

Queer Fear: Ministry Made Strange by the Fear of the Sexual Other

Stephen V. Sprinkle

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before Him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and He knows everything.—1 John 3:18-20

When I dare to be powerful—to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.

—Audre Lorde¹

What effect does fear have upon ministerial formation? For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, folk who are queer and aspire to religious leadership, fear is unnecessary and unavoidable. No one seeking authorization to lead people spiritually should be subjected to fear and loathing to the degree that queer seminarians and clergy are. Such fear is hard to reconcile with the Christian message of hope and justice. Nonetheless, countless anecdotes and scores of studies confirm that fear is virtually universal at one point or another in the formation processes of LGBT

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religious leaders.² For hetero-normative North American society and the ecclesial communities that worship and work in it, fear of the sexual other has displaced all other pretenders to the title of “Most Extreme Xenophobia” of the twenty-first century. Homophobia is everywhere among North American churches. With pitifully few exceptions, the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* could list each denomination as intolerant of sexual difference, and for full disclosure under its clergy statistics should add the note, “LGBT candidates for ministry need not apply.”³

As a field educator, an ordained gay man who is now out, open, and life-partnered, I know first-hand from LGBT seminarians how pervasive anxiety is for students in formation for ministry. After being denied admission to the ordination process of a mainline denomination solely because of honesty about sexual orientation, one of my students came to my office and said, “No one could have told me how painful this is!” Fear of being defrocked and rendered unemployable causes clergy who are closeted to keep their heads down and their sexual identities sublimated or deeply hidden. They phone or come by school furtively, like Nicodemus undercover, seeking an ear and a kind word.

I know what such fear feels like, too. During my seminary career and for seventeen of thirty years of ordained ministry, I was locked away in a clergy closet. Throughout those years, I did good ministry. The four churches I pastored thrived and I received teaching awards from the liberal arts college where I worked to help pay the bills—but I was unbearably lonely. In order to follow my calling as a minister, I cut off any possibility of having the intimacy and companionship I needed. Why did I do it? For the same reasons untold thousands of men and women who are queer and long to serve the church do so: the stigmatizing churches they serve will retaliate against them if they do not make these inhuman choices. Closeted queer folk serve the church in every denomination and in every region of the country, but, as was true in my case, the cost is terrible both mentally and spiritually.

Clergy closets are no guarantee of security from attack either. Though I was closeted, my home was defaced by graffiti on two occasions; my car was vandalized; phone and cable service were ripped off the back of my parsonage; anonymous letters were mailed to church leaders about me; I received death threats; and my two pet dogs, my only companions, were slaughtered and hung up in a tree in my parsonage yard. I count myself,

however, as one of the lucky ones: I have never been physically assaulted, as so many LGBT people are. During the toughest days, I reached out to a fine Jewish psychiatrist at a university medical school who probably helped to save my life. After one of our sessions, he said to me, “Reverend Sprinkle, you are not paranoid—they really are out to get you. You don’t need a psychiatrist nearly as much as you need a good attorney. May I give you the number of mine? Learn how to fight back.”

This essay is an act of witness, resistance, and survival to the vitiating fear caused by homophobia as I and other queer folk live out our pastoral and sexual identities.⁴ The very act of breaking the silence about the deforming effects of homophobic fear on formation and ministerial practice is something of a small victory in itself. Besides my own testimony, I have included the voices of a broad spectrum of religious LGBT people in this article: racial/ethnic minorities, lesbians and gay men, Roman Catholics and Protestants, mainliners and evangelicals. Every queer person speaking out through this article spikes the rock of prejudice that attempts to stifle and imprison us, and everyone who takes the time to listen by that very act drives yet another liberating spike into the rock.

PERVERSE FASCINATION

Since the invention of homosexuals as a species by clinicians who had a perverse fascination with trying to cure us, the medico-scientific community reduced us to specimens with nothing interesting to contribute to their inquiries other than our oddness.⁵ Beginning with Carl Westphal’s imposition of pathology on our lives in 1870, queer folk have been endlessly subjected to dehumanization without allowing any of us to participate in the debate of which we were the contested issue.⁶ Though institutional religion continues stubbornly to refuse to include us in its discussions about the morality of our existence and our sexual practices, increasing numbers of LGBT clergy and seminarians are refusing to be invisible and silent in our ecclesial settings. We are consenting less-and-less to be self-denying, self-loathing, penitent, and celibate, regardless of consequences. As Audre Lorde declared in her famous address to the Second Sex Conference in 1979:

Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any

difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.⁷

The terror that Lorde speaks about is intimately known to us. Since it is entrenched in the ideologies of the churches to which we have dedicated our lives, it is particularly keen. Yet it is precisely because of the acuteness of the fear that homophobia causes LGBT people that our experiences, though particular to us, have something of value to offer to all clergy and seminarians. Because we are so often the targets of irrational rejection and injury, we queer clergy are the very people to bring the question of fear in ministerial formation to the table. We are the appropriate ones to lead out with the question of how deforming fear may be faced squarely and transformed into new erotic possibilities for the love of ministry and the desire for God.

