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**An  
Oral History Interview  
with  
Rev. John Warfel  
1998**

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**Rev. John Warfel in the courtyard  
of  
Christ Church Episcopal  
March 11, 1998**

**[McBride photo]**



# **Las Vegas Gay Archives**

## **Oral History Project Interview**

### **with**

**Rev. John Warfel**

**conducted by**  
**Dennis McBride**  
**March 11, 1998**

*This is Dennis McBride, today is Wednesday, March 11, 1998 and I'm talking with John Warfel at Christ Church Episcopal who's going to be leaving Las Vegas permanently March 16, so I'm very grateful that he made some time for me today.*

*We're going to be talking about Christ Church, about Dignity<sup>1</sup> and their experience here, and about Mr. Warfel himself. I'd like to know quickly about your background: where you were born, when you were born, and where you were educated.*

*I was born in 1958 in Maryland, grew up in Maryland. I had an interesting adolescence because I moved to England with my first lover when I was 16. My*



parents let me go. Then, it seemed very natural. But now I realize they really trusted me. Went to college at Georgetown University. Worked for MCI, the phone company, for 10 years. Always had a sense of [a] call to priesthood, but I wanted to make money and being gay was the excuse I used for not responding to the call because I wouldn't lie and the church was not, at that time, ordaining openly gay men and women.

But in the mid-80s the call to priesthood was strong and so I quit my job and went to seminary in Berkeley, was ordained in 1993 and came here.

*Into the Episcopal Church.*

Right.

*How did you learn reconcile your homosexuality with general church condemnation of it? Not Episcopal in particular.*

From the earliest moments of any spiritual awareness I could not see the logic in the condemnation against homosexuality. I grew up in an atheist/agnostic home with a lot of skepticism about religion, and so I never once took seriously ... . It made no logical spiritual sense to condemn a group of people because of what I knew was innate and natural. I never worried about going to hell like so many people do because it was inconceivable to me. But the message in the gospel that I see as God loving us all was so strong and so real I just looked at that and thought, "Well, this [condemnation of homosexuality] isn't right. Something is wrong here." I just held them both together.

*In an ideal world, of course, there wouldn't be any contention. But having felt a vocation as you had and the only framework in which you could express it was condemning of what you are—when did you reach a point where you could overlook one for the sake of the other?*

That's an interesting point. I think I never took seriously the dark side of Christian spiritualism. And I would consider anything that goes against the grain of not judging and total acceptance [as unspiritual]. I didn't take it too seriously. I went through a fundamentalist stage for awhile—this was in, like, 9th grade—and thought that if I prayed hard enough I would become heterosexual. And, of



course, when that didn't happen my conclusion was that God had not abandoned me, but that I had been told [by others] something [that was] very wrong. So I guess if there was a moment when I rejected the possibility the condemnation was true, it would have been in 9th grade.

*How, then, did you take that attitude with you into seminary?*

By the time I got to seminary I was 32. The liberal part of the Episcopal Church was very accepting [on] issues of human sexuality. There was tremendous support in the seminary I went to for my ordination and the ordinations of my sisters and brothers that were gay and lesbian.

*Berkeley.*

Right. In San Francisco. My sponsoring diocese was San Francisco. So if anybody had homophobic or that kind of traditional approaches to faith they were pretty much dismissed. It [was] a very safe place.

*So you were allowed to be very open about yourself?*

Absolutely. And I, from the very beginning of the ordination process, let the bishop and the Commission on Ministry know that I was gay. Partly, if I'm really truthful, I entered into priesthood or the ordination process very hesitantly and I did it only because I felt that the holy spirit was really drawing me to do this. But kind of out of resistance or rebellion my attitude was, "Well, I'll just be as honest and as open and as out as I can possibly be. And somewhere along the way I'll get a *no* from the church and then I'll be able to walk away from it and say to my God, you know, 'I tried, but the church isn't ready.' " But that didn't happen.

*It was an excuse you were looking forward to, perhaps?*

Yeah, exactly. Because then I wanted to put it to rest and go back to my Yuppie or Guppie<sup>2</sup> lifestyle which was very comfortable. But I knew then and I know now that this is what I was supposed to do.

*How was it, then that you came to Las Vegas and to Christ Church?*



After ordination ... . The diocese of California has so many people in the ordination process that there are no jobs.

*Really?*

Oh, yes! There were 70 people when I was in the process, and the process takes anywhere from 3 to 6 or 7 years. There was no hope of my getting full-time employment in San Francisco regardless of my sexuality or my experience. There were no jobs. I was willing to go anywhere—unlike some of my friends who wouldn't leave the city. They would, you know, either work at a secular job or piece together 3 or 4 part-time jobs. I knew that this was a life-changing thing and even though it meant moving to Las Vegas ... . This parish called me, they got my name through the seminary and I saw clearly that this was what I was supposed to do.

