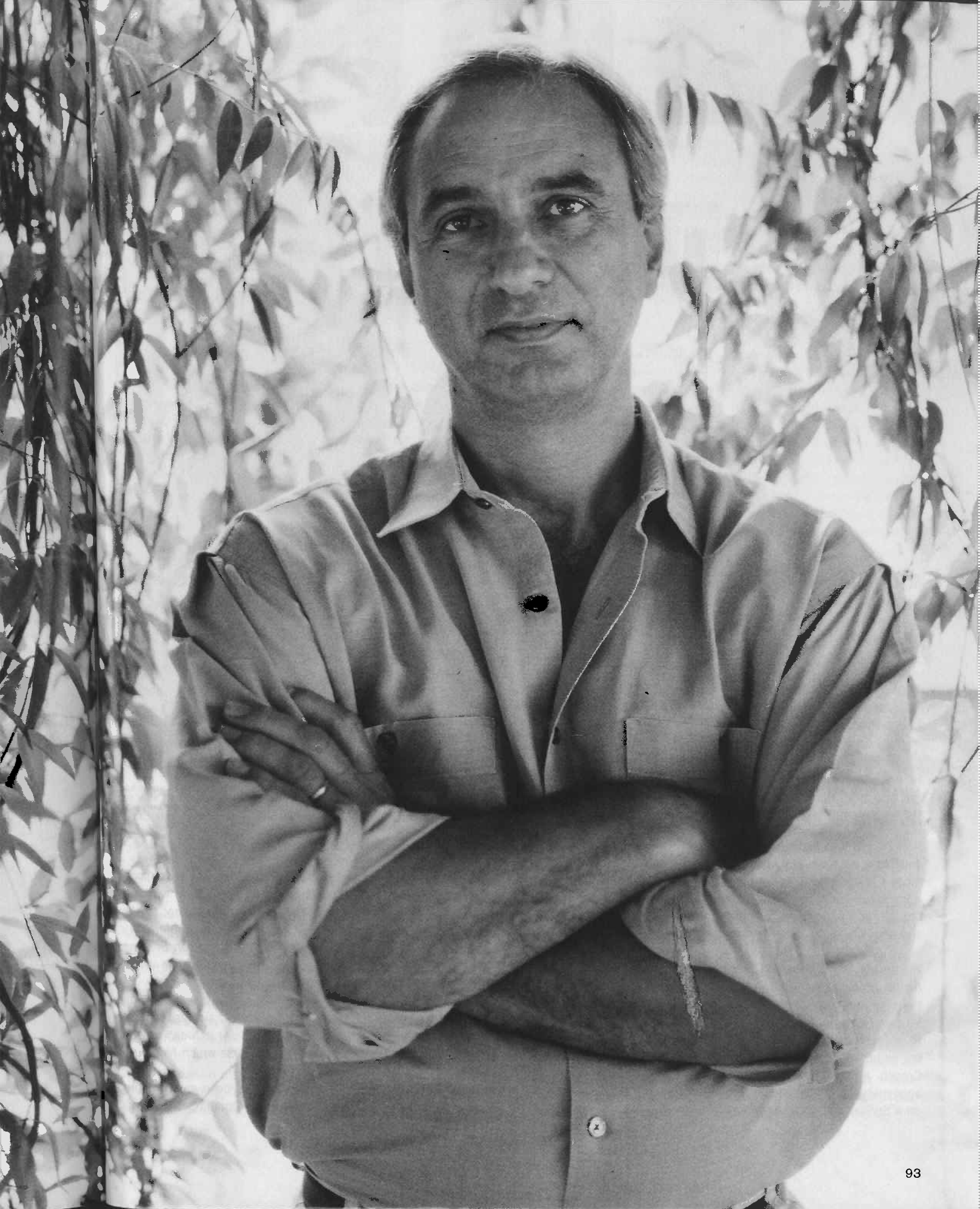
It is June 28, 1998, and the Reverend Jimmy Creech is the guest preacher at Riverside Church in New York City. He stands in the pulpit once occupied by activist minister William Sloan Coffin, in the church built in 1929 for Harry Emerson Fosdick, who had resigned his pastorship at New York's First Presbyterian Church. For Creech, this is a fitting sanctuary after a bruising year.

The previous fall, Creech had celebrated the holy union of two women, Mary and Martha, at the First United Methodist Church in Omaha, Nebraska. It was not the first holy union Creech had performed for a gay or lesbian couple—there had been as many as 13 since 1990—but it was the first one since the United Methodist Church had seen fit in 1996 to forbid its ministers from participating in them. Two months before Mary and Martha's ceremony, Creech wrote to the man instrumental in bringing him to Omaha's First Church, Bishop Joel Martinez, to let him know he intended to wed the women. Martinez counseled him not to. A dismaying but not dissuading development. The year before, when he was offered the pastorship at First Church, Creech had had a very pointed discussion with the bishop's proxy, the district superintendent. "I'm very unhappy about the prohibition that was passed related to holy unions," Creech recalls telling her, "and you need to know I will not abide by it. It's unjust, and if that makes a difference in your asking me to come, I need to know it now. You can withdraw the invitation." And her comment to me was, "Well, we'll walk that road together when the time comes." On the eve of Mary and Martha's nuptials, Creech found that talking the talk and walking the walk were different things indeed. But, good as his word, Creech officiated at Mary and Martha's union on September 14, 1997.

