

Behind the Scenes for LGBTQ

Back in the early 1980s, pulmonary medicine was in its early stages. As a medical specialty, it had only existed for a quarter century, but Sam was a pioneer in research and practices in the mid-South. On that forefront, he was also one of the first physicians in greater Memphis to treat AIDS patients, at a time when there was great uncertainty about its contagions. He said to Phyllis one day in 1984, after describing the symptoms of this mysterious new disease, “I want to treat a particular patient.” He was referring to a young man whom other physicians had been refusing to take into their care. “Fine,” Phyllis said, unsure of the problem. “You don’t understand,” Sam persisted. “No one knows how this disease is contracted.” He went on, “This may impact our lives together. It could affect how we make love, for instance. There may come a time when I stick myself or somehow contract this disease and it could impact our lives.”¹

During that time of uncertainty, when no one knew how it was contracted or how contagious it might be, Sam believed that it was important for older physicians who had already established families to treat AIDS patients. He didn’t think it was fair to ask a young doctor just starting out to risk his life. But he could. “Okay,” Phyllis said, not ready to argue with such conviction. Sam went on to build a large practice to AIDS patients in West Tennessee. Subsequently, he felt even more emboldened to treat those suffering from the disease on the many occasions when he heard clergy, as well as fellow physicians throughout the South, say that it was probably a scourge of God brought to bear on the gay lifestyle.

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When AIDS was largely misunderstood, most of Phyllis’s friends, going back to grad school and teaching, her work in poetry, and as a book

publisher, were scholars, artists, and writers. These communities seemed to be touched by the disease more than others. Also then, Phyllis was serving as a member of the vestry of St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Millington, Tennessee. It was on that vestry that she first became sensitized to the fact that her denomination did not permit the ordination of gays and lesbians. The bishop of West Tennessee was staunchly opposed to changing this practice, as were the majority of voting members in the House of Deputies at the triennial General Convention of the Episcopal Church USA. Phyllis had many gay friends, but hadn't given the issues much thought until the gay community seemed to be embattled from all sides—disease decimating their lives, and acceptance of their rights in question.

Still, most of the impetus in the Tickle home toward the cause for gay rights came from Sam. Sparked by his work as a physician, aware firsthand of what was happening to the lives of gay patients and friends, Sam was prodding Phyllis to pay attention to a growing crisis. His anti-religion stance was simultaneously strengthening, the more he watched the leaders of churches speak uncaringly, unchristianly, on this subject. He also, in working with St. Luke's Press, knew many writers whose lives were touched by the growing epidemic. In fact, the press's accountant was transgendered in some as-yet-to-be-understood ways, and s/he and Sam became good friends.

Going back to his own school days, Sam never felt like he quite fit in. He was drawn to depressives, neurotics, misfits, and those who had been hurt or felt excluded. By the time the AIDS crisis erupted, it was already clear to Phyllis why Sam's love for LGBTQ people developed so easily—because he felt that he was one of them. It was a few years earlier when he came out privately to Phyllis as bisexual. This is how he described it to a physician colleague who was also a transgender friend: "After 15 or 20 years of marriage I told her I need a man. I need her [Phyllis] more, but I think I would have lost it had I not made that plea to her. She approved because that is who I am. Yes, I know it even improved our sex life. I leave the closet door open but do not advertise." From then on, at least, Sam enjoyed occasional sexual partners who were men. He goes on to speak of "Phyllis and our deep love," adding, "She approves of my men and knows each one and is best friends with them. She knows I need a man."²

Phyllis lived with this silent pain around her marriage for four decades. The first line of the poem “Hymen Broken” perhaps expresses the emotion: “Sometimes it sweeps over me in icy waves of quiet.”³ There was a degree of stoicism in how she managed it; there was nothing she could do. In this way, the following sentence from *The Shaping of a Life*, read by many as an anti-romantic musing, was actually a way of expressing that there are certain truths in life that she might have preferred not knowing: “Whatever clear otherness there was to him [Sam] in those long-ago days, whatever otherness there still is in either of us, exists now more as a particularity of the what-we-are than as the border marker of a neighboring territory.”⁴ She excelled at philosophizing around emotional difficulty.

By the end of Sam’s life, all of his children would know about his sexual identity, whether or not they wanted to believe it. It seems that none of Phyllis’s friends were aware, although it was often evident from comments she would make about her husband that there were ways in which she had to either acquiesce to his needs, or else leave him, and the latter was not an option. She at times counseled friends in bad marriages toward divorce, as for the greater good, but she always believed her own marriage vows were for life.