*Now, they took you as a known quantity, then, as the gay man they knew you were.*

Right.

*Did you have a lover at that time?*

I was in between. I'd ended a nine-year relationship that started to end [when I was in] seminary. I was dating somebody but I moved here without anybody and it was a very lonely time.

*When you arrived here was your gay nature an issue at the outset that you had to sit down and discuss with the vestry? Like a job interview.*

Right. I came for the interview. The vestry is the governing body of the church and there was one *extremely* homophobic person who was my initial contact at Christ Church whom I came out to, and telling her that I was without a partner she could assume comfortably that I was celibate. And at the time I *was*. But not for the reasons that she wanted me to be. And so when I had this interview right here in the parish hall Karl Spatz, who was the rector and wanted me as his assistant, kind of suggested that I just visit with people from table to table and



talk to them individually. But I decided that I would just address the group and answer any questions because I *knew* that the issue of my sexuality would come up. And if they didn't bring it up I was going to. But this woman, the first question I was asked, she asked if I were gay. And I said, "Yes." Then it was an incredibly powerful experience of grace because for 10 minutes I just spoke about yes, I am and this is why. I didn't say too much or too little. I think I wowed them. The people who were uncomfortable or blatantly homophobic, it's my understanding they were kind of intimidated because the majority of people felt so strongly. And there was like a honeymoon period because I wasn't in a relationship so those who wanted to think of me in sexual terms—which is odd because nobody would think of Karl Spatz and *his* sex life, you know, with his wife, but they *would* with me. When I was single there was a honeymoon period because I am a good priest and people realized that. Some folks left, but very few. And it almost became a non-issue. Some people, I got the sense that they were very proud of how liberal they were being in terms of being accepting. But I won the people over fairly soon. My enemies were few and for the first year I really didn't know who they were. They were very ... I've learned a lot in the last four and half years about church people [laughs] and the ones that are most dangerous are the ones that are sweet and nice but stab you in the back. There were a handful of them

*What year was it that you came here?*

December of '93.

*I'd like to talk about Karl Spatz briefly before we get into Dignity. He's dead now.<sup>3</sup> He was a very gay-friendly individual.*

Extremely.

*Why?*

I asked him that and he was in some ways ... Justice and fairness were very important to him. And he told me that in the '80s he went to some church-sponsored AIDS-related seminar and overnight people with AIDS, people who ministered to AIDS and just gays and lesbians in general became something very



important to him through this [seminar]. I think it was someplace in California, an Episcopal Church function. And that became his thing, so for probably 10 or 11 years that was his thrust. Besides priestly functions and preaching the gospel and all, that was his passion. And I'm sure that was the reason that he hired me. Out of a sense of ... . I don't know. Fairness or whatever. Gay people tended to like Karl 'cause he could banter and joke. He was very approachable.

*I remember AFAN [Aid for AIDS of Nevada] used to hold functions here in the 1980s and Karl was there shaking hands and being friendly and welcoming which most people in town then were not. And that made a great impression on the gay community. And I think a lot of the gay people in the community, too, looked kindly on him because of his son, Christopher. We always felt that was a great factor in his being so friendly to other gay people.*

Well, oddly enough it's my understanding that Karl's ministry to gays and lesbians happened long before Chris came out to 'im. And Chris actually wasn't sure how his parents would react even though he knew that his father was supportive. But then again, a father *knows*! [laughs] A mother *knows*!

*Dignity began meeting in Christ Church in 1994. Had you been involved with the local Dignity chapter before then? It formed just about that time, too.*

I was friends with Bruce Adams<sup>4</sup> and I can't remember ... . No, I knew Bruce before Dignity. In fact, I met 'im at an event at the Metz [nightclub] in 1994. Lisa Bechtel and Lisa Hernandez were honored.

*The Honorarium. The Gay and Lesbian Community Center Honorarium.*<sup>5</sup>

Right. That was the first gay event that I went to and I met Bruce. I remember talking to Karl about a new reincarnation of Dignity. I can't remember the first Dignity event I went to. A lot of this ... . Karl did a lot of management on his own, so, like, I would see folks go in. I'd see Jay [Duggan] and Jayson [Miller]<sup>6</sup> go in to talk to Karl and I knew who they were, but I was never called in to, you know, join in the conversation. Or rarely. But I guess it was that spring when we made the chapel available and I remember the vestry meeting. As rector of the parish Karl has control of the keys. That's canon law, so he can invite any group



he wants into [the church]. He did mention it to the vestry, not for a vote, but just to ... . Actually, no—he *did* call for a vote because he wanted to give [Dignity] the space for free, and anytime a group came in, if the fees were waived, the vestry had to approve. The vestry *did* approve it and Karl just described it as Dignity and this same homophobic woman asked clarification of who they were and he said, "A group of gay and lesbian Christians." And the vestry approved it.

