



THE ONE WHO ENDURES

In 1972, Bill Johnson '68 made history when he became the first openly gay man in modern history to gain ordination to the mainstream Christian ministry. That was just the beginning of the journey for the man and his church. **By Anne Moore**

In 1971, while he was working as a youth pastor in Northern California, William R. Johnson asked an association of the United Church of Christ to do what had never been done before in modern Christianity: ordain an openly gay man. In 2010, the Episcopal Church has an openly gay bishop, the House of Representatives has openly gay members, and network TV has openly gay characters galore. In 1971, however, homosexuality was considered a mental disorder by the American Medical Association, and homosexuals were subject to criminal prosecution in 48 states. Johnson's request made the national news, and Johnson became a person of interest to the police in Los Angeles, where he was living at the time.

A number of church leaders vehemently opposed Johnson's ordination, using arguments that at the time were highly conventional. The Reverend David Held of the Congregation Church of San Mateo said Johnson's "abnormal sexual adjustment" would contaminate children. Another church leader suggested Johnson might be an acceptable candidate if the 26-year-old seminarian gave up sex. His homosexuality didn't seem to bother some people as much as the fact that he acknowledged it.

Still, nearly all agreed, Johnson was in most respects an ideal candidate for ordination: smart, educated, compassionate, a leader, a man through whom the love of Christ shined.

In April 1971, during a contentious hearing to determine if he were fit for ordination, Johnson sat alone in a chapel. Opening a Bible at random, he came upon this passage from the 13th chapter of the Gospel of Mark:

As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils... and you will stand before governors and kings because of me... When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit... You will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Today, the Reverend William R. Johnson serves as vice president for member relations of the Council for Health and Human Services Ministries of the United Church of Christ. His job at UCC headquarters in Cleveland requires him to do what he has done for decades now: bring people together, exchange meaningful information, and help believers to find ways to bring their faith into their work. At 63, he seems to be nowhere near the end, but he has endured.

Bill Johnson knew he was gay by age six.

The youngest (by 10 minutes) of three boys, Johnson, a fraternal twin, was raised in a working-class home in Houston. Aside from the Bible, the family home had no books, and the Johnson children had

little expectation of a college education. Money was scarce. "Christmas baskets?" Bill recalls. "We were the family that received them."

In high school, Bill was teased, bullied and beaten up. He found a respite at Slumber Falls, a UCC camp in New Braunfels, Texas. The camp brought together youths of different denominations and races, and gave Johnson a picture of life beyond his Houston neighborhood. He was treated kindly, for a change, by his peers. He became a youth leader in the church. The camp director, the Reverend Bill Royster, was a graduate of Elmhurst College, and Johnson's closest friends at camp were Elmhurst students. Elmhurst College came to seem like a ticket to a better world.

Johnson arrived on the Elmhurst campus in 1964. He had never been on an airplane before and had never seen snow. But he sensed that he'd find the same kind and accepting people that he'd known in New Braunfels. For the first time, he also found a place that valued the intellect; and to his great relief, he fit in academically. To pay his tuition, Johnson cobbled together grants, loans, and income from a job in the campus kitchen.

Elmhurst became Johnson's arcadia. He made friends easily, was elected president of his freshman class, played the lead in *The Fantasticks*, and joined a fraternity. He lived all four years in Niebuhr Hall. An English major with a minor in philosophy, he carries "an undying love" for Shakespeare, thanks to the inspired teaching of Dr. Gordon Couchman, who chaired the English department.

For all the joy he found in campus life, Johnson carried a heavy secret. Like nearly every gay college student in the 1960s, Johnson hid his sexual orientation. Gay students at Elmhurst and elsewhere were so closeted that they didn't even speak to one another, he recalls. They had no role models. Many were depressed, isolated, and socially inhibited. Some committed suicide. Within a society that was almost uniformly intolerant of sexual difference, the consequences of coming out seemed enormous. If he told his friends he was gay, would he lose them? Would he alienate their families, who had taken him in on weekends and over holidays? "I was in agony," Johnson recalls.

He found a measure of consolation during long talks with friends and fraternity brothers. Like Johnson, many of his friends had their eyes set on the ministry. In time, a handful came to know he was gay. Those talks saved his life, he says. "The love and acceptance I got from my friends was huge."

After graduating from Elmhurst, Johnson headed west to study for the ministry at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. While at the seminary, he worked for the UCC in a special ministry for unaffiliated individuals, canvassing areas on the West Coast with the aim of starting "house" churches—bare-boned congregations without money or a building. He reported to the Reverend John M. Rogers.

"The point of the job was to give students a first-hand look at how the church forms from the inside out," says Rogers, now 74. "Bill was like the

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others, young and energetic and idealistic—interested in music, obviously very bright."

Rogers sensed that Johnson was gay and teased out the truth. He then sent the young seminarian to a psychiatrist "to get straightened out." "That's what we did back then!" Rogers says, laughing heartily.