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Phyllis and Sam felt called, together, to join an active LGBTQ congregation as soon as they heard about Holy Trinity Community Church in Memphis. This particular church family made the two of them feel at home for different reasons and in different ways. Phyllis entered into conversations theologically, with progressive intentions—but these were also the years when she was moving from being a detached journalist-observer of religion to renewed involvement as a partisan-participant. Sam was there for relationships. Together—finally, religiously together—she and Sam were settled and at home at Holy Trinity.

Phyllis often said to people who asked where she attended church that she and Sam were at Holy Trinity as missionaries of the Episcopal Church, but that was never really the case, and ECUSA never had any formal relationship or outreach at Holy Trinity. They simply felt more

comfortable there than they ever did at Calvary Episcopal in downtown Memphis. “The pain in that congregation [Holy Trinity] was at fever pitch at that time,” she said, “since it looked then as if it would never be all right to be gay or hermaphroditic or just different.” She and Sam were there as simple congregants, “asking for a place within a spiritual family, but we were also walking straight into a maelstrom.”⁵

It wasn’t uncommon, for instance, for a month to go by during which at least one member or regular communicant at Holy Trinity had died by suicide. Phyllis felt the necessity of the Gospel and experienced the presence of Jesus in ways that wouldn’t have been possible at most Episcopal churches. “I fell in love,” she said, “with the passion for Jesus that truly, truly broken and rejected and battered and publicly castigated people can have when they understand themselves to have been accepted by Him.”⁶ Holy Trinity’s then-pastor, Tim Meadows, describes it: “I think what attracted both Phyllis and Sam was this church at that time was an exiled community whose members risked their livelihood to be in the fold.”⁷ It was more than a place of refuge; they had a voice resonant with pain and joy of exile and costly discipleship. She also loved the absence of pews.

For Sam, it was the first time that Phyllis had gotten him to attend church regularly in years. Holy Trinity was a special congregation in how it taught the Gospel. There was a sense that it was possible to embrace people from all faiths for the benefit of the Gospel that wasn’t defined by any one particular faith or tradition. This suited Phyllis, as well, who was always more than Christian in her own spiritual identity.

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This was a time in Phyllis’s life when it seemed that every spirituality author with an eye to advancement wanted a pound of her flesh—for endorsements, introductions, or favorable coverage in *Publishers Weekly*. She seemed to know everyone. She had sat with the Dalai Lama, and was unimpressed by his guru effect on devotees. At the other end of some spectrum, she’d met Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, authors of a now forgotten memoir that was nevertheless something *PW* was obliged to cover. She even spent what she later remembered

as “a hideous afternoon being taken by police guard into a conference room in some hotel at some meeting in Florida so the Attorney General could fill my ears in safety with his importance as well as his religious insights.”⁸ Attorney General John Ashcroft had a new book, *On My Honor: The Beliefs that Shape My Life*, and the event Phyllis remembered took place in early March 2001, two months before the book was published. During this same time period, however, and on behalf of Holy Trinity Community Church, Phyllis became the one asking favors.

She had met and immediately admired Tammy Faye Bakker Messner, who was the opposite of these others. Not only did Tammy Faye want nothing from Phyllis, but she was, then, also without pretense. “I don’t even remember when or how we met, but it was way after the break-up with Jim and after her marriage to Roe, and way before she got sick,” Phyllis recalled.⁹ Tammy Faye had fought colon cancer in 1996, but Phyllis was remembering her famous announcement and discussion of her lung cancer on *Larry King Live* years later. Then, at the tail-end of the twentieth century, either despite or because of her fundamentalist background, Tammy Faye came out in full support of gay rights and LGBTQ people. She began to march in gay pride parades, and for many reasons—most of all, a documentary narrated by drag queen RuPaul, *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*—she became a gay icon.

Phyllis said, “She didn’t want anything except to talk about the situation in which we found ourselves and to swap tales that might allow each of us to elucidate something for the other.”¹⁰ With the blessing of Pastor Meadows, Phyllis began to curate a series of talks on Sunday mornings before worship. She called them “Pancake Theology,” and Sam loved working in the kitchen at the griddle actually making the pancakes. Her first big “get” was to ask Tammy Faye to come to Memphis. It was the spring of 2003 and Holy Trinity was then meeting in an old bank building on Summer Avenue.

“