*He didn't say Catholics?*

No, he must have. He must have. Yeah, he must have said Roman Catholics. Yeah, I'm sure. If not then, sooner or later. And the only issue was not that they were gay or lesbian but that we weren't charging a fee because we were going through a period of charging all twelve-step groups and everything, or trying to get money. It was a very ugly, ugly time. But that passed without incident and I was very proud of the parish and the vestry at that time because I knew that at least one person was very uncomfortable.

*Did word of Dignity meeting here go beyond the vestry to the bishop? Did he have to know what was going on here or did Karl feel he ought to let him know?*

No. It would have been unusual for Karl to have told Stewart [Zabriskie, the bishop]. The rector really has ... . *Rector* means *ruler* and there's tremendous power. There's ecclesiastical subservience to the bishop but not in matters of how he or she runs the parish.

*A great deal more autonomy than I realized.*

Oh, absolutely. Unless you break canon law or ... . In Episcopal orders when we're ordained we don't take vows of chastity, poverty, obedience. [But] we promise to obey our bishop and that's very important. Me, I'd never go to a diocese where the bishop was homophobic because I couldn't obey him. A strong rector really doesn't *have* to bring issues to the bishop.

*In terms of the congregation in general, how receptive or supportive were they of this gay group meeting on their premises?*



At the time very few people even knew because Dignity met Saturday night, I believe, so there was not a lot of activity. It never really became general knowledge or talked about because so many groups did use the space. But those who knew that they were gay and lesbian Roman Catholics, the attitude, I think, was probably, "Well, this is just Karl and his outreach to the gay and lesbian community, just like AFAN and the Candlelight Memorial services<sup>7</sup>." It was not anything that alarmed anybody. I can't remember how long it was—it was probably, maybe, a little over a year, that Dignity met without incident. [smiles]

*What was the beginning of the contention over Dignity meeting here?*

The same-sex blessing of Jay and Jayson.<sup>8</sup> That was actually the spark of contention that paralyzed the parish for a long time. And there's still fallout from it.

*Had there been unions blessed before Jay and Jayson?*

No.

*They were the first?*

Yeah. I mean, gay and lesbian. No. In the Episcopal Church same-sex blessings do happen, sometimes secretly, sometimes out in the open depending on the bishop. And the bishop here has refused to allow us same-sex blessings at this time. So it was a non-issue.

*As Episcopalians.*

Right. Exactly, and having no jurisdiction whatsoever over any other faith. What I have done and what Karl had done and suggested that I do is that when a couple wants a blessing we'll bless their house and bless those who live in it. Kind of tailor it around to as close as we can get away with without disobeying the bishop.

*Kind of married by fallout!*



Right! [laughs]

*Describe to me Jay and Jayson's wedding and why it became such a bone of contention.*

Well, I didn't go so I don't remember. I remember the before and after. And what happened was Karl did not mention it to the vestry. Certainly didn't ask the vestry's permission. I don't know how it became apparent. I think somebody, either the secretary told ... . Oh, I *do* know. I *do* know how. [smiles] One of the vestry found out probably through his wife—this is a guess—who was the bookkeeper. And this one particular vestry person has a real problem with gays and lesbians and had a real problem with me as soon as I became in a monogamous relationship.

*Was this the same homophobic individual who was so concerned when you came?*

No. No, this is a man. She was a woman. As we all know a very irrational fear. And this really disturbed this man who was concerned about Christ Church becoming a *gay* parish. He liked me up to a point but he really thought that I brought in the wrong kind.

*He blamed it on you?*

Not the same-sex blessing. In fact, I got very little fingerpointing. It was mostly directed at Karl. So this man basically stirred up crap among the vestry and confronted Karl. Of course, all this was happening over there [gestures across the courtyard to the administrative offices of the church] and I was watching it and Karl was very quiet about what he was thinking. And, you know, he stood his ground. He said, "You know, they can do whatever they want. We can't tell them what to do and what not to do." Basically the same person [the homophobic man from the vestry] went to the bishop. And I do remember the bishop coming over, and this is about the same week as Sarah Serna<sup>9</sup> and Bill Serna's wedding. I think they were consecutive Saturdays. The bishop had heard that there was going to be a blessing during the Dignity service and came over and he thought maybe the gossip was around Sarah and Bill's wedding. But it wasn't. I heard the bishop say to Karl, "It's really up to you. You have to decide what you're going to do, but here are all the ramifications."