MINISTRY IN A CULTURE OF FEAR

Formation for ministry is where two species of queer fear come together: one of them serious and one trivial. A serious fear is a survival response to real, possible, impending harm. For LGBT seminarians and clergy, fear of homophobic injuries is serious: the ecclesial, spiritual, professional, and financial risks are only one part of the story. As for all other LGBT people, clergy people face the prospect of shame, rejection, isolation, alienation, denial of shelter, public accommodation, equal protection under the law, legal redress, and adequate healthcare. Bodily harm is never out of the question either.

Trivial fear is a response to insubstantial or inconsequential danger. When church and society accuse LGBT people of endangering marriage, spreading disease, and preying on children, the fear factor over these untruths, distortions, and popular prejudices registers off the gauge in proportion to any sane account of actual peril. Homophobia is more than a set of irrational ideas—it is a nuclear breeder reactor for artificial terror in a post-9/11 world. The triviality of these fears by church people is tragic precisely because they fear their own daughters, sons, parishioners, priests, and ministers. Their perceptions of an impending “lavender menace” to marriage, doctrine, and children are false, but sadly, today’s perceptions have real effects. It appears that the lessons of the Inquisition, witch hunts,

the extermination of the First Nations, the Middle Passage, the Nazi holocaust, and the Red Scare were all lost on the contemporary church.

Peter Gomes, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church of Harvard University, sums up the disproportionate fear factor in our culture caused by homophobia in this way:

The contemporary fear gripping America appears to be a fear of the normalization of homosexuality. What a strange pathology this is—fear that the sexual identity and practices of a minority will somehow taint the identity and practices of the majority. Someone has said that the fear of homosexuals has replaced the fear of communism in American life, and as Americans always seem to need someone to fear, homosexuality is an ideal candidate for that role...This irrational fear of the sexual other is all the more dangerous because it conceals itself within the sanctions of religion. Homophobia is the most current example of how good people can end up doing and believing bad things.⁸

Gomes, an African American gay man and ordained Baptist minister, has first person experience of the effects of homophobia on his own ministry. In defense of LGBT students at Harvard, he spoke out publicly at a rally in Harvard Yard. During his speech, he revealed not only his homophile interpretation of scripture, but his sexual orientation as well. Of his speech, he wrote: "I gave my speech, and naïvely thought that my disclosure of my own homosexuality would serve to substantiate the Christian message of reconciliation in diversity and equality in Christ. I, however, rather than my message, became the subject of attention."⁹ Gomes immediately became the target of personal criticism in what he calls "the ensuing tempest":

Many of my critics, chiefly from within the religious community, asked if I read the same Bible they did, and if I did, how then could I possibly reconcile my position with that of scripture? When arguments failed, anathemas were hurled and damnations promised. The whole incident confirmed what had long been my suspicion. Fear was at the heart of homophobia, as it was at the heart of racism, and as with racism, religion—particularly the Protestant evangelical kind that had nourished me—was the moral fig leaf that covered naked prejudice.¹⁰

Roman Catholicism, too, with all the authority of the Vatican, breeds fear of homosexuality under the guise of superior morality. In 1986, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, issued *Homosexualitatis problema, Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, which sent shivers throughout the Roman Catholic clerical community.¹¹ Besides reiterating familiar anti-gay interpretations of scripture and adding to them the most

negative readings of Catholic tradition, the *Letter* ominously warns “homosexual activists” of violence to come. As Mark D. Jordan, Asa Griggs Candler Professor of Religion at Emory University, sees it, though the *Letter* ostensibly deplores gay bashing, it still conjures up the Inquisition and its dubious justification, “the church’s misreading of the story of Sodom”:

If the sodomites are not stopped, so the old harangue goes, they will bring on the destruction of any society that tolerates them. Sodomy will produce famines and plagues, floods and earthquakes, until God’s own wrath is moved against it in final conflagration. Sodomites are murderers and destroyers of humankind. If sodomy flourishes, “neither the Church nor society taken as a whole can have any cause to be surprised if other opinions and other aberrant ways of acting increase more and more and if irrational and violent ways gain strength” [quote from the *Letter*, no. 10]. If the *Letter*’s threat echoes very contemporary forms of hate speech, it also repeats some of the oldest church attacks on same-sex acts. Indeed, it replicates the distancing logic by which the church could hand over or “relax” sodomites to the secular arm for public execution.¹²

