



Bishop's Liaison to the Gay and Lesbian Community in Los Angeles (1992-2001): A Memoir

Jim White asked if I would be willing to write down some of my memories of the beginnings of Los Angeles Diocesan LGBT Ministry with my appointment in 1992 as the Bishop's Liaison and the forming of the Task Force for Gay and Lesbian Ministry (precursor to the Bishop's Commission for Gay and Lesbian Ministry.)

It was an exciting time, as the church wrestled with full inclusion of gays and lesbians and the blessing of same-sex couples. Much has changed. However, I still encounter many gay folk who are still very wounded by the church and have no desire to return. While those who have found their way into inclusive faith communities, there is still work ahead of not only caring for those within the walls of the church but those outside who still carry the wounds of the past.

I have no doubt that corrections need to be made to dates, times, and people. I hope this will be the beginning of soliciting the memories/stories from the others who were there at the beginning as well.

The Rev. William McCord "Mac" Thigpen III

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Early in 1992, a few members of Integrity Southland led by Larkette Lein met with Bishop Fred Borsch to request that an official diocesan representative to the Gay and Lesbian Community in Los Angeles be appointed. The request grew out of a desire to integrate the work of gay and lesbian ministry into the diocesan life of the Episcopal Church in Los Angeles.

Integrity had been doing its own ministry to say "God Welcomes You" and offer hope and healing to the gay and lesbian community¹ but there was sense of limitation in its inability to have the authority of the diocese with the directive of the Bishop to organize diocesan ministry and local parish ministry as well to the gay and lesbian community in Los Angeles, to educate, encourage, and change hearts and minds within and with out the church; and reach out to the gay and lesbian community with God's Good News of hope and healing.

In February of 1992, Bishop Borsch appointed the rector of Trinity parish, Los Angeles, the Rev. William ("Mac") M. Thigpen to be his official liaison with the gay and lesbian community in the diocese of Los Angeles, the first official diocesan representative to the gay and lesbian community.

Bishop Borsch sent me the following letter:

¹ "Gay and Lesbian Community" was the term used at that time to describe what would become LGBT+.

February 18, 1992

Dear Mac:

Thank you for our good conversation of earlier this week and your willingness to serve as my Liaison to the Gay and Lesbian Community. With this letter I appoint you to that ministry for whatever period it seems good to me and to you that you serve in it.

It will be without remuneration but I will make available to you an expense and discretionary fund of \$1,000 annually for attending events in connection with this work and other expenses.

There was already a group of folks primarily from Integrity ready to organize.

On June 23, 1991, I walked in my first Gay and Lesbian Pride Celebration. The previous year, I had accepted the call to serve as Rector of Trinity, Los Angeles; and was open about being gay in the interview process with the search committee and the vestry. Wearing my clergy shirt and collar, I walked in the 1991 Pride Parade with eleven members of Integrity and the Bishop's Commission on AIDS because I could.

Randy Kimmler for several years had hosted a Eucharist and brunch at his apartment in West Hollywood. I arrived in time to eat a bagel and to walk in the Parade that year. There were many who attended the Eucharist and brunch but did not walk in the parade. We were a small group of eleven with homemade signs "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You." Following the parade, we began to talk about how we might better organize in such a way to bring in more people and make a stronger statement to the crowd attending the third largest parade in Southern California, over three hundred thousand people lining the parade route.

A group of committed Episcopalians began to meet, strategize, and plan for the future. Those included were Jim White, Randy Kimmler, Larkette Lein, Skip Cole, Steven Price, Tad Webster, and many others. Initially, three parishes were the primary investors in time and energy: All Saints – Beverly Hills, All Saints – Pasadena, and Trinity – Melrose.

In preparation for Christopher Street West Parade and Festival 1992, the task force began to solicit parishes to be included in a brochure that would list parishes in the Diocese who considered themselves welcoming to the LGBT community. The "pink" Welcome Brochure included a brief introduction to the Episcopal Church, statements from the General Convention of the Episcopal Church on its position of support for the LGBT community, and a list of welcoming parishes in the diocese. The truth was there were places that were not welcoming to people who were gay or lesbian and we wanted to be able to give out information that would be honest and helpful to the LGBT community.