*What were the ramifications he described?*

Just tremendous hysteria in the parish. It was so emotionally charged that logic went out the window. Once everything hit the fan and we had the next vestry meeting ... . The blessing did *not* take place. Mike Mas,<sup>10</sup> the Roman priest who was to officiate, and Jay and Jayson and Karl met together and decided that the blessing of the relationship would take place someplace else, but the worship, or the mass, would take place in the church. It was a very unhappy compromise. And it wasn't something that Karl insisted on. I think that Mike Mas was largely responsible for soothing all the parties together. Because I wasn't in on the conversation I don't know how it worked. But my guess is that Mike was very conciliatory, wanted to protect Karl. Jay and Jayson wanted to protect Karl, too. And I don't really know what would have happened if the blessing had happened in the church, whether the reaction would have been worse or not. Relationships were destroyed after this. It was the beginning of Karl's ... . I don't think it's too dramatic to say that the tension and the division among the parishioners after this event I think contributed largely to his death. He was not well.

*He died shortly after that.*

Actually, he died two years ago yesterday [March 10, 1996]. And so this happened in July and August '95 and then Karl died in March of '96. Karl did tell me at the height of all this ... . Then there were vestry meetings and some real ugly things that happened and I don't remember the sequence of it but I got involved in it.

*Can you describe some of the ugliness that came out of this?*

The really hateful vestry meeting I was on vacation [but] I heard a tape [of it]. And there were claims of, you know, "This is *my* church and *my* God and I don't want gays and lesbians sitting in my pew." It was complete and total irrational responses. And my argument was all along, you know, that the presumption that this vestry could tell another worshipping community what they could or could not do in their liturgy was just absurd because we had Greek Orthodox



meet in the chapel for *years* and the Greek Orthodox and the Episcopal Church, they're not even in communion with each other. They don't ordain women. They don't do a lot of things that we don't agree with and I would bring that out. But no—that didn't matter. And so what the vestry wanted to do, in order for Dignity to continue meeting here, the vestry wanted them to sign some kind of document that said that they would not do anything that was prohibited by the Roman Church or by the Episcopal Church. Which was just absurd to ask any group to do or sign, so rightly, Dignity left. Now, Christ Church ... . The people that were angry at Dignity will say that Dignity [just] left. They did, of course, but it was because of this tremendously unreasonable demand that the vestry was making on a guest worshipping community.

*Where did the divisions in the parish fall over this matter?*

This escalated [into] a whole gays *vs* straight kind of paranoia. Some people felt very, very threatened about blessing same-sex unions here because of media attention. One woman said, "I can just see Channel 3 out and it will be on the news." And I could sympathize with that concern, even though I think it's unreasonable and way out of proportion. There was that concern and there was also a sense people felt neglected pastorally. They *always* do, people, you know. They will always say, why, "You didn't come and see me when my husband was sick." Or whatever.

*But you'll do this for faggots.*

Right. Exactly. So a lot of anger about my being hired—I'd been here about 2 years, a year and half by then—escalated. There was something to direct all the homophobia towards and it was Dignity. Because Dignity wasn't John Warfel who people either loved or didn't love. It was something to attack that wasn't close to home. So all of the resentment that people had towards *any* ministry towards gays and lesbians ... . We had Reach Out, the babies with AIDS, met here for a couple of years. And that caused ... . There were parents who didn't want their children in the same Sunday school room on Sunday because of the AIDS babies. So basically, they met someplace else. And so parents were angry over that. So all of this that had been brewing since the mid-'80s came to a head around Dignity because it was safe to bad mouth them. If people tried to bad



mouth me there would be some resistance. It was a venting [for] a lot of people who felt that the church was far more liberal and Karl was pushing [it] in a direction far more liberal than they wanted. It all centered around that.

*Was all of this contention, at least its outward show, confined to the vestry, or was it congregation-wide?*

You could tell the people that were angry because you'd see them talking to their friends in angry tones and stuff. You could just sense the mood. Karl told me—at that time he'd been a priest for years—and he said, "It has never been this bad in terms of ill will in a parish." And his experience in ministry had never been that bad. And he looked at me and he said, "I promise you this is the worst you'll ever experience in ministry." And the sad thing about it was he died and it got *worse* for awhile. In terms of the pressure and responsibility. He felt—and he'd been through a lot, you can't be a priest for 40 years in different places around the world and not [experience trouble]. There was a lot of power and significance behind that statement.

*After he died, then, you said it got worse for a time in terms of pressure. Pressure on you?*

Right, because I was the interim. It got worse because there was no resolution over the Dignity issue. It happened in the summer, Karl died in the spring. In January a new vestry was elected, or 3 new members, and the whole sense of platform was "Are you pro-gay or not?" I mean, are you pro-family? Nobody would say, you know, I don't want any gays or lesbians. But one woman in particular, her whole platform was, "My children are being neglected. The only place they get to pray is in their locker room at school, and we need attention for our children." She also said—and this is Elana Hatch, who is an attorney and works either for the county or whatever—made this statement three times, that the only person's sexuality that she cared about was her husband's, you know. That got little snickers. And on the surface she was saying she wasn't homophobic at all, she only considered it a personal matter. And yet when my partner, Mike Powell, was asked to teach Sunday school and he readily agreed to, Elana would not let her children attend that class because he was gay.