The practical implications of Ratzinger’s *Letter* are chilling: queer Catholics must never contradict the church’s official teaching; they must abstain from any homosexual activity, denying themselves the chance to act as full human beings; and they must renounce gay life or suffer the regrettable consequences.¹³ The *Letter* concludes by directing bishops to remove any support, material or spiritual, from ministries that serve lesbians and gays and all ministers who dissent from the church’s anti-homosexual teaching.¹⁴

The Vatican continues to reinforce the *Letter* by pointedly ordering bishops in the United States to oppose any nondiscrimination legislation with the full force of their office. The implications of this directive, *Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons* (1992), are brutally clear: “As a rule, the majority of homosexually-oriented persons who seek to lead chaste lives do not want or see no reason for their sexual orientation to become public knowledge. Hence the problem of discrimination...does not arise” (no. 14).¹⁵

In plain English, Jordan spells out what this actually means—that there are really no “good” homosexuals in the church, if by “good” we mean those who seek to experience the humanity God gave them. Any

“good” Catholic who is homosexual will be so discreet and closeted that no one will even suspect that he or she is homosexual. On the other hand, any Catholic who is out of the closet, by definition, is likely to be disobedient, willful, and an agitator. Discrimination against such people by the civil state is justifiable and obedient Catholics should support it.¹⁶

To bring home what church teaching by threat actually does to people in religious formation, consider the case of a gay man named Eric who entered a Trappist monastery, left, and before dying of AIDS some years later, requested that he be buried in the lay cemetery near the entrance to the abbey. The abbot consented. Father Matthew Kelty, OCSO, preached his funeral, pulling no punches about the culpability of the church in Eric’s death.¹⁷ Drawing parallels between discrimination against gays and ethnic/racial minorities in the Roman Catholic Church, Kelty identified Eric’s suffering with the sufferings of Christ:

Humankind is good at faith in a Savior. Someone to bear our burdens, suffer our pain, share our cross. We are always on the make for a Savior, an answer to our riddles...We need someone to pick on. To crucify. We need someone to hang from a tree, as was the custom just a few years ago. The custom has an Irish name: Lynch.

Do you know what it is like to be gay? Today? Yesterday? Do you know what it is like to have the finger on you, guilty and cursed? We go on making saviors of anyone who will bear it and on those who will not. It is my generation which will live forever with the Holocaust of the Jews. Not to mention Stalin and his kind. Have you ever lived in a small town and known the vicious human tongue?

...For the mystery is that when we do another to death one way or another, as we did Christ, the one we do to death becomes Christ. Christ dies in the black, the Hispanic, the poor, and the plague-ridden. This is the horror and the glory. You lay the whip on another’s back and then discover whose back you whip.

...Every once in a while the heavens open and we see the glory to come. Usually such moments come only at the price of enormous pain and sorrow. Like now.¹⁸

SLOW-ROLLING HOLOCAUST

The toll on LGBT lives exacted by homophobia is terrible to contemplate. There are still those in the psychological establishment who maintain that the fears and anxieties of queer folk are the consequences of exaggerated narcissism and such reductionism is an insidious act of violence in itself. If anyone ever wonders whether fear among LGBT people is unfounded, all one has to do is read. The statistics bear out that threats to anyone perceived to be a member of the sexual minority are all too real.

For the LGBT population, suicides, deaths due to lack of sex education about sexually transmitted diseases, denial of adequate physical and mental healthcare, and hate crimes are alarmingly on the rise in the United States.¹⁹ The most recent Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) hate crimes statistics confirm that anti-LGB hate crimes incidents rose by 18% in 2006.²⁰ The evidence indicates, however, that the totals of hate crimes against queer folk are seriously undercounted. Anti-transgender crimes are still not reported in FBI statistics by law. Since sharing statistics with the FBI is voluntary and unfunded, over 4,300 of the 17,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States choose not to report their hate crime incidents. "Incidents" is a slippery, misleading term, as well. Multiple crimes may be committed and still reported as a single incident, undercounting the actual number of hate crimes in all categories.

Most striking, the 2006 FBI hate crimes statistics fail to list even a single murder of a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual person.²¹ Apparently, the murders of queer folk do not count to the FBI, no matter whether many women and men were brutally killed during 2006 for no reason other than their sexual orientation.²² News sources and the gay web logs indicate that the numbers of sexual-orientation hate murders in 2007 increased markedly.