Two days later another Nebraska minister filed a complaint with Bishop Martinez. In December the complaint was referred from the Committee on Investigation to a church trial. Creech was suspended from November until his trial the following March. In its 200-plus years, the United Methodist Church—the church of personal piety and social action, the church of theological visionary John Wesley and, yes, of Hillary Rodham Clinton—had never put one of its ministers on trial for defying its "Social Principles." And although Creech was narrowly acquitted, Bishop Martinez decided against reappointing him to First Church in Omaha.

Creech—his voice musical, his Carolina accent subtly spiced—was in fine self-deprecating form that Sunday morning at Riverside, three months after the trial. Instead of dwelling on his







A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS: JIMMY CREECH WITH HIS WIFE, CHRIS WEEDY, AT HOME IN RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA. "JIMMY IS ANOINTED TO DO WHAT HE DOES. HE'S BEING OBEDIENT," SAYS LARRY ELLIS. CREECH OFFICIATED AT ELLIS' HOLY UNION TO JIM RAYMER IN APRIL. FOR PERFORMING THAT CEREMONY, CREECH WILL BE PUT ON TRIAL—FOR THE SECOND TIME—BY THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH AND WILL LIKELY LOSE HIS CREDENTIALS. "IF ANYONE COULD SUPPORT A CAUSE AND NOT BE A MARTYR," SAYS ELLIS, "IT'S JIMMY. HE'S THE FIRST STRAIGHT MINISTER I'VE KNOWN IN MY LIFE WHO HAS STOOD UP AND BEEN SO FIRM IN PRESENTING THIS CASE."

departure from the Nebraska pulpit, he wanted "to focus upon those I think were truly courageous," he said. "That is, the two women who had the courage, the integrity, the self-esteem, and the faith in God to come together in the presence of their families and their friends to make vows to one another of love and fidelity."

We do not know Mary and Martha's real names. Those are the names Jimmy Creech has given them. None of the participants in the ceremony has divulged their identities. Creech and his colleagues know firsthand about the practical necessity of anonymity for some of us: Even now, Mary is trapped in a tense struggle with her ex-husband over visitation rights for her adolescent daughter. Creech also understands the edifying and elegant uses of anonymity. He enjoys shaping a parable: *It was a simple service on a Sunday afternoon, a small gathering—about 30 people. There*

was a greeting from the couple.... There were prayers. There was a homily. And then they spoke vows to one another. These are some of the promises they made: "We take the vow of fidelity, which to us means to speak the truth with love, to share life openly, to stay close to reality. We take the vow of risk, to be vulnerable to the love that risks what we are for the sake of what we can become. We vow to walk together in empathy and compassion. We vow to be happy, not to forget who we are and who we want to be. We vow to celebrate our sensuality. We vow to not only share our joys and successes but to accept each other's mood swings, sorrows, and failures. We vow to let that which is different between us exist and be itself. In this we vow to love the universe which feeds us."

"It was a simple service." Yet the fallout has been anything but. That ceremony at First United Methodist in Omaha set the stage

for what threatens to become the first major rift in the nation's second largest Protestant denomination (there are 8.5 million members) since 1844. The issue then—slavery.

"This is God's history," says Creech one night at his home in Raleigh, North Carolina. It is a preternaturally confident assertion from a man who may lose his ministerial credentials within the month. "There is a saying from Africa that a man cries the loudest just before death," he says, less sermonizing than prophetic. "I see the resistance in the church as sort of that last cry. We have the opportunity to correct a very serious mistake that was made in the Middle Ages, when gay and lesbian people were attacked by the church. And it's going to be the emancipation not only of gay and lesbian people, and not only of the church, but *all* people."

• • •

Jimmy Creech believes there are battles that convert us, not because we pick them, but because we accept them when they get up in our face. One could say love is like that, too, asserting itself unexpectedly and then demanding that we respond. For instance, take Larry Ellis, 48, and Jim Raymer, 42. Their holy union has led to what will be Creech's second trial, the one that is likely to bring to an end his 29 years as a United Methodist minister.

Since their ceremony, Ellis and Raymer have been as visible as Mary and Martha have been anonymous. "We've had our say," Ellis jokes, "sort of like the Delaney sisters." And so they have: The local news showed up at the ceremony; a week later the inimitable fag-hater and founder of Westboro Baptist Church, Fred Phelps, picketed the church where the union had been performed (he and his ragtag crew penned behind police barricades looking, says Ellis, "like little animals in the petting zoo"); and their wedding album is on the Internet (www.geocities.com/~leeralnc). "We'll interview with anybody," Ellis says. There's a reason for that, and it isn't the queasy-making narcissism that often coats gestures of social activism: It's Jimmy Creech.