After a year of counseling, Johnson reported back to Rogers. "Now I'm *certain* I'm gay," he said.

In the UCC (as in all denominations, then and now), closeted gays were ordained routinely. But Johnson wondered if he could minister with integrity, and thus be of genuine service to others, while trying to sustain a secret life of inner turmoil. "Could I do it? Could I live a lie?" he asked himself. "It takes an enormous emotional and psychological toll to present a self that is not authentic."

On November 11, 1970, Johnson attended a forum in Berkeley on "Homosexuality and the Church." A participant presented a negative view of including gay people in Christianity's embrace. Johnson got angry. He stood up and announced to the crowd of more than 400 people that he was gay, and would seek ordination in the United Church of Christ. That day, Johnson became what at the time was almost an oxymoron: an openly gay seminarian.

He got mixed messages about his informal new role in the church. He immediately lost his job teaching Sunday school. But his local parish in San Carlos loaned him money to pay for seminary. He received a call to develop house churches, a so-called "tentmaker" ministry. But it appeared that, even if he were ordained, parish ministry would be closed to him.

In film footage from the time, Johnson is a fit, handsome, fair-haired young man. He looks golden, and at peace. He wasn't. The first time he was turned down for ordination, he wept the whole drive home. Later, he fumed as the church forced him to jump through hoops that other seminarians were spared. In meetings with church leaders, he was astonished to find himself prepared to talk about theology but asked instead to discuss homosexuality.

The moment of truth finally came on April 30, 1971, at the council hearing during which Johnson discovered the passage from Mark's gospel ("For they will hand you over to councils..."). The council on this day heard a letter from Minnie Johnson, Bill's mother. "It hasn't been easy to accept the fact that I have a son who is a homosexual," she acknowledged. Then she added: "I ask you to judge his qualities as a dedicated Christian, and not his sexuality."

As the council voted, Johnson stood outside the church. A man bolted from the building, yelled "You're destroying the church!" and spat on him. Johnson kept his cool. In the end, the association voted in his favor, 62 to 34.

On June 25, 1972, William R. Johnson was ordained a minister of the United Church of Christ. It was a historic breakthrough, marked by



Bill Johnson's ordination broke a barrier for gay people. From top: with the Elmhurst College Brotherhood of Squires in 1968 (Johnson is top row, right); the Ecclesiastical Council hearing that considered Johnson's application for ordination; Johnson greets a parishioner at his historic ordination to the United Church of Christ ministry in 1972.



Johnson has lived in New York and Cleveland but has stayed connected to Elmhurst College. From top: With President Donald Kleckner at Commencement; at the United Church of Christ General Synod in 1987, at which the UCC Coalition for LGBT Concerns was celebrating its 25th anniversary; at Elmhurst College Homecoming Weekend in 2009.

enduring signs of the church's ambivalence. Johnson was not allowed to serve communion at his own ordination.

Nearly 20 years would pass before Bill Johnson would work full time within the denomination that ordained him. He never led a parish. "No congregation would have him," John Rogers recalls. "No church was interested in a gay minister."

Johnson holds a deep sorrow, and some bitterness, for the pastoral life he was denied. "I paid an awful price," he says. But he found other ways to serve the church. Working multiple jobs to support himself—as a temp, a typist, a bookkeeper and a waiter—he fashioned an informal, unpaid ministry to gay youth, gay seminarians, and clergy seeking to help gay parishioners, many of whom feared they had no place in the church or in the world. In 1972 he founded the UCC Gay Caucus, began to edit its newsletter, and co-authored *Loving Women/Loving Men: Gay Liberation in the Church*. He became widely known as an activist and speaker.

It was in this role that he met Vito Russo, a film historian and prominent gay-rights advocate in Manhattan. Russo became the love of his life. In 1977, Johnson moved to New York to live with him in Chelsea. Johnson joined Riverside Church and waited tables to pay his share of the rent. Russo wrote *The Celluloid Closet*, a landmark history of gay characters in cinema, published in 1981. In time their romance faded but they remained close friends, living in the same building, one floor apart.

The late 1970s was a boisterous, bracing time in gay New York. Johnson spent so much time dancing to loud music in clubs that he suffered significant hearing loss.

In quieter moments, he worked to start Maranatha, an LGBT group at Riverside Church. "Bill was a breath of fresh air and sunlight," says Nancy Chew, who worked with Johnson on Maranatha. "He stood up to the homophobes. He had the strength to change minds and hearts, person by person."

In June 1981, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control reported finding a cluster of *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia among five gay men in Los Angeles. It was another year before the CDC started using the term AIDS. By that time, the epidemic already was starting to devastate Bill Johnson's wide circle of friends.

"Three to four deaths per week. Six or seven new diagnoses. There was no treatment then," he recalls. Over time, Johnson cared for and ministered to 385 friends with the disease. "Friends," he says pointedly. "Not acquaintances." His best friend and roommate, Douglas Tuthill, died. Johnson attended, and often led, countless funerals, and wrote hundreds of eulogies.