The effect of these murders on LGBT seminarians and clergypersons mirror the impact upon the general LGBT population. Like the static pop and hiss of dust and scratches on an old vinyl disc as it spins, the consciousness of hate crime violence cannot be tuned out of 21st century queer experience. No region of the United States is exempt from these heinous crimes. They are perpetrated from the San Francisco Bay to Bangor, Maine; from the Four Corners Navajo country to Brooklyn and Queens; the suburbs of Chicago to Fort Campbell, Kentucky; from upstate South Carolina to northern Florida and throughout "Sweet Home" Alabama. Anti-queer hate

speech, much of it begotten by religious groups, spawns clusters of murders that send a chill throughout the LGBT population.²³ Community after community and church after church are touched by the horror of these killings, which tend to be the most violent of all hate crimes.²⁴ Because these crimes affect whole segments of the population, they are nothing less than acts of domestic terrorism. Whether seated in the classroom or working in the parish office, the icy thought is bound to shudder through the consciousness of each queer minister and seminarian: "Next time, that could be me!"

GET OUT AND STAY OUT!

Ministry by LGBT people is practiced AYOR—At Your Own Risk. The great majority of queer ministers, priests, and seminarians may never have to deal directly with violent crimes against their persons. The undeniable reality of so many sexual-orientation hate crimes every year, however, creates a climate of anxiety and fear that stunts the development of ministerial character.²⁵ Comstock's groundbreaking work on violence against lesbians and gay men reminds us that behind the brutality of hate crimes is a patriarchal religious establishment teaching that sexually-other persons deserve to die.²⁶ The corollary threat most LGBT religious people have to face, the one that makes the ecclesial closet seem so necessary, is the possibility of a social and professional death if we do keep our orientations hidden.

Sexism, racism, and homophobia construct the ecclesial closet. Like most other dead-end enclosures, it is a trap. Ordination is usually offered only to those who keep quiet about their queer sexual identities, and once ordained, keep any expression of gayness well hidden. While Suzanne Pharr, lesbian founder of the Women's Project in Little Rock, Arkansas, chose a secular career as an activist rather than an ecclesial one, her experience of the closet could be that of any lesbian or gay male aspiring to religious leadership:

To keep my identity safe meant that I had to be constantly vigilant and lie, primarily through omission, but sometimes through commission, virtually every minute of every day. I had to put one large part of myself in exile. The cost was enormous. I could not have authentic friendships because I could not talk about my life. My life could not be shared with my family which in turn necessitated superficial relationships. The stress of maintaining vigilance over the lies I had to create for safety made me never able to relax. Perhaps worst of all was the damage to my

sense of self, my sense of integrity. As a woman who had grown up deeply rooted in the church, albeit in tormented debate with it, and as a Southerner with deeply held and mostly unexamined values of courage and honesty, I had to view myself as a woman who lied because of fear.²⁷

The dishonesty that a stigmatizing church and society demand of LGBT people is a double bind of anxiety and shame. The context of fear mandates that candidates for ministry mask or deny their sexual orientation, treating the most intimate dimension of their lives as a dirty little secret. Once the secret is out, not only are we LGBT people disgraced for our sexuality, but we are also accused of lying to parishioners, judicatories, and colleagues, thereby marking ourselves as deceiving, unreliable people who are obviously ashamed of what we are and deserving of whatever punishment we get.

Horace L. Griffin, Pastoral Theologian and Director of Field Education at The General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church in New York City, speaks out of his gay African American perspective about the injustices gay ordinands face on a daily basis:

Men are especially despised, maligned, and attacked for expressing themselves sexually with other men. Black gay men in the church have been the target of this derision and live with the reality of scriptures, perspectives, and actions being directed against them and their love relationships. Black heterosexual Christians use scripture in their emphasis of heterosexuality as God's intention for all people. In their minds, no righteous person can be gay and Christian.²⁸

Griffin notes that black clergy and laity tend to be harsher in their opposition to black LGBT clergy than some of their white counterparts in mainline denominations. They ascribe to an ideology of "heterosexual supremacy" as well as homophobic fear.²⁹ This ironic attitude of bigotry among black clergy who have inherited a legacy of religious and social justice has encouraged routine dishonesty among black heterosexuals about how much discrimination and pain that they exercise against LGBT people.³⁰ The claim that there is either no homophobia in black churches, or that it is a "black thing" that others cannot understand, is simply false.³¹ There is no justifiable bigotry, even among minority groups.

This climate of hostility boxes black LGBT ordinands into what Griffin calls "the predicament of the closet": "Lesbians and gays in black churches are constantly weighing the odds, compromising their present reality, and working to convince themselves of the best decision with no good options.

