

Gay before ONA

The pilgrimage of an
early gay pastor

By Robert W. Wood

Editor's note: The article that follows came in response to an invitation to add to the experiences recorded in the commemorative book, UCC @ 50—our history, our future.

Should I proclaim my homosexuality and risk not being ordained?

What was the possibility of finding a church job when Senator Joseph McCarthy was outing “pinkos” and “homos”? Or should I keep silent until I have been ordained, found a church, and proven myself as a pastor/teacher?

I did the latter and was in ministry 35 continuous years during which I preached 1610 Bible-based sermons and shared three parsonages with my beloved spouse, Hugh Macmaster Coulter.

Magazine article provides exit from the closet

Two years on the staff at historic Broadway Tabernacle in Manhattan, and then called to my first parish. In 1956, my third year at First Congregational in Spring Valley, N.Y., I stepped out of the closet. Invited by the editors of a gay physique magazine, *Grecian Guild Pictorial*, I wrote “Spiritual Exercises” with my own name and title complete with photo. Letters arrived from men frustrated at having to hide their gayness in order to keep their Christian faith.

Motivated by these letters, I began to formulate a thesis that it's o.k. to be a gay Christian when church and society were saying just the opposite. In 1960, my hard-cover 221 page book, *Christ and the Homosexual*, was published with my real name plus photo on the dust jacket. I resolved the five negative Bible texts and listed some positive ones including John 10:P16 and Romans 8:39. In it I called for ordination and one-gender marriages.

I gave a copy to each member of my church council and experienced no negative reactions. The book received two awards of merit and favorable comments in all five national gay publications. It was also reviewed in *United Church Herald* (January 12, 1961), and *Sexology* magazine. *The Ladder*, a lesbian review, said in part: “Reverend Wood has gone all out—this is no timid venture....It is a definite step forward in America....”

Marriage vows, matching rings

Two years later I met Hugh. He was a lean 6'2" rodeo cowboy. Once we touched we never let go until death parted us. He left rodeo and worked full-time as an artist. We exchanged marriage vows and wore matching wedding rings. During the more than 11 years I was in Spring Valley, there was the Korean war, President Kennedy was assassinated, our senior highs collected for UNICEF at Halloween, and we expanded the church building to accommodate our growing Sunday school and congregation. Hugh shared his artistic skills, and members voted to become part of the UCC.

In 1965, I was invited by the search committee of Zion, a former "E" church in Newark, N.J., to meet with them. Hugh and I went together. For more than 13 years at Zion there was Vietnam, Watergate, the bi-centennial, and the fatal race riot of '67, the Stonewall riot in New York City in '69. Hugh and I organized and led three Bible Lands Tours. The first included the Rev. and Dr. Robert Moss, just a year before he became the UCC's second president. He was supportive of us as a gay couple. I was a delegate from the Central Atlantic Conference to General Synods 10 and 11, and served six years on the Homeland Board. I wrote for gay publications, spoke at Mattachine meetings, and with Hugh walked the picket line for gay rights. The dedication to Zion Church by its German members enabled us to continue in ministry during major sociological upheavals in Newark.

In 1978, at the age of 55, I began as pastor at Union Congregational UCC, in Maynard, Mass. Hugh participated in my installation. It was a dramatic change from Newark! Women could carry handbags and it was safe to be out after dark. My widowed mother moved into the split-level parsonage with us. When a parishioner asked if she was disappointed I had not given her a daughter-in-law, she replied, "but Bob gave me a fine son-in-law." She died at 96.

AIDS took three dear gay friends. One more Bible Lands Tour, but by then Hugh's health was failing. I served six years on the World Board. For 20 years I challenged UCC leaders to be in ministry with homosexuals. Hugh suffered two strokes and a broken hip. He and mother both needed my full attention. When I retired on April 30, 1986, Maynard's Board of Selectmen issued an official proclamation naming it "Reverend Robert W. Wood Day."

We didn't fit the Common stereotypes

How did we manage to survive in three parishes in the years before ONA? We chose not to "out" ourselves but to live our lives as a caring, loving couple and let parishioners and everyone else accept us as they found us. We didn't fit the stereotypes folks had of queers in those days. My being a wounded and decorated combat veteran of World War II, and Hugh having served in the U.S. Airforce, worked to our advantage. Those on the Bible Lands Tours were among our strongest supporters. Hugh's participation in the life of each parish was a plus. Mother's unassuming support was helpful.

Perhaps the major reason was verbalized when my biographer asked former parishioners why they accepted us as a homosexual couple. They replied, "Bob was a good pastor." Thus a combination of factors, including our affirmation of Isaiah 12:2—plus some luck. There was always the possibility of a backlash at any time, and we never felt 100 percent secure. But none ever came.

The risks to career and bodily harm were rewarded when a gentleman in 2005 said to me, “You saved my life.” He couldn’t cope with being gay and seriously considered suicide until he read *Christ and the Homosexual*.

The ring Hugh put on my finger in 1962 is still there. I have been a gay widower since January 3, 1989 when Hugh died at the young age of 69. One day we will be reunited in God’s eternal kingdom—and every church will be ONA.

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