

# Faith-based equality

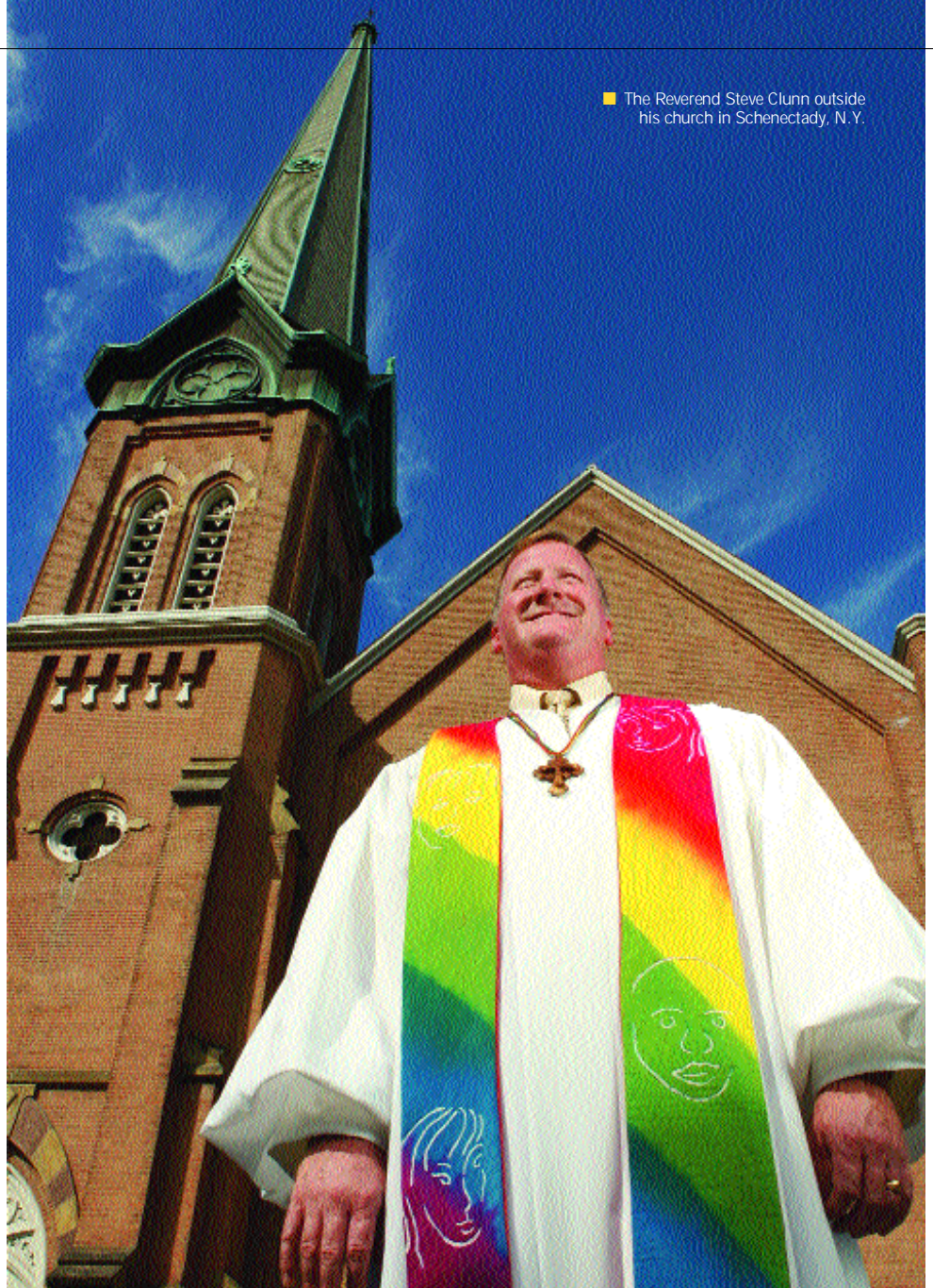
What would Jesus do, indeed. Hundreds of straight religious leaders are coming out in support of gay men and lesbians—both in speaking to their congregations and lobbying lawmakers  
By Sarah Wildman

In November 1980, Steve Clunn was a 19-year-old with two dreams: become a minister and see Ronald Reagan get elected president. He remembers thinking that the 40th president was just the conservative force needed in the United States to “keep the queers out of the classroom.”

A quarter century later, Clunn has come full circle. He is pastor at First United Methodist Church in Schenectady, N.Y., and one of the state’s most outspoken supporters of gay and lesbian rights.

“I understand the pull of being raised homophobic, because I was,” says Clunn. “I went from a place of ignorance and fear to a place of understanding because people had the courage to talk to me. I don’t know if they saw something redemptive in me.”

As the antigay right continues to use religious rhetoric as a political tool to stall equality, Clunn and hundreds of other straight religious leaders are speaking up for LGBT Americans. More than 450 religious leaders participate in the Pride in the Pulpit program run by New York gay equality group Empire State Pride Agenda. The Washington, D.C.-based National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has run a re-



■ The Reverend Steve Clunn outside his church in Schenectady, N.Y.

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ligious roundtable with primarily LGBT clergy members from inclusive congregations of all faiths since 1998, and during the past year and a half that project has turned increasingly toward national advocacy work. Also in D.C., the Human Rights Campaign announced in June the launch of its nationwide Religion and Faith Program.