*Did consensus among the vestry change after this election? Did it become more or less contentious over the gay issue?*

It got better because one openly gay man was elected. There was just no communication. There was a breakdown in communication.

*You said the parish became paralyzed.*

Yes.

*In what ways? What was not being done that should have because they were so preoccupied?*

The *spirit* of the place was deadened. People were exhausted and there was a lot of healing that hadn't started to take place, which eventually did. *Slowly* did. When there's so much anger there's very little room for God's love and for, you know, telling the good part of the story. So it was a very flat, contentious time. There were people in the vestry [involved in] the first open attempt to get rid of *me* because my contract was ending and the excuse was there wasn't enough money. So there were people who were trying to get rid of me. A tremendous amount of resistance to that made it feel very obvious that [getting rid of me] wasn't going to happen. In our vestry meetings people can come and when the issue of my contract being renewed came up there were, like, 30 or so people [speaking in my favor]. And a wide variety of folks at Christ Church, certainly not just gay- and lesbian-friendly people or gays and lesbians but little old ladies and school teachers and everything. And so the people who thought they were going to get rid of me realized it wasn't going to happen.

*You were the interim rector?*

No. I was the assistant when Karl was still alive. Then when Karl died the same people who wanted to get rid of me suddenly had to in some ways eat their hat because I was the only person to continue Sunday liturgy. Frankly I did a remarkably good job considering I'd only been out of school a couple of years. And with all of the bad blood that was still flowing, attendance was up, money was up. I guess soon after Karl died, slowly after Karl died some of the Dignity



issue and the tension between gays and lesbians and straights kind of slowed down or kind of faded because there was this crisis of the rector for 26 years having died and the excitement of somebody new. So a lot of it just kind of faded.

*How did the gay and lesbian members of the congregation deal with the contention over Dignity?*

A lot of folks ... . Not a lot. We're talking probably only 10 or 15 at that time out-of-the-closet gays and lesbians in the parish. Some people were uncomfortable with Jay and Jayson not because they were gay but because they thought they were too strident.

*Too out?*

Yeah. And so often, you know, our gay brothers and sisters will feel that way. But the gays and lesbians who felt attacked because of the issue and because they were gay ... . One man who'd been a parishioner here since the early '60s who was on the vestry basically wrote a letter to the vestry coming out and he said, "You know, you are talking about *me*, and I've been here longer than any of you." Because the attitude was these gay people are coming in. Well, there had been gay people here since the beginning. And I think that really surprised some folks. There was a town meeting partly over the bad blood still around Dignity. And then Sarah Serna was not approved for candidacy, postulancy, by the vestry and that caused another tremendous outrage.

*Why was she not?*

I really can't speak for all of them, but the sense that I got was some people thought she was just too bold and pushy. One of the excuses that some people used was that she'd been divorced one or two times. And, of course, this *really* escalated. We found out soon the rumors were that she'd been divorced 6 times and had killed somebody! [laughs] I forgot all about Sarah! [laughs] Sarah was another target of all this anger and when the vestry did not approve of her process toward ordination there was a town meeting that was very ugly and it was the same kind of ... . The same kind of anger that had happened over



Dignity—on both sides—and Sarah Serna on both sides—just kind of came to a head.

*How much of the problem the vestry had with Sarah was over her being Sarah and how much over her connections with the gay community and Dignity in particular?*

I'm sure a lot of it had to do with her history and support of Dignity. At the one meeting that I wasn't at she said something, I don't remember what it was, I heard it on tape, that was very rational and appropriate. But it was challenging the old guard. I think people's opinions of Sarah *were* influenced by her support of Dignity, but a lot of people just ... . She preached a sermon once that was I thought excellent, but she used the word *condom* in the service. She is a prophet and prophets are usually killed. [laughs]

*Sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically.*

Right.

*She was killed metaphorically here?*

Oh, yes, definitely.

*A broader question, but still relative to the Dignity thing: how much of the problem can you fault with the individuals at Christ Church and how much can you fault the Episcopal Church itself?*

Well, it would certainly be nice if we as a national church had a consensus about blessing gays and lesbians, their relationships, or ordination of gays and lesbians because if we *did*, then we could simply say, well, this is what the church says and this is what we're gonna do. But because we're in that in-between stage and ... . Probably further along than any mainline denomination in terms of actually affirming these issues. See, the Episcopal Church doesn't have a magisterium or a pope or a single group or document that says what is right and what is wrong. Our anchors are the creeds, scripture, tradition, and reason. Every 3 years a general convention assembles and that's when changes to canons and legislative changes are made. And that is probably the only legislative body that can



approve or disapprove of anything. And for, gosh, the last 10 years, at least, or the last 3 general conventions, the issues of ordination of gays and lesbians and blessing of same-sex unions keeps coming up. Narrowly is defeated each time.