"We had no desire to be poster children for gay unions," says Ellis, "but we could not let him take all the heat, let him make sacrifices, and remain quiet and safe."

Originally, Ellis and Raymer's United Church of Christ minister Rick Edens was going to perform the ceremony with his co-minister Jill Edens, but when Edens was unavailable, they sought out Creech, who was then living in nearby Raleigh with his wife, Chris Weedy. "People have asked us if we did this because it was going to get us in the papers," says Ellis, who had once been on a panel with Creech. "Well, actually, we kept it a secret. Nobody knew until the invitations went out." When the news leaked—around the time another Methodist minister, Greg Dell, went on trial for officiating at a holy union—Ellis and Raymer called Creech. "Look, Jimmy," they said, "if you don't want to do this, we understand." There was no question about what Creech would do.

"Jimmy knows in his heart what's right and is not going to stand for what is wrong," Raymer says. It is a constant refrain, this undaunted clarity of Creech's. Lest you imagine his perseverance

WHERE THE OTHERS STAND

The United Methodist Church isn't the only denomination in turmoil over homosexuality. There are ongoing battles within organized Christianity—as well as many other organized religions—between what author Bruce Bawer calls the "Church of Law" and the "Church of Love." For religious legalists (or literalists), homosexuality seems to have been promoted to the last and worst sin, standing between God and his people. Fortunately, there are those within their faiths—gay and non-gay—fighting the righteous fight. Here are some of the flashpoints:

CATHOLIC

Under Pope John Paul II, the Catholic Church hasn't softened its stance on homosexuality—it is "disordered" and "intrinsically evil"—and has begun chastising those in the faith who have. In July 1999, the Reverend Robert Nugent and Sister Jeannine Gramick were instructed to end their 28 years of pastoral work with gay men and lesbians permanently. Nugent feels that their ministry—giving seminars that promote a positive understanding of homosexuality and spirituality—fell within the church's guidelines for reconciling homosexuals with Catholicism; the Vatican begged to differ. He and Gramick are confident their case will get another hearing at the annual meeting of bishops in November.

JEWISH

For gay and lesbian Jews it's not just a matter of which team you play on, but which league you play *in*. The most liberal of Jewish movements, the Reconstructionists, allows gay men and lesbians to be ordained and to wed. Although supporting our legal right to marry, the Reform movement does not officially endorse the blessing of gay unions. (In a poll conducted last year, however, more than 500 Reform rabbis said they were willing to officiate at commitment ceremonies.) According to "Mixed Blessings," the Human Rights Campaign's 1998 report on homosexuality and organized religion in America, the Conservative movement has downgraded homosexuality from an abomination, though there is still debate on whether it's a sin. As for Orthodox Judaism, it bases its condemnation of homosexuality on the purity laws in the Book of Leviticus.

MORMON

(CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS)

The Mormons are unyielding in their condemnation of all things queer and, like Southern Baptists, actively urge church members to oppose our civil rights. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) gained national attention during Hawaii's 1996 same-sex marriage battle by unleashing a costly ad campaign, establishing political action committees, and donating more than \$600,000 toward stopping the legalization of gay unions. Last year the Church again made headlines, with a \$500,000 donation to the Alaska Family Coalition in support of a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages in that state. In their latest salvo, LDS has called on its 740,000 California adherents to support an initiative on the March 2000 state ballot that would ban gay marriages. As a result of this political activity, the church's tax-exempt status has been challenged.

to be a brand of ministerial arrogance, Raymer quietly adds, "I find him to be extremely gentle, extremely loving despite—*despite* is not the right word—his meekness." Raymer reflects. "There's a good deal of power in that."

"Jimmy," Ellis adds, "is the first straight minister I've known in my life who has stood up and been so firm in presenting this case to the point that it is self-sacrificing."

The man who, Ellis says, "just kind of radiated God's love" at their ceremony is once again having his practice of that love prosecuted. "I started out feeling sorry for Jimmy," Ellis continues, "until I realized that he's like Br'er Rabbit—excuse the analogy—thrown in the briar patch." Ellis smiles. "For Jimmy, that's where change is going to be."

• • •

As a boy, Jimmy knew what he wanted to become. But before he can tell us his story, he's interrupted. We're seated at a comfortable restaurant not far from his home. "Excuse me...are you Reverend Creech?" asks a woman with shoulder-length curly hair and a pleasing voice that nevertheless suggests a kind of permanent congestion. Creech pushes away from the table and stands.

"I am." He extends his hand, seemingly without regard to whether she's friend or foe.

"I just wanted to thank you for all your efforts for gays and lesbians," she says. "I have a lot of admiration for you. You have a lot of courage. I think it probably helps you when you hear it."