We started with around thirty-six parishes listed, many of the ninety-eight parishes in the diocese were hesitant to be included. We also asked for a parish representative to be named from each parish. This would give us a liaison to each parish to help with communication and education within each parish, to recruit parade participants and festival volunteers.

For 1992, we would march as a Diocese in the parade and we would have a booth at the festival. We made signs that listed each “welcoming parish,” plain white signs, all the same size, black lettering with the name of parish and its community, i.e. St. Mary’s Palms. We decided to ask everyone who was walking to purchase a designed t-shirt for the event that we might all be seen as one. Randy Kimmler designed the first t-shirt with St. George slaying the dragon on a pink triangle and “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You.”

We began the morning of the parade with a street Eucharist on Crescent Heights Boulevard out in front of Randy Kimmler’s apartment. It provided a convenient staging ground. We put up a simple table on the street as our altar. We gathered in a circle. I was the celebrant and preacher that morning. Bishop Chet Talton joined us for the parade, after his morning visitation.

Bishop Talton rode in the parade along with Larkette Lein as convener of Integrity. The Rev. Malcolm Boyd and Jack Plimpton rode in a second convertible. There was a cross with incense leading the contingent, followed by bagpipers, banner, and rainbow and Episcopal flags. We had approximately 200 people march.

For the festival, Randy Kimmler designed the booth with the Episcopal Shield and banners decorating a counter where we handed out brochures (and coffee) and talked with festival attendees.

For the 1993 “A Family of Pride” parade and festival, we began early advertising and continuing to invite and encourage rectors and parishes to sign on the welcoming brochure, to publicly advertise their parish as welcoming to gays and lesbians. Randy Kimmler edited several “Triangle Times” newsletters with news briefs and information on planning for parish’s participation. Money was tight. I put out a request to clergy who might help with gifts from their parishes. Several rectors made contributions.

The committee decided to host an Afternoon Tea at the Trinity Melrose rectory with William Countryman as honored guest. A suggested donation of \$20 was asked. It was a successful, fun event that continued to be held annually. By June 1993, in the “Triangle Times” it was announced that we had fifty-five parishes listed as welcoming in the pink brochure.

I was celebrant and M.R. Ritley was the preacher for the 1993 street eucharist on Crescent Heights Boulevard. 250 Episcopalians were in attendance for the Eucharist. 350 participants marched in the parade. Bishop Talton again rode in the parade along with Alison Arnglim, actor, Nellie from Little House on the Prairie. The Diocese was awarded the parade’s \$750 grand marshal’s award as the day’s second largest participating group – out-numbered only by the AIDS Project Los Angeles contingent.

Much of our activity as a task force was focused on the Christopher Street West Parade and Festival. With over three hundred thousand viewers, we had the opportunity to make an important impact to a community of people who with good reason felt isolated from the church

and from God. Many who had to flee the church simply to become healthy. But we felt that the Episcopal Church had a message of welcome, healing, hope, and reconciliation that was honest and empowering.

By our presence we could say there is a different message that welcomes you – whoever you, wherever you are on our journey we welcome you. You are a blessed child of God. Come and see. It was an important witness for the church to be there, especially for our witness to the gay and lesbian community. We had a great opportunity to say something different than the fundamentalists.

The crowds were overwhelmingly supportive; many surprised as they saw clergy and bishop and connected our contingent with the “church”, with God.

We were doing important work with the parishes by asking them to take a look at where they stood as a parish with their welcome of the LGBT community. What does it mean? Who are we are? Who will be? Important education and formation took place in the hearts and minds of parishioners.

CSW was a large event to build on our work and continue to reach out to the LGBT community with the message of “welcome.” We also supported other Pride celebrations around the diocese, providing resources, brochures, signage, banners, flags, etc.

Each year, we had a booth at the Diocesan Convention to celebrate and inform the diocese of the work we were doing. Videos of our participation at the parade were made each year and shared.