This game of Russian roulette has placed us in black churches in a no-win situation."³² Closeted black lesbians and gay men in black churches, like other religious queer folk, make a bargain with the devil to stay under the radar of homophobia. They construct a series of "unfortunate survival strategies" that Griffin organizes into a typology describing the cost to the lives, souls, and integrity of black lesbians and gay men.

- **Type 1, Guilty Passing:** Homosexuals who feel that they are sinful and deserving of the rage and condemnation imposed on them by heterosexual church members; they may or may not participate in church actions that define homosexuality as immoral.
- **Type 2, Angry Passing:** Homosexuals who publicly deny or remain silent about their own homosexuality [emphasis his] and live (pass) as heterosexual by expressing rage and condemnation of homo-sexuality and/or lesbians.
- **Type 3, Silent Passing:** Homosexuals who publicly deny or remain silent about their sexual attraction to live (pass) as heterosexual.
- **Type 4, Opportunistic Passing:** Lesbians and gays who have accepted themselves but remain in the predicament of the closet, feeling they cannot "come out" and may or may not speak against the homophobia and heterosexual supremacy in black churches.³³

Griffin's "predicament of the closet" parallels Comstock's research into life in the ecclesial closet across all LGBT demographics. Queer folk who work for churches are damned if they do and damned if they don't. Three-quarters of gay, lesbian, and bisexual church employees, clergy and lay, are firmly closeted, compartmentalizing their lives and affections to the detriment of themselves and their ministries. Comstock could not be clearer about the cruel mercies of the closet for queer church workers: "Even though the large majority of gay clergy and lay employees are not out, significant percentages report having been verbally harassed in seminary, prevented from carrying out their liturgical duties in local churches, and discriminated against in all forms of employment within religious bodies. Many remain closeted to avoid punishment and termination but do not always escape such treatment."³⁴ The closet is little more than an upright coffin where the spirit of true Christian ministry is boxed away and smothered. It is a soundproof room where the music of Christian vocation dies.

The truth is that the culture of fear thrusts LGBT seminarians and clergy into a unique, empathic relationship with the cross and resurrection, Christianity's central symbols of personal and social transformation. Suffering and dying is no kind of a living, no matter what pious, armchair theologians may say from their secure and comfortable offices. Christ achieved Atonement—there is no need for another scapegoat. Nonetheless, life in an ecclesial closet is like decaying in the tomb. Proximity to deathlike loss is a miserable neighborhood in which to live, but it does put queer folk nearer to the hope of resurrection.

All that keeps LGBT people in the closet is fear. Overcoming that fear is the initial step in the process of reclaiming lives and ministries of integrity and freedom. As daunting as it may appear, coming out of fear and shame inwardly is the first gift of ministry queer Christians have to give the world as public theologians.

Just like the configuration of each person's closet, the process of coming out is unique.³⁵ It is shaped by each individual's psyche, age, and interactions with family, friends and employers, and by socio-cultural factors at work in contemporary history. For some, the process of coming out is rather linear, moving from stage to stage. For others, it is anything but linear, including some recognized stages of sexual identity development, skipping others, and encountering unique life experiences. Although, this doesn't mean that a linear process is preferred. LGBT people who undergo non-linear coming out processes are just as likely to be fulfilled human beings. The point is that there are a variety of styles and sequences of coming out that work, depending on the people involved.

There are, however, at least three commonly shared aspects of the coming out process. First, coming out often is told as a story. Coming out stories are staples of LGBT literature and generally share a common structure: awareness of difference, first sexual attractions and encounters, encountering obstacles, and claiming a place in society. Second—unlike awakening to sexism, racism, and anti-Semitism, which normally occurs in community with the help of family, mentors, and institutions such as schools, churches or synagogues—each LGBT person comes out alone—utterly. The point of this essay is that religious institutions are actually to blame for much of the isolation and alienation queer folk suffer. There is no help for a gay kid there. Even one's parents, normally the first persons to come to a child's aid, such as a racial or ethnic minority child facing dis-

crimination, are the very last people LGBT sons and daughters confide in for fear of rejection, loss of love, shelter, and financial support. Third, and related to the isolation LGBT youth and young adults feel as they come out, is the cold presence of fear that pervades a process that may last an entire lifetime. No matter how much fear is involved, if queer seminarians and clergy are to make a godly contribution to church and society, we need to come out and stay out—for as long as it takes.³⁶

RE-FORMING MINISTERIAL FORMATION

Being queer in religious leadership is not simply a personal matter—it is a systemic intervention, political, ecclesiastical, and theological. Imagine what the church would be like if the long, crooked arm of homophobia were broken and reset to assume the posture of benediction over all God's children. That is what is at stake in the struggle to re-form the preparation and practice of ministry.