"It does," he says. "It does a lot." It's an awkward moment; it's also the kind of encounter that suggests that what he gives, he gets in return.

But, as I was saying, Jimmy knew what he wanted to become. In the mid 1950s, Goldsboro, North Carolina—Jimmy's birthplace—was home to the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, at that time a strategic command center on the East Coast. "Almost every day I'd see fighter planes flying," Jimmy says, "and I thought it was just poetry in motion. Just gorgeous. All I wanted to do was fly. I really didn't think about fighting. What I thought about was flying. When I was in junior high school, I decided that I would go to the Air Force Academy."

In her book *Making the Gods Work for You*, astrologer Caroline Casey writes about the scientific discovery that every river has an invisible river flowing deep beneath it and that the health of the visible river is contingent on the health of the invisible one. Jimmy's story is a bit like that: A current of meaning has always run parallel to his own ambitions. Jimmy got that appointment to the Air Force Academy during his senior year. But before he could attend the academy, a sports injury interfered. Jimmy had played on the football team at Goldsboro High. "I couldn't run fast. I wasn't strong," Creech says. Even now, he is not a big man, and soon to be 55, he looks 10 years younger. He stays fit, working out in a makeshift gym in the garage out back of the house, with Dickens, a 10-month-old sheepdog, hitched to the treadmill.

"I weighed 140 pounds, but I knew what I could do was get in the way of people. I couldn't hit a ball, I couldn't catch a ball, but I knew I could get in people's way." There are those who would argue that Jimmy Creech is still good at getting in people's way. "The next to the last game of my senior year, my knee was torn up, and I was physically disqualified from going to the Air Force Academy." Fortunately, because Jimmy had been nominated for a scholarship, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill had his application on file. He was accepted. He went. He became a biblical studies major. From UNC he went up the road to the Divinity School at Duke University. Out of seminary, he became an associate pastor at Edenton United Methodist, an impressive brick church that occupies a full block in downtown Raleigh.

Jimmy knows that there is a direct line begging to be drawn between his football injury and God's Plan. Only he's not having any of that. A fan of Albert Camus and Nikos Kazantzakis, author of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Creech's philosophy is more existential than providential. So he smiles and says in a voice melodious and crisp, "Someone could tell that story and say, well, God was really..." he trails off, wary of his listener's predilection for tidy spiritual narratives. "But I wouldn't tell it that way. This is life; bad things happen to people. Disappointments and good things that are surprising. I think rather than putting the responsibility off on God, simply say, 'This is the way life is.' Spirituality is coming to terms with what's really important in your life and trying to be faithful to those things, whatever the seasons."

Now more about the twists and turns of that invisible river. Creech was the pastor at Warsaw Methodist on the North Carolina coast when one of his parishioners, Paul, came to him and said he could not remain a member of a church that so clearly did not accept him. To its lovely, optimistic passage about human sexuality in the "Social Principles" ("Sexuality is God's good gift to all persons. We believe persons may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the Church, and society") the Methodists had added a dissonant negation: "Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider the practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all."

Jimmy hadn't known Paul was gay. Indeed, although he'd had a very assertive justice ministry, Creech hadn't thought much about homosexuality, didn't know any gay people. Creech was dismayed by Paul's decision but, after listening to him, agreed with his conclusions. Paul left the church, and Creech began reading more closely what the Bible really said about homosexuality, what Biblical scholars have said, what gay people and sociologists and historians have said about gay desire. It was a heartfelt investigation into the unholy union of Bible-fueled bigotry and institutional cowardice.

• • •

Creech won his Omaha acquittal in March 1998 by gracefully using a technicality to battle the church's own creeping legalism: He argued that the prohibition was merely "advisory." Five months later, the Judicial Council trumped that stylish maneuver by

Seroquel
quetiapine fumarate
tablets

ruling that the prohibition was indeed law and that pastors who did not adhere to its language would now risk censure or loss of their ministerial credentials. Creech, who had gone with his wife, Chris, and 17-year-old stepdaughter, Natalia, to the outer banks of North Carolina to clean cottages and heal after they'd left Omaha, challenged his fellow pastors to "protest this decision...by defying the prohibition and publicly celebrating same-sex covenants." It was a call that did not go unheeded.

In January of this year, 68 United Methodist ministers from the California-Nevada Conference perpetrated a mass mutiny, an intentional act of what's being called ecclesiastical disobedience, by celebrating the holy union of Ellie Charlton and Jeanne Barnett in Sacramento. What's at stake for this group, to be known here on out as the Sacramento 68? For the pastors with churches, suspension from the pulpit or worse: the loss of their credentials. For the retired among them: loss of health benefits and possibly their pensions. Four months before Charlton and Barnett's nuptials, the Reverend Greg Dell had celebrated the holy union of Keith Eccarius and Karl Reinhardt at Broadway United Methodist in Chicago. He was tried in March 1999, found guilty, and given this option: The only way to lift his suspension would be to sign a pledge that he would uphold church law. Dell chose to leave the ministry and became director of In All Things Charity, an organization of United Methodists working for the full inclusion of gay men and lesbians in the church.