*Increasingly narrowly?*

Yes, yes. For instance, last convention, in July, one thing that did pass was that dioceses were allowed at their option to offer insurance benefits to same-sex partners.

*Which would be you.*

Right, yes. [But] this diocese doesn't. Not because it's homophobic but because it's poor. Diocese of New York where I'm going to *does*, in fact, and so my partner, once that takes place—which I think will be in the summer—he will be protected just as any other spouse, which is great.

But there is definitely two minds in the church now about these two principal issues that affect gays and lesbians. And until we have a policy one way or the other—and, of course, I'm hoping that we'll continue going in the right direction—it's very hard to tell a congregation, "Well, this is what the Episcopal Church says about this." Because they're not saying anything concretely now. It's two different camps battling each other.

*They're really giving church members the responsibility of what they do and don't do. They're not able to blame it on a higher authority.*

Right, which is the Anglican way. That's why it's tough being an Episcopalian or an Anglican because you're told to think for yourself. Not like the Fundies [fundamentalists] or the Mormons or even the Romans [Catholics] to some extent. We don't say, "This is black, this is white." So it's a tough faith. It's a lot different from being told. And if you fit into a rigid box, boy, it's a lot more comfortable if all the answers are in a book.

*Then generally speaking, the implication of what we've been talking about is that whatever homophobia was born out of Christ Church was the responsibility of individuals in Christ Church.*



Yes, but with the support of people in the church hierarchy who *support* that kind of [behavior]. You could go, and parishioners have, the real conservative, homophobic folks, will go to priests in conservative areas of the country and get counsel and come back and say, "Well, my other priest says it's a *sin*." And etc., etc. Yes, it's definitely [true that] the responsibility and the burden of the moral choices that we make are based on the individual guided by scripture, tradition, and reason. But those things are very fluid.

*Well, Mike Mas told me when I talked to him last Friday that you've been instrumental on the eve your departure in contriving a more inclusive mission statement for Christ Church. Can you give me details about that?*

At the last vestry retreat the mission statement at my suggestion [included] the word *inclusive*. And I said because this means something—in particular to gays and lesbians. And so this was embraced for the most part. And I did say, you know, "If you don't mean it don't put it in and don't lie." And at the last vestry meeting this same person, Elana Hatch, made issue of the word because she thought—and by my own statement it [did]—that it was geared towards gays and lesbians. And I think her reasoning was we should be much more open and inclusive of *all* people and not zero in on one group. My personal feeling is that she would feel very threatened if we were known as an inclusive church for gays and lesbians. The rector rightly said, "There are no code words here. *Inclusive* means *inclusive*." There are people, one woman in particular—her mission statement is, "Now that Father Warfel's gone, let's rid the parish of all gays and lesbians." We're too far along for that to ever happen.

*You're sure?*

Yes. Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Because the mindset of this parish has changed since I've been here. People learned to love me and appreciate me as a priest and then reconciled the fact that I was gay. So many people have said, "I really changed my understanding of all this because of you." That won't change. And in some ways, maybe once I'm gone, it will be easier—I *hope* it will be easier—for us to move along toward *real* inclusion. Because I won't be the lightning rod anymore. There won't be, at least for now, unless somebody gay or lesbian is



hired, there won't be anybody [like that] on the staff so the folks that feel threatened will no longer feel threatened. And people are odd, you know. They'll be accepting of gay and lesbian parishioners, fellow parishioners, but not the clergy.

*Which is a nice segue into something else I wanted to ask. You came here as a single man, but you're certainly not leaving as a single man. Can you tell me how you were accepted or not accepted and how you broached the subject with the vestry that, "I have a husband now."*

Just a little background. Mike Powell, my partner, we met in the '80s when I was in between ... . Actually, I was seeing somebody but we were in that not getting along period, and so I saw Mike for about a month. Then the existing relationship healed or whatever and it continued. That's the one that lasted 9 years. So I stopped seeing Mike. But he kept in contact all these years and moved to San Diego and Monterey. And then in 1995, Christmas, he came to Las Vegas and came to midnight mass. And I knew he was coming and I hadn't seen 'im in about 9 years. So I was looking for 'im and after church I went up to a very handsome man and introduced myself and after I got the words out I realized that I was talking to Mike. Basically, to make a long story short we rekindled what we had had in the '80s. He moved from San Diego here five months later. We lived in separate apartments. And not just because I knew it would be easier for me if I did. I wasn't ready. I didn't want to move in yet. The next relationship was the one that I was going to honor. Not that I didn't honor the others. But I wanted to be very careful about who my partner was not just from my own emotional needs as a man, and sexual needs. The role of clergy spouse is really a tough one and I have to be careful who I choose and who chooses to say yes to it because it's a really tough role. So we lived separately for a year and then moved in together just a few weeks before Karl died. And I know Karl was concerned. Very concerned about us moving in together and what would happen with the parish reaction now that I wasn't celibate anymore. People did drive by the house to see if Mike's truck was in front. A marvelous story. Stewart Zabriskie, our bishop, after Karl died and I was the interim, Stewart made a pastoral call on Mike and me. Which is rather unusual for Stewart to do to *any* couple, but he came just to say kind of an "Attaboy!" to us. Before he came he said, "Now, you need to tell me where you live. You see, I'm not one of those who've driven by