Other professions have a good deal to teach churches about formation for leadership in a homophobic world. Elementary school teachers, therapists, social workers, physicians, and law enforcement officers all see the need to combat the irrationality of homophobia in order to fulfill their vocations.³⁷ Straight and queer people co-operate with each other in all these professions and have developed strategies that work. Social workers have gone so far as to declare their profession non-discriminatory toward people of minority sexual orientations.³⁸ While this declaration exists at this point as an aspiration, setting the goal of a homophobia-free profession would be a light-year leap for Christian clergy to make. Why must the clergy of the Church of Jesus Christ be the only modern body of helping professionals where LGBT people are not free to assist their straight colleagues for the betterment of their vocation?

Sexual orientation is not about what people may do with the seven orifices of their bodies, though it is certainly may include that. For the Christian, sexual orientation, heterosexual and homosexual alike, is about doing the work of ministry and loving God. Who better to bring forward new erotic possibilities for desiring God and ministering to the people than those who have been eroticized so utterly by church and culture? LGBT seminarians and clergy do not want to replace the outworn "Powers That Be" by exchanging places with our heterosexist oppressors. If anything, out

LGBT folk want to find a way to work together as honest partners with everyone, including homophobes (who think everyone should be straight) and heterosexists (who think everyone is straight), until we find ways to leave all our labels behind in service to the God, whose love outstrips all our categories and erotic patterns.³⁹

That is a vision worth risking for: the re-formation of ministry. As Audre Lorde has taught us, fear will not go away as LGBT people claim the courage to come out and face the risks of openness. Fearlessness may even be a bad idea in a church and world that are by turns either apathetic and hostile. To come out is not a passive exercise—it is a courageous battle using the bright weapons of peace. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people will still need to assert our identities in the face of all oppression, whether inside or outside of the church. To serve a higher vision is not to lose one's mind—it is instead learning how to fight with all the cunning and subtlety afforded queer Christians by One who fought to set people free with the grace of doves and the shrewdness of serpents.⁴⁰ It is to add to this peaceable armory the weapons that have sustained queer folk through countless persecutions and anathemas: humor, camp, parody, style, treasuring our bodies, and tenaciously loving one another against the odds.

Since LGBT people cannot avoid fear in the formation and practice of ministry, the fact of our fear must be reframed. Instead of being the enemy of queer ministers, fear must become our companion in the work of love.⁴¹ What is necessary, as Thomas Aquinas suggests, is the re-ordering of fear so that the vision of an inclusive ministry may be achieved.⁴²

Creatively putting fear in its place is what dozens of queer pastors and seminarians in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) have recently demonstrated. In order to protest the highly publicized defrocking of an openly partnered Lutheran pastor in Atlanta, Georgia, they outed themselves as non-celibate queers in an act of ecclesiastical disobedience. Surely, they knew that the church that dismissed one pastor could dismiss them all. The fact of their fear of retribution, however, became less important than their allegiance to a vision of ministry, which they had never actually experienced. These seminarians and pastors, all of them willing to own their queerness before the world, believed that ministry could be radically inclusive and justice-oriented. That is not the ministry of ELCA that we know today or have ever known. This public disobedience, however, challenged leaders throughout the church not to punish clergy in

active, same-sex partnerships—the leaders voted and established a first in the history of American Lutheran ministry.⁴³ The message to the church was an ambiguous one—the Atlanta pastor was not reinstated. Homophobic and heterosexist interpretations of scripture still compete with progressive interpretations in the ELCA. Yet the church punished none of the protestors, allowing sexually active lesbians and gay men in pastoral charges to continue their ministries. Once stretched so large, it is doubtful that the Lutheran ministry will ever shrink down to its former size again.

I am a queer practical theologian. I know first hand how crooked the long arm of homophobia can be. Since coming out, I have learned that openness has its costs, too. A surprise to me was that the fury of the church increased when I became partnered, probably because I was no longer only theoretically queer in the eyes of clergy colleagues. Open practice, even as mundane as living quietly with someone one loves, arouses the ire of an insecure, heterosexist church. I believe that queer fear in ministry is a failure of Christian theology. How could the Gospel of love and justice proclaimed by Jesus Christ get so twisted out of shape by those who profess to benefit from it? Christian theology, however, has at times shown itself to be adept at change, able to shift identities and adapt to new cultural challenges. It can even overcome past failures, given time and imagination. At its core is a God who refuses to be marginalized or written out of history. This odd God offers me hope about the future of church and ministry. So do the queer apostles of this odd God, whose mission is to celebrate their rightful place in ministry, bye and bye. That they and I may be afraid to break the silence and queering the church becomes less and less important, once we are actually in the swing of it. Christian theology and Christian ministry need a good queering, now more than ever. If the recalcitrance of the church makes enacting the vision of a fully inclusive ministry of women and men of all ethnic and racial extractions and sexual orientations seem like a fool's errand, then we must reorder our fears about that. We must not be afraid to fail any longer—we must instead be afraid not to try.