In 1994, Bishop Talton was celebrant and preacher at the street Eucharist before the parade. The Diocese won the Stonewall award for its 1994 participation.

In 1995, I was celebrant and preacher for the street Eucharist. Bishop Borsch rode in the parade. I rode with him.

In 1996, Bishop Oliver Garver rode in the parade, one of his last public appearances before his death. The Reverend Carmen Guerra was the celebrant for the street Eucharist. The Malcolm Boyd was preacher and Malcolm also rode in another convertible.

In 1997, Bishop Talton was celebrant and the Rev. Ed Bacon was preacher for the street Eucharist.

In 1998, Bishop Anderson was celebrant and preacher for the street Eucharist

In 2001, Bishop Jon Bruno rode in the parade with his wife, Mary.

From the beginning as the Bishop's Liaison, I attended events in Los Angeles for the LGBT community and national events around the country: HRC dinner, fundraisers for the Gay and Lesbian Community Center, March on Washington, and Co-chaired the 1994 NEAC conference in Santa Monica.

In a time when much of the church rejected inclusion of LGBT members in their parishes/congregations, it was important that the Episcopal Church be as visible as it could be to the community. I wore my collar to events and joined on the dance floor. I was invited to be a columnist in OUT magazine, a local LGBT magazine. The column was called "OUT in Spirit." There were three of us who wrote a weekly column: Rabbi Denise Eger, The Rev. Peter ??? (RC Liaison), and myself.

I do not remember the year but eventually the task force became a Bishop's Commission which regularized us into the budget and agenda of the Diocese.

As the Bishop's Liaison, I was invited to open the Board of Supervisors for the County of Los Angeles on March 22, 1994 by pronouncing the invocation. This was the prayer I offered on the occasion:

God of hope and God of mercy,
you are a God who knows us well,
our joys and our sorrows,
our successes and our failures,
our peace and our turmoil.
Look with mercy on this community,
we have suffered much
- riots, fires, floods, violence, AIDS, earthquakes,
the very ground we live on groans for peace.

We struggle to make sense of our lives individually;
we struggle to make sense of our lives together.

A few days ago, I buried another young man,
- dead from AIDS – another young gifted life lost.
Week-after-week, a mother brings to me her seven year old daughter
living with AIDS
and asks for a blessing.
Have mercy, O God, on those who suffer from any grief or trouble.
Help us, O God, to know how to care for those in need around us
especially like those living with AIDS
and those who our society deems as unimportant – as "throw-a-ways."

As a gay man, O God, I know the pain of not fitting in,
I know the pain and shame

caused by hatred, prejudice, and rejection,
the hurt runs deep,
into the very depths of our being,
when we are told that we cannot be considered for a job,
for housing,
for advancement;
when our partners, our family, are not recognized as family,
because we are gay,
because we are simply who we are.

But I also know the healing that comes from the strength of your love and
from the care and acceptance
of those who seek to include
rather than exclude,
of those who use compassion and understanding
rather than fear and ignorance,
of those who seek to bind together
rather than look for ways to tear apart.

Your child, Jesus, came among us as outcast, illegitimate, exiled. Through him you touched
lepers and bleeding women, ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, healed the tormented,
taught the hopeless, welcomed North and South, East and West into your loving embrace.
Help us to not organize the world only for our convenience,
help us to not lord it over the have-nots,
help us to not reject the defective and the different as unclean.

Creator of all,
you have given us wonderful gifts,
the earth, the sky, and the sea,
you have given us our bodies, an incredible and mysterious gift,
you have given us one another to love and care for,
you have given us our children to teach and nurture,
you have given us this community that we might grow and flourish.
These are indeed wonderful and mysterious gifts, O God,
help us to use them wisely.

You are a God who calls us, invites us,
to a new place,
to a place where we live in genuine community
with one another,
living our lives with honesty, compassion and justice.
Give us the wisdom, courage, and strength
to be this kind community in the County of Los Angeles.
Amen.