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
n 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 2020, 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: 

"The point of the job was to give students a first-hand look at how the 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. 

"It takes an enormous emotional toll to present a self that is not authentic," says Rogers, now 74. "Bill was like the United Church of Christ. It was a historic breakthrough, marked by 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. "It wasn't 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 youth leader in the church."

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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 he found his sexual orientation. Gay students at Elmhurst 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 his families, who had taken him in on weekends and over holidays? "I was in agony," Johnson recalls. 

As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils… When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry and you will stand before governors and kings because of me… I'm gay," he said. 

"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 youth leader in the church." Johnson kept his cool. In the end, the association voted in his favor. "I'm gay," he said. 

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early 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 have very little in common with ‘ordained,’” he says. But he found other ways to serve the church. Working multiple jobs to support himself—as a temp, 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 1971 he co-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. In quieter moments, he worked to start Maranatha, an LGBT group at Riverside Church. “Bill was a breath of fresh air and sunlight,” says Tom Mattern ’68, a friend from Elmhurst College. “He had the strength to change minds and hearts, person to person.”

Johnson spent so much time dancing to loud music in clubs that he suffered significant hearing loss. In 1981, he suffered another blow—Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia among five gay men in Los Angeles. It was another year before the UCC started using the term AIDS. By that time, the epidemic already was starting to devastate Bill Johnson’s wide circle of friends. “There 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 35 friends with the disease. “Friends,” he says pointedly “Not acquaintances.” His best friend and roommate, Douglas Tathill, 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-