NOTES

1. Scripture quotation from *New Revised Standard Version Bible*. Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, Special Edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1997), 13. Lorde (1934–1992), a Black lesbian of West Indian descent, was a renowned poet and word-warrior against racism, sexism, and homophobia.

2. See Gary David Comstock, *Unrepentant, Self-Affirming, Practicing: Lesbian/Bisexual/Gay People within Organized Religion* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1996), where twenty-seven empirical studies are referenced, as well as ten "religion-related" studies. Also of note is his groundbreaking study, *Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

3. Published annually by Abingdon Press, considered the most reliable, up-to-date sourcebook for information on denominations in North America.

4. Claims about "LGBT community" are convenient heterosexist fictions and should be approached with suspicion. We are too various and too obstreperous to be herded into a single corral. Consequently, I make no claim to universal gay or queer experience in this essay. "We," "us," and "our" are used here with respect and acknowledgment that I do not speak with authority for all queers anymore than, say, Marshall Mathers (Eminem) speaks for all rappers.

5. See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 42–43. Note especially "Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species."

6. Westphal's article in *Archiv für Neurologie* medicalized and pathologized same-sex desire as a "contrary sexual sensibility." The sexual binary, homosexual versus heterosexual, was never neutral. See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 101.

7. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing Press, 1984), 113, emphasis hers.

8. Peter J. Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What's So Good About the Good News?* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 106.

9. Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 165.

10. *Ibid.*, 166.

11. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Homosexualitatis problema* [*Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, October 1, 1986]. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 79 (1987): 543–554. English translation in Jeffrey S. Siker, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 39–47.

12. Mark D. Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 38, emphasis his.

13. *Ibid.* Of special interest is paragraph No.11 of the *Letter*.

14. *Ibid.*, 39.

15. *Ibid.*, 41. As quoted in Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom*, 41. For the text of Considerations, see Jeannine Gramick and Robert Nugent, eds., *Voices of Hope: A Collection of Positive Catholic Writings on Gay and Lesbian Issues* (New York: Center for Homophobia Education, 1995), 229–233.

16. Ibid.
17. Kelty is an out gay priest and former Divine Word missionary living at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky. Until his recent retirement, he served as retreat chaplain.
18. Matthew Kelty, *My Song is of Mercy: Writings of Matthew Kelty, Monk of Gethsemani*, ed. Michael Downey (Kansas City, Kan.: Sheed and Ward, 1994), 137–138.
19. For LGBT youth in the fifteen- to twenty-four-age range, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that better than 1,400 suicides succeed annually, amounting to thirty percent of the total of all youth suicides in the United States. When the numbers of suicides among LGBT people older than twenty-four are added, along with those youth suicides reported as accidents, the numbers of queer suicide victims increases dramatically. See [Religioustolerance.org](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_suic.htm), "Suicides Among Gay and Lesbian Youth," http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_suic.htm (accessed December 2, 2007).
20. Michael J. Sniffen, "FBI Reports Show Anti-gay Hate Crimes Up 18% in 2006," in *Dallas Voice* 24, no. 27 (November 23, 2007): 18.
21. Jim Burroway, "Hate Crimes Statistics Released for 2006," November 19, 2007, <http://www.boxturtlebulletin.com/2007/11/19/1024> (retrieved December 2, 2007).
22. For example, in 2006, Michael J. Sandy, 28, Laquanda "Swoop" Johnson, 24, and John Canora, 57, were murdered because of their sexual orientation. The FBI in their latest figures did not report these murders and many others as hate crimes.
23. See Michael Cobb, *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
24. See Jim Burroway, "Crimes Based on Sexual Orientation Most Violent," November 19, 2007, <http://www.boxturtlebulletin.com/2007/11/19/1026> (retrieved December 2, 2007). Burroway writes, "Out of all the major categories, hate crime incidents motivated by sexual orientation are more likely to be crimes against persons (i.e. violent crimes) as opposed to crimes against property (robbery, vandalism, etc.). Only Ethnicity come close, and that is largely due to the recent surge in anti-Hispanic hate crimes for 2006."
25. For a discussion of ministerial character, see the pertinent section in my book, Stephen V. Sprinkle, *Ordination: Celebrating the Gift of Ministry* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2004), 101–137.
26. Comstock, *Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men*, 130–133.
27. Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, expanded edition (Berkeley, Calif.: Chardon Press, 1997), xiii–xiv.
28. Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians & Gays in Black Churches* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 111.
29. Ibid, 123, 127.
30. Ibid, 127.
31. Ibid, 139.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid, 139-140. Griffin notes that Type 4 lesbians and gays exhibit the most inner conflict since they have matured to the point of enough ego-strength to accept themselves sexually, but feel for a variety of reasons that they must remain affiliated with homophobic churches. Ibid, 140, no. 50. "Passing" is queer argot for pretending to be heterosexual.