the house to see if Mike's car is there!" [laughs] Because Karl died and suddenly I was in charge and these folks needed me, there wasn't any direct confrontation over the fact that I was now living with Mike. At one vestry retreat I did bring it up and I said, "This is how it is and if you don't like it, that's tough. I never said I was gonna be celibate. I came here as a single man, but this is how it is. Your opinion of me is none of my business." There was a lot of anger in that but lines were drawn and it was very clear that I wasn't gonna tolerate any kind of overt ... I wasn't going to be threatened by anybody who thought this was sinful or wrong.

*Do you feel they were so preoccupied over the Dignity issue that your relationship kind of slid by? That they just weren't ready to go into another whole conflict over something?*

Yeah, I think so. Also, Mike had been around for a year and some people liked 'im. Here, again, it's a matter of when people get to know the person then they stop thinking in terms of sexuality and what you might be doing in bed or not doing in bed. There wasn't enough momentum for people to make a big stink about the fact that I was no longer celibate. I had spoken to the bishop and I told the vestry, you know, "The bishop knows." And I think that I also said, "If you have a problem with this, you see Stewart."

*You formally told the bishop before you formally told the vestry?*

Oh, months before. Fact, before Mike even moved here I said, "There's somebody in my life now." Because I wanted his take on it and he [Zabriskie] was very encouraging and pleased that there was somebody in my life. So I guess because I had the support of the bishop I didn't care what anybody said. Apparently a few people still have real problems with the fact that I am sexually active, but it hasn't come to me. They haven't come and said anything to me.

*You think perhaps Zabriskie's support, even tacit support of you and the issue, is a little intimidating to the homophobic individuals?*

Somewhat. There isn't a high regard among those people towards the bishop anyway because he's very liberal on other issues, too.



*And I contrast him with Daniel Walsh.*

Ooooooh! Yes!

Stewart, when I came in for my first interview for Christ Church, I went in and talked to him before Karl hired me. And I said, "You know I am gay and I don't feel called to celibacy and I'm not in a relationship now but I need to know how you feel about this [since] because of my ordination I obey my bishop." And he said, "I don't care about your sexuality I just care about your gifts for ministry." Which was such an obviously holy thing to say. So I have high regard for Stewart in terms of issues of sexuality and support. After Karl died I went through his files cleaning out his office and found a file on me and saw a lot of hate mail that Karl got and a lot of hate mail that Stewart got and some very, very pastoral but firm letters that Stewart wrote back to these people who eventually left. So he's been nothing but supportive of me and Mike.

*Now that you're leaving do you feel that Christ Church is moving in a truly more inclusive and tolerant direction than when you got here?*

Absolutely. Yes. See, anybody can be liberal and inclusive until it's put to the test. And when they had a gay assistant, then a gay interim, and now a gay associate, all in the form of me—and I think I have the overwhelming support of the parish—attitudes have changed. Attitudes have changed about the gay and lesbian people in leadership within the parish. The woman who said she wants to rid herself of all the gays and lesbians in the parish also claims to have visions from the Virgin Mary. People now are kind of overlooking and accepting the eccentricities of the homophobes where at one time they were overlooking the eccentricities of the gays and lesbians. So I really think that we will continue to go in the direction of inclusion and I really think that once I'm gone many people will feel far less threatened. And I think that we've turned the corner. There are too many people whose hearts and minds are open and have changed.

*Are you happy or sad to be leaving Christ Church?*

Both. I'm in denial about it. Once we leave, I think I'll realize what I've done. But I'm going to a parish that hired me knowing that my lover and I were living in the rectory. I will be the rector. I was out from the first letter I wrote them.



There are problems there, too. Two people have resigned already, so it's the same stuff all over again. But it is time. I really believe that I've done what God called me to do here. I was also in the running for rector [at Christ Church] and I didn't want it. At the time I didn't feel that I had the leadership skills to lead a parish that couldn't easily be led. The person who was called is marvelous, Massey Gentry. He's been here a year. I'm leaving now with him clearly liked and in authority.