The struggles in the Methodist Church, the defiance, the trials, the cruel tweaking of institutional language to keep us in a separate and unequal relationship to God—all these will no doubt continue through next spring, when the church's General Conference, its top legislative body, convenes. Even with so much at stake for the Methodists, it would be easy to dismiss these goings-on as just so much insider baseball. Yet these sacred dramas tell us we are living in a time when church schisms are still possible, when theological combat over scripture is heightened. When congregations can pull apart at the seams (and, yes, sometimes reconcile) over hermeneutical differences. That the written word still has the power to cause such deeply felt rifts should be comforting to readers and writers everywhere, and yet it's hardly soothing for us to be the turf on which a holy war is being fought.

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Did I tell you that there are a couple of seemingly incongruous details about our hero Jimmy Creech? First of all, when he writes, he is fond of the exclamation point, a kind of punctuation that is hardly ever detectable when he's just sitting around talking, even when he's conversing about the joyous or the painful. Then there's his enthusiastic—for a man so stunningly thoughtful—use of the words *neat*, *wonderful*, and *delightful*. Like when he tells me to call up Boo Tyson: "Boo has been out as a lesbian for a very long time. She left the church and has come back and is very active," he tells me. "She's a *delight*." And in a completely unexpected way, she is.

When Martha Buie Tyson ("I was never called Martha, always Martha Buie. You know, it's very Southern to have a double name") walks into Owen's Broad Street (continued on page 140)

MUSLIM

In America, being gay and Muslim may not be a death sentence (though homosexual acts are a capital crime in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Afghanistan), but it remains a fearsome struggle. In 1998, 22-year-old Faisal Alam, a Pakistani immigrant, founded Al-Fatiha, an organization for gay, lesbian, bi, trans, and questioning Muslims. In May 1999 the group sponsored a conference in New York to explore the challenges of reconciling sexual orientation with religion. "For many people, being gay and Muslim is an oxymoron," Alam says. "People have been living with separate identities for so long that for us to say 'you can be gay and Muslim' really scares them." Although some of the 60 attendees registered under false names for fear of being identified, the conference was held without incident. Alam expects increased turnout at Al-Fatiha's second international retreat, scheduled for June 2000 in London.

PRESBYTERIAN

Early this year a regional board in New York voted to allow ministers in 95 churches to perform commitment ceremonies for same-sex couples—as long as they aren't called marriages. Then, in June, as part of the church's annual General Assembly meeting, an official Presbyterian ministry for those struggling with "sexual brokenness," OneByOne, met with Exodus International (the infamous ex-gay ministry) to discuss the inherent problems of what they call "pro-gay theology" (any ministry that fails to acknowledge a strictly negative scriptural interpretation of homosexuality). The General Assembly voted against changing language that currently prohibits gay men and lesbians from becoming ordained. Instead, it assigned a special committee to conduct an in-depth study on ordination standards, due in 2002.

SOUTHERN BAPTIST

With nearly 16 million members, the Southern Baptist Convention remains the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S. It's also one of the most aggressive opponents of gay rights. The SBC dropped American Airlines as a recommended carrier for its annual June meeting, stating that through its contributions to PFLAG, the Human Rights Campaign, and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, the airline supported movements that are "destructive of the family and society." At the meeting, the SBC rebuked President Clinton (himself a Southern Baptist) for proclaiming June Gay and Lesbian Pride Month, demanded that the president rescind his appointment of James Hormel as ambassador to Luxembourg, and reaffirmed that gay men and lesbians can be converted to heterosexuality through belief in Jesus.

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

With only 1.4 million members, it's not a large church. Founded in 1957, it's not an old church. But the UCC has been fighting for gay and lesbian rights since before Stonewall. By far the most welcoming mainline denomination for gay men and lesbians—it has supported the ordination of openly gay ministers since 1972 and is the only Christian denomination to recognize and bless same-sex unions—the UCC's General Synod encourages all congregations to study homosexuality and declare that they are "open and affirming" (there are at present 300 such congregations). The UCC is also a longtime supporter of gay civil rights and an open opponent of sodomy laws and military discrimination. —Lisa Kennedy and Michele James

QUIET AMERICAN HERO / FROM PAGE 97

Diner, a café housed in what was once a gas station along the old train tracks in Durham, North Carolina, she shares a few friendly words with the manager, then sits and orders a cup of coffee. Dressed in gray overalls and a plaid shirt, the 37-year-old Tyson is an amalgam of prepossessing ease and quiet earnestness. If the true heroics of the pastoral are mysterious, easily lost in the translation from the sacred to the secular, then Tyson is the perfect translator. The daughter, granddaughter, niece, and cousin of United Methodist ministers, Tyson takes pleasure in reminding me that she knew about Jimmy, that North Carolina knew about Jimmy, "long before you all knew about him."