Meanwhile, activists in 25 other states have called on religious leaders to fight against statewide campaigns that seek to deny marriage rights to gay couples.

These projects are not simply a response to last year’s election—most began before—but they have increased in urgency as a result of the aggressive use of reli- ►

gious rhetoric by those who advanced homophobic amendments and legislation.

"If it's just LGBT people talking and organizing, then we lose," says Alan Van Capelle, executive director of Empire State Pride Agenda. "The most important thing we could do was find nontraditional allies to organize around our issues."

The religious leaders in the program reject the use of religious rhetoric toward homophobic ends, the biblical literalism of certain antigay religious leaders, and the idea that being gay is a sin. They are challenging the efforts to paint people and politicians who speak for LGBT rights as somehow ungodly, and they are taking pains to show the face of a very different religious world, one in which we are all, to paraphrase these clergymen and women, God's children.

Clunn was pleased to be approached by Pride in the Pulpit. There is a sense of relief both on the part of the clergy members who have long desired to have a say in the use of religious rhetoric and a chance to reject the homophobia used in the name of religion and on the part of LGBT activists.

Clunn's changed views regarding gay men and lesbians came when he entered the seminary in 1985. He saw gay friends who were active in the church but forced to stay in the closet. It enraged him. Clunn ended up leading a group of students working to change the doctrines of the United Methodist Church.

Today, he pastors at a "reconciling" congregation—one that consciously appeals to LGBT parishioners. It is akin to "reconciling" congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and "welcoming" Presbyterian churches affiliated with that denomination's More Light movement.

Having such religious leaders speak out in support of gay men and lesbians is crucial in the current political climate, says Pride Agenda's Van Capelle. For example, if an antigay state lawmaker "gathers religious leaders to denounce homosexuality and gay marriage...we now have our rapid response team from within the Pride in the Pulpit team that is able to stand as religious leaders and say, 'No, there are many religious leaders in New York that are against discrimination, including discrimination against gays and lesbians.'"

NGLTF's roundtable and HRC's Religion and Faith Program try to do this on a national level.

"Some try to make the claim that LGBT equality is not related to civil rights. I think that's bogus," says the Reverend Cedric A. Harmon, a Baptist minister and member of the NGLTF roundtable who describes himself as a "same-gender-loving" man.

Harmon adds, "Liberation is for all, and as long as one person is not free, all of us are still in bondage. The roundtable is uniquely positioned and doing a good job of getting more religious voices out there so LGBT persons and persons of faith can communicate with each other in ways that have not happened in the past. We talk about what's going on nationally, and we find ways to respond to the religious right, who seem to have taken Christianity and religious thinking captive."

After the last roundtable in September 2004, a delegation of

## Faith and marriage in Maryland

Not all religious groups oppose legalizing marriage for same-sex couples, and gay rights activists in Maryland are out to prove it. They held a meeting of pro-gay religious leaders on August 10 to rally support for a lawsuit challenging the state's ban on same-sex marriage.

"The religious community does not speak with one voice on this issue, much to contrary belief," said Meredith Curtis, public education director for the American Civil Liberties Union in Maryland, which helped

organize the event with the gay rights group Equality Maryland.

About 50 clergy and laypeople attended the meeting, held at the Evangelical Reformed United Church of Christ in Frederick. Dan Furmansky, Equality Maryland's executive director, said similar events were planned for the Eastern Shore and southern Maryland to invite church leaders to join the fight. In February, 28 religious groups and 48 spiritual leaders from Maryland signed a document supporting same-sex marriage.

interdenominational clergy went to Capitol Hill to lobby legislators to oppose the antigay Federal Marriage Amendment. "Often they don't know that there are religious communities and religious leaders, pastors, and clergy who are supportive [of LGBT rights]," says Harmon.

There are hurdles to such programs, however. Progressives generally have an understandably great distaste for weakening the barriers between church and state.

"We have been very reluctant, I think, to talk about our individual faith journeys and what motivates many of us to be involved in the justice movement, because we didn't want to be disrespectful," says HRC's Religion and Faith Program director Harry Knox, an ordained Methodist minister from Georgia. "But what we have lost in that process has been important, and we need to recognize we have to reclaim it, which is the power of authenticity. What motivates us individually as advocates and activists? For many people, it is their faith."

HRC, NGLTF, and Freedom to Marry will hold a Washington, D.C., informational summit in September that will bring together leaders from the 25 states that have progressive clergy coalitions.

"What we are doing now is going to our colleagues around the country who have already been doing this work, like the LGBT affinity groups in various denominations," says Knox. "We are asking this question: What will the Religion and Faith Program look like if it is relevant to the communities you serve, enhancing of the work you are doing, without co-opting that work?"

Recently Clunn wrote a letter to his congregation in which he addressed the presence of God in all relationships, no matter what the couple's sexuality. "My marriage and family life and/or values aren't threatened in any way by two people of the same sex trying to live out what I've had the good fortune to find," he wrote. "Yes, I am personally in favor of marriage for same-sex couples, but it has so much more behind it than an extension of rights and privileges that I enjoy as a married person. I simply don't want anyone to be denied the ability to discover the same joy I've found in my marriage." ■

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