34. Comstock, *Unrepentant, Self-Affirming, Practicing*, 165.

35. Vivienne Cass, an Australian psychologist, devised the first pattern of sexual identity development for homosexuals. Being the earliest model, Cass's work took hold in the therapeutic community and continues to enjoy wide use by clinicians. The Cass model consists of six linear stages: (1) identity awareness, (2) identity comparison, (3) identity tolerance, (4) identity acceptance, (5) identity pride, and (6) identity synthesis. See Vivienne Cass, "Homosexual Identity Formation: A Theoretical Model," *Journal of Homosexuality* 4 (1979): 219-235. The Cass model has been criticized by other researchers who see her stages as too rigid, lacking in appreciation for socio-cultural factors in identity development, and anachronistic given newer, more fluid understandings of queer identity. Eli Coleman focused more on the behavioral aspects of homosexual identity development. His five-stage model includes: (1) pre-coming out, (2) coming out, (3) exploration, (4) first relationships, and (5) integration. See Eli Coleman, "Developmental Stages of the Coming Out Process," *Journal of Homosexuality* 7 (1981): 31-43. R. R. Troiden constructed a four-part model of interlocking stages, which unlike Cass's and Coleman's took into account age-specificity: (1) sensitization beginning before puberty, (2) identity confusion during adolescence, (3) identity assumption first coming out in homosexual community and then, if at all, in heterosexual community, and (4) commitment in which the individual embraces a homosexual lifestyle. See Troiden, "The Formation of Homosexual Identities," *Journal of Homosexuality* 17 (1989): 43-73.

36. I am well aware that in the closet and out of the closet is a binary with negative aspects for LGBT people as well as the positive ones. Judith Butler adeptly makes this point, arguing that the discourse of coming out has largely outlived its purpose, and that the logic of coming out is circular. The subject of coming out is still under subjection, so is someone who is out free? Is this not the exchange or concealment of one closet for another? Yet even Butler assents to a sort of "out" homosexual identity in solidarity with others in order to rally political support for oppressed people. Even if the rhetoric of inside/out is a category error, the practice of out seminarians and clergy suggests that it is a salutary error, one at this stage of queer theology that we cannot do with (out). See Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Subordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diane Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 13-31.

37. See "Working in Professional Training Programs," in *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies That Work*, ed. James T. Sears and Walter L. Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 247-338.

38. Elizabeth P. Cramer, "Strategies for Reducing Social Work Students' Homophobia," in Sears and Williams, *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia*, 288.

39. See Mark D. Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church: Scandal, Flesh, and Christian Speech* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 68-78. Jordan's vision is breathtaking.

40. Matthew 10:16.

41. Craig O'Neill and Kathleen Ritter, *Coming Out Within: Stages of Spiritual Awakening for Lesbians and Gay Men* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 216–218.

42. *Ibid.*, 56–59.

43. See Susan Hogan-Albach, "Gay Lutheran Clergy Come Out of the Closet," *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 8, 2007, http://www.suntimes.com/lifestyles/religion/501201_CST-NWS-lutheran08.article (accessed August 13, 2007), and "Lutherans to Allow Pastors in Gay Relationships," *Reuters*, August 11, 2007, at http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20070811/us_nm/religion_lutherans_dc (accessed August 14, 2007).

Years ago a traveler reached a wide river that appeared to be frozen. He wanted to cross over before nightfall, but he was not sure if the ice would hold his weight. So he got down on his hands and knees and began to creep to the other side. Then he heard the sound of a horse and wagon being driven speedily across the ice. The driver knew something the creeper did not.

People of faith know something that others do not know. We know that God goes before us, with us, and behind us wherever we venture in God's name. So no matter what, we do not have to creep through life. We can be confident drivers, who face even fearful situations and prospects with courage.

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