*Why did you choose to leave here?*

Because this parish in New York found me in the computer and wrote me and I believe that the holy spirit wants me to go. I also will be a rector, so in terms of career path ... I'll be an hour and a half from New York City, which will be a nice change. A place called Middletown. I wanted to go back to California, to San Francisco, in particular. But there's still not the right jobs there. I was on the short list, I was finally one of two for a position in Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Didn't get it. But I know that this is where God wants us to go. And Mike and I insisted that we both be flown back for the interview because he would have a large say in whether we went or not. I made it very clear. And he didn't want to go. He's a truck driver and didn't want to drive in the snow and all that. But after we came back he told me that in his own discerning and prayer life he felt that we were called. And when I heard that I knew that if both of us were hearing that, then it was right.

\* \* \*

For information on Bruce Adams, see the entry, "Buried in Bruce Adams" (Las Vegas Eagle, May/June 1994, p. 10). Also refer to Dennis McBride journal entries for June 19, 20, 21, and 26, 1994; July 12, 22, and 25, 1994; August 2, 12, and 20, 1994; September 23, October 3 and 16, and December 15, 1994; February 26, 1995; January 24, February 1, and April 26, 1996; and McBride/Adams correspondence files.

The honorarium referred to here is sponsored by the Gay and Lesbian Community Center. The first honorarium presentations were made at the Melt nightclub on January 13, 1994 (see "Community Center to Honor Four Local Leaders" (Las Vegas Eagle, January 1994, p. 19)).

Jay Duggan and Jayson Miller were among the leaders of Dignity-Las Vegas at this time.



## Notes

1. Founded by Fr. Patrick Nidorf in Los Angeles in 1969, Dignity is a lay movement of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered Catholics. Dignity became a national organization in 1973 and by 1996 comprised 75 chapters throughout the United States [see *Catholicism, Homosexuality, and Dignity: Questions & Answers About Being Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgendered and Catholic*, a brochure published in 1996 by Dignity/USA, Inc.] A Dignity chapter was first founded in Las Vegas in November 1979 [see an advertisement in the *Vegas Gay Times*, November 1979, p. 8; and untitled stories in the *Vegas Gay Times*, January 1980, p. 5, and February 1980, p. 3; also refer to Dennis McBride journal entries from 1979 (November 4 and December 26), and 1980 (June 14, June 18, July 26, July 28, and August 12)] The chapter was active for about 2 years and published a newsletter titled *Oasis*, from May 1980 through January 1981. Efforts to establish chapters occurred in 1983, 1987, 1990 [when the organization called itself Lesbian and Gay Catholics and Friends], and on July 16, 1994. At the time of this interview, this last version of Dignity is still active.
2. *Yuppie* is the slang term for the acronym, YUP—Young, Upwardly Mobile Professional—used to describe a class or people who emerged in the 1980s. A *Guppie* is a Gay [young] Upwardly Mobile Professional. The term was pejorative since Yuppies were perceived to be selfish, self-centered, and materialistic.
3. Rev. Karl Spatz died March 10, 1996. See "Longtime Episcopal Priest Spatz Dies" in the *Las Vegas Sun*, March 12, 1996, 2B.
4. For information on Bruce Adams see his obituary, "Farewell to Bruce Adams" [*Las Vegas Bugle*, May/June 1996, p. 44]. Also refer to Dennis McBride journal entries for June 19, 20, 21, and 26, 1994; July 12, 22, and 25, 1994; August 2, 12, and 20, 1994; September 23, October 3 and 16, and December 15, 1994; February 26, 1995, January 24, February 1, and April 26, 1996; and McBride/Adams correspondence files.
5. The honorarium referred to here is sponsored by the Gay and Lesbian Community Center. The first honorarium presentations were made at the Metz nightclub on January 23, 1994 [see "Community Center to Honor Four Local Leaders" (*Las Vegas Bugle*, January 1994, p. 19)].
6. Jay Duggan and Jayson Miller were among the leaders of Dignity-Las Vegas at this time.



7. Las Vegas's first AIDS Candlelight Memorial was held on May 26, 1986 on the steps of the Foley Federal Building [see "AIDS Candlelight Vigil" (*Bohemian Bugle*, June 1986, p. 1)]. The service was moved in 1991 to Christ Church Episcopal.
8. Jay Duggan and Jayson Miller were married on July 15, 1995, after which each adopted a new family name—DiCotignano, a blend of their mothers' maiden names. See "Not Your Average Catholic Wedding" [*Las Vegas Bugle*, July/August 1995, pp. 6-7].
9. For information on Sarah Shirley Serna, see "Lighthouse: An Interfaith AIDS Ministry" [*Las Vegas Bugle*, May/June 1995, p 8]; *Auntee Social* [*Las Vegas Bugle*, May/June 1995, pp. 47-48]; and "Lighthouse AIDS Ministry Reforms; Drops 'Ministry' and the Minister" [*Las Vegas Bugle*, April/May 1997, pp. 37 and 39].
10. The Las Vegas Gay Archives Oral History Project interviewed Mike Mas on March 6, 1998.

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