"One of the things that makes people around here uncomfortable with him—and in this part of North Carolina there are some people who feel very strongly that he represents evil—is that he's one of us," she says.

As is usually the way in the United Methodist church, Tyson's father was

moved from parish to parish in the eastern part of the state. "When you're one of a preacher's family, you're connected, and you hear people say either good things or negative things, and Jimmy Creech is one of those folks I always heard good things about. Never in a million years knowing our paths would cross in this intimate, personal way."

When Tyson was 17, she came out to her parents and then to the youth leadership of the North Carolina Conference. "I kept running into Methodist young people in the gay bars who were struggling. How could they be gay and Christian?" she recalls. So she said to the youth ministers, "Hey, why don't we talk about it?" Their response was immediate. "I got excommunicated," she says, with the sort of punchline flatness that implies an earned distance from the hurt. "They never spoke to me again; the leadership didn't look at me. They acted like they didn't know who I was. My dad's a preacher, my granddaddy was, his brothers are, cousins are—I thought I was one of them."

Tyson left the church. Nearly 10 years later, she picked up a copy of the local alternative weekly, *The Independent*. On the cover was a picture of Jimmy Creech. Then pastor of the Fairmont United Methodist Church in Raleigh, Creech had taken part in Raleigh's Gay Pride march. (What transpired after the march eventually led to Jimmy's virtual exile from the pulpit in North Carolina.) "I called him immediately," she recalls, "and said, 'Can I have lunch with you?'"

Of that meeting Tyson admits, "There was a part of me that couldn't quite believe he was for real. My own homophobia almost wouldn't let me believe it."

It seems worth mentioning here that in North Carolina even the righteous Christians like Boo Tyson have an ease with God-talk that's striking for its matter-of-factness. "I was looking for somebody to confirm that I was in fact God's precious child. On some level, I've always believed that. I was raised well, and when I came out, it wasn't that difficult. It was when I told people and [got] the reaction I got, which sent me into this...I call it my

'wilderness years.' I was in the midst of that when I met Jimmy."

Tyson says she is once again "a lifelong Methodist." It wasn't an instant miracle of reconciliation. Jimmy's good, but not *that* good. Still, "that day planted the seed in my heart," she says now. "In fact, over the last few years I've had a healing experience that I can link back to that day with Jimmy." Jimmy and Tyson see each other at meetings. Along with other gay and non-gay Methodists, the two are part of the reconciling movement. There are now 160 congregations that have stated, after holding dialogues about the Bible, about social attitudes, and about personal feelings, that they are open and welcoming to gay and lesbian people.

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Jimmy Creech is no radical. He'd be the first to tell you that. Indeed, our hero believes deeply that the heroic, the revolutionary even, is the domain of people like Larry Ellis and Jim Raymer, Boo Tyson, and Mary and Martha.

It turns out to be rather typical of the Reverend Jimmy Creech that although he sits not in a church office but at home writing a book about his church's history of excluding gay and lesbian people, strategizing about the upcoming trial and composing an anything-but-contrite missive to the most recent Committee on Investigation, he'd rather talk about the people in the First Church congregation whose lives were transformed by the events around Mary and Martha's union: the closeted lesbian, the retired businessman, the parishioners who for the first time came out as the parents of gay and lesbian children, the 1600 members who supported the church's inclusive vision.

Jimmy is aware that running underneath America's secular life is an invisible river: its spiritual life. The health of the first is bound up with the health of the other. We might well imagine, thanks in part to how the media tell the story of Christianity in this country, that the invisible river is dying, teeming not with possibility and with life but bubbling with toxic bigotry, leeching into our civic lives via the Family Research Council, (continued on page 147)

the Christian Coalition, the Southern Baptist Convention. But then we'd be ignoring the widening stream of the heroic. It is the Sacramento 68, Greg Dell, and Jimmy Creech to name just a Methodist few. It is the countless gay and lesbian Christians who insist on their spiritual right to an intimate relationship with God.

And it is Shelly. Shelly from First Church in Omaha. Shelly, whose firstborn was just a month old when Jimmy celebrated Mary and Martha's union. "I got a call from Shelly," Jimmy says, and Jimmy is seldom as radiant as when he is talking about his parishioners. "And she said, 'Jimmy, I want you to know I support you a hundred percent.' She said if Mason grows up to be gay, I want to know that my church will love him." Jimmy's voice catches. "And for a young mom to say of her first baby—to even consider the possibility that he would grow up and be gay and then say, 'I want my church to love him and accept him.'" Jimmy's eyes shine. "That was just *wonderful*." •

Lisa Kennedy profiled Lili Taylor in the August issue. She has also written for US, INTERVIEW, and THE VILLAGE VOICE.