In 1986, Jeffrey Sevick, Vito Russo's companion, died of AIDS. In his memory, Vito made a panel for the AIDS quilt—one of four panels whose creation was chronicled in the film *Common Threads*, which won an Academy Award in 1989 for best documentary. By that time, Vito him-

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self was dying. He and Johnson had an arrangement. "If Vito needed something during the night, and couldn't get to his desk to call, he would bang on the steam pipe next to his bed to summon me."

Vito's death, among so many other deaths, nearly broke Bill. "I was exhausted," he says. "When do I get to mourn? When do I grieve?"

Around this time, a friend from Elmhurst College, Tom Mattern '68, asked Bill to travel to Denver to officiate at his wedding. Afterwards, Tom and his bride insisted that Johnson stay for a while in Colorado's clear air and bright sunshine. The new locale—along with evolving attitudes within the United Church of Christ—enabled Johnson to envision a new future for himself. He would try to continue his ministry inside the church. The General Synod had passed a resolution encouraging all UCC churches to become "open and affirming" to gay parishioners. When the church decided to hire a part-time consultant for its AIDS ministry, Johnson told officials, "I'm your man."

Two years later, Bill Johnson was called full time to the national staff of the United Church of Christ. He had been an ordained minister for 18 years.

These days, warm hugs and kind greetings envelop Johnson when he steps into the UCC's headquarters in Cleveland. Johnson works mostly from a home office, but he's tethered to the Council for Health and Human Services Ministries at the downtown office on Prospect Avenue.

The UCC operation includes Pilgrim Press—founded in 1640, the oldest publishing house in the United States—and the church's abundant literature as well as print and electronic media are everywhere on display. Johnson's hand is evident in a number of significant works, including *Preach Out!*, a two-volume set of gay-affirming sermons by UCC pastors, and *Call Me Malcolm*, a feature-length documentary about a transgender seminarian. He is most proud of an AIDS prevention curriculum that he coauthored two decades ago; it was the first of its kind and remains in steady use.

Johnson also spends a lot of time serving as a mentor to the church's openly gay seminarians, a role he has filled for decades now. William D. Ingraham was among Johnson's protégés. Two decades ago in Kansas City, Ingraham was openly gay and studying to become a Methodist minister. The church was willing to ordain him only as a celibate. "I saw it as a test of faith," Ingraham recalls. "If God made me gay, and God made me a minister, God could accept me as a gay minister." Friends led Ingraham to the UCC, and from there to Johnson, who flew to Kansas City to meet with him. Today, Ingraham is a 47-year-old openly gay pastor serving his third UCC parish, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Johnson, he says, "made me brave enough to make this move, to take a risk as a person of faith, to step out on a limb."

The limb is not as lonesome as it used to be. The UCC now has openly

gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender clergy working in parishes across the nation and in ministries overseas. The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have opened their own ministries to gay and lesbian persons. In July 2005, the 25th General Synod of the UCC took another historic risk of its own, voting to "affirm equal marriage rites for couples regardless of gender."

Johnson's role as a UCC pioneer was formally acknowledged in 1999, when the United Church Board Homeland Ministries established the William R. Johnson Scholarship with an initial investment of \$500,000. The scholarship supports the studies of openly LGBT seminarians who plan to become parish ministers. About 90 seminarians have received Johnson Scholarships. For them, "the path is easier," Johnson says quietly. "Their vocational dreams seem possible."

At 63, Johnson is a big man with a soft shape, like a giant Teddy bear. Quick witted, he still speaks with a slight twang that marks his Texas roots. He has the smooth skin of a man who avoids the sun and eyes so bright a blue you can spot them from across a room. He has a gentle, fun-loving manner and fierce convictions. At any given moment, you might find him crooning Sixties Motown or pondering the meaning of grace.

He lives in a tidy Arts and Crafts two-flat in a historic district of Cleveland. Leafy and suburban on the outside, it's a riot of color on the inside, with a coal blue study and a guest room lacquered in Chinese red. He frets that he's put too much money into the place, and pines for what he most wants and doesn't have, a partner to share his home and his life.

At 99, his mother, Minnie, a widow since 1968, still lives in the Houston house where she raised her three children. "When are you coming home?" she asks Bill. "Home is wherever I am," he answers kindly.

He wrote the charter for his parish, Liberation United Church of Christ in Lakewood, Ohio. He's raising money for a new sanctuary and sings in the choir.

He will speak to groups when asked, but prefers not to preach.

He thinks the fight for gay rights is nearly over—the next generation, he believes, will not allow their gay friends, neighbors and siblings to be treated less than equally. But he worries that gay men still seem to hide themselves on college campuses. Women, he says, are more comfortable with homosexuality.

Today, when prospective applicants call the number for information on the William R. Johnson Scholarship, some are shocked when William R. Johnson himself answers the phone. They'd assumed he was dead. After all, Bill Johnson is not just a name on a scholarship. He's a figure in history.

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