Pastor's Church Trial Attests To Divisiveness of Gay Issue

By GUSTAV NIEBUHR
Published: February 15, 1998

Correction Appended

OMAHA — Joining a man and a woman before God is standard duty for members of the clergy. But for performing a union of a different sort, the Rev. Jimmy Creech, a United Methodist minister here, will soon be tried in a church court.

At issue is Mr. Creech's officiation at a covenant ceremony last September uniting two women in his congregation, First United Methodist Church. The event resembled a Methodist wedding, with Scripture readings, an exchange of vows and a celebration of communion.

But it came a month after Mr. Creech's bishop told him not to do it and a year after Methodist leaders added a statement to the denomination's rule book forbidding ceremonies uniting people of the same sex.

Mr. Creech said in a recent interview that he could not, as their pastor, refuse the women's request and that he considered the church's opposition to unions of people of the same sex to be discriminatory. He could lose his ministerial credentials if convicted.

The trial, which is scheduled to begin on March 11 in a Kearney, Neb., church, will highlight a divisive pattern emerging within Protestantism, where the consensus against homosexuality has been eroding, as it has elsewhere in society.

Issues concerning homosexuality, especially the question of whether to ordain noncelibate gay men and lesbians as ministers, have touched off rancorous debates at church conventions, where opponents often cite biblical injunctions against homosexual acts. A few cases have ended up before ecclesiastical judges.

No major Protestant denomination has voted to allow the ordination of homosexuals as ministers, nor has any developed official rituals to bless same-sex unions. But the stands that denominational leaders have taken vary considerably.

In 1996, for example, the United Methodists firmly rejected a measure to allow homosexuals to be ordained.

Last year, the regional bodies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) went a step further, amending the church constitution to bar anyone sexually active outside marriage from serving as a minister, elder or deacon.

By contrast, the United Church of Christ leaves the matter up to its regional associations, a few of which have ordained openly gay men and lesbians as ministers. In 1997, priests and lay leaders at the Episcopal Church's General Convention narrowly rejected a proposal to develop liturgies for blessing same-sex unions.

"This is the polarizing issue," said Michael McClellan, an Omaha lawyer and a member of the First United Methodist Church who will be Mr. Creech's co-counsel. A retired Methodist bishop will serve as judge and other ministers as a jury.

The number of same-sex unions quietly blessed by clergy members is not known. The

privacy surrounding such ceremonies has helped insure that no minister has ever been tried for performing one in the 8.5 million-member United Methodist Church, the nation's largest mainline Protestant denomination.

"This is going to be a test case," said Mr. Creech, 53, who has been suspended with pay. "This didn't start as a strategy. It began as a couple coming to me." Mr. Creech is married with a stepdaughter and has an adult son by a previous marriage.

James V. Heidinger 2d, president of Good News, an evangelical movement among Methodists, said the trial would "be a shot heard round the church." The ceremony, he said, was "a clear violation of biblical principles, as well as the tradition of the church."

Mr. Creech described his position on homosexuality and the church as a Divine calling. "I really believe this is God's history and I'm part of what God is doing," he said. "I've been invited into it and given a responsibility."

Bans on ordaining homosexuals as ministers and blessing same-sex unions, he said, reflect "a cultural prejudice that has been institutionalized in the church." In 1997, he signed a statement, titled "In All Things Charity," that called for support for ordaining gay men and lesbians and for developing ceremonies for "same-gendered couples." The statement has been signed by more than 1,300 Methodist ministers, or about 3 percent of the denomination's 37,000 ordained ministers.

The Rev. Jeanne Knepper, a spokeswoman for Affirmation: United Methodists for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Concerns, said a few signers had performed same-sex unions. "I could give you -- but I won't give you -- the names of 20 United Methodist pastors who have done these ceremonies," she said. Mr. Creech, she added, "is not anywhere near alone: he's the lightning rod."

Mr. Creech is charged with violating Methodism's "The Book of Discipline," its laws and administrative rules. In 1996, the denomination's policy-making body, the General Conference, added a sentence to the book's "social principles" section: "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches."

That section also contains an earlier statement describing homosexuals as people of "sacred worth," but calling homosexual acts "incompatible with Christian teaching." Mr. Creech's trial will turn on whether the 1996 statement against same-sex unions is legally binding, rather than merely advisory, as Mr. Creech and his supporters contend.

The controversy has shaken members at Mr. Creech's church, a 200,000 square-foot complex atop a small hill. Financial pledges are down, as is Sunday School attendance. Some of Mr. Creech's critics have quit attending, while some supporters have picketed the offices of the Nebraska Bishop, Joel N. Martinez. Church staff members say many in the 1,900-member congregation feel caught in the middle.

Founded in 1855, the First United Methodist Church has undergone tumult before, although nothing like this. One early pastor carried a six-shooter in the pulpit. Another, considered a Southern sympathizer in the Civil War years, was run off by the congregation. In 1975, a tornado struck the church buildings.

At one time, said the Rev. Donald D. Bredthauer, the acting pastor, First United Methodist "was sort of seen as a high-steeple church," meaning socially exclusive. But he said that was

no longer true for a congregation that prepared meals for people with AIDS, backed an organization that lobbies for civic improvements in poor neighborhoods, Omaha Together One Community, and supported Habitat for Humanity, which builds housing for the needy.

"We've not stopped doing our other ministries just to take care of this," Mr. Bredthauer said.

Bishop Martinez appointed Mr. Creech to the church in 1996. He had served congregations in North Carolina. But his critics said that they found out only later that Mr. Creech left his last pulpit in Raleigh, N.C., amid a bitter dispute over his support for local gay rights initiatives.

A chapter in a book, "Congregations in Conflict: The Battle Over Homosexuality" (Rutgers, 1996), by Keith Hartman, describes that experience, saying that the congregation divided mainly along generational lines, with older members largely opposing Mr. Creech.

Mr. Creech later went to work as a lobbyist for the North Carolina Council of Churches, where he became known as an opponent of the death penalty.

The rift at the First United Methodist Church began in January 1997, after Mr. Creech preached that "to be gay was in itself healthy, normal and natural." The sermon, he said, "got a pretty strong reaction."

Bob Howard, a retired insurance company executive, said he had complained to Mr. Creech that it was "the fourth sermon we had heard on the subject."

Mr. Howard said the minister "listened very well, but the word was, 'I'm going to continue down that path.'" Mr. Howard canceled his financial pledge in protest and later stopped attending.

Melvin J. Semrad, a gas and electric company executive, said he urged Mr. Creech "to slow this train down," to give skeptics a chance to adjust. And last April, Mr. Semrad said, he warned Mr. Creech that his preaching was "going to drive a wedge" into the congregation.

"We believe we are an open church," Mr. Semrad said, "but we also believe in the 'Discipline.'" The Methodist rule book, he added, "is not for someone to pick and choose."

But Deb Keeney, an administrative assistant in a local school, said that Mr. Creech was "helping us fulfill our vision" at the church.

Before he arrived, the church had drawn up a statement of purpose, called "Vision Focus," which said, in part, that members would "welcome and celebrate the diversity of God's children," including "all economic levels, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, marital states, abilities and age levels."

Mr. Creech, Ms. Keeney said, "came to the church knowing this was the vision we had, and had no inkling there were people who did not agree with that."

But not everyone in the church had attached such weight to the statement. Frank Rathbun, a church member who is a retired natural gas company executive, said the way the statement was interpreted under Mr. Creech "turned out to be much broader than when people agreed to it."

All this might have remained within church walls had not the two women asked Mr. Creech to perform a covenant ceremony for them. He agreed last July and wrote to Bishop Martinez, who, he said, instructed him not to conduct it.

Mr. Creech said he replied to the bishop "that I felt that it was my responsibility as a pastor to do it," and that the "Book of Discipline" statement was "unjust and discriminatory." (He has not identified the women, nor have they spoken out.)

After the ceremony, more than 400 First United Methodist members wrote Bishop Martinez, saying the event challenges "the principles of our Christian faith." A Methodist minister in western Nebraska filed a formal complaint. In November, the bishop suspended Mr. Creech.

Two months later, a church investigative committee ordered a trial. Bishop Martinez issued a statement promising to expedite the process. He did not return calls seeking comment on the case. But Mr. Creech released his own statement, saying, in part, "I believe that the sin of heterosexism is no less a sin than that of racism."

His supporters have organized a group called "Support the Vision." At a recent meeting, one woman described Mr. Creech as "a beautiful man of Christ" who "was sent here for a purpose, for all of us to be tested."

But Virginia Semrad, Melvin Semrad's wife, likened Mr. Creech's relationship with the church to a marriage gone sour. "He was not known, we did not court each other long enough," she said. "I feel Jimmy Creech cannot, should not, return to his pulpit."

Although Mr. Bredthauer occupies the pastor's office, it remains largely as Mr. Creech left it. The wall behind the desk displays portraits of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mohandas K. Gandhi and Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, all victims of assassins. There is also a picture of Rosa Parks, the African-American woman who in 1955 refused to yield her seat to a white man on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Ala..

Mr. Creech, who grew up in Goldsboro, N.C., said he had been "very much affected" by the Civil Rights movement, although he had not taken part in it. "It was people willing in that moment to be faithful, to take a stand, to do the right thing, that ultimately brought about change in the South," he said.

He acknowledged that within a congregation, such boldness could be disruptive. But the sacrifice, he said, amounted simply to the loss "of artificial unity and peace."

"In order for there to be any kind of growth," he said, "there must be conflict."

Correction: February 26, 1998, Thursday An article on Feb 15 about the coming church trial of the Rev. Jimmy Creech, a United Methodist minister in Omaha, for performing a ceremony uniting two women, misstated the surname of a critic of Mr. Creech. He is Bob Howell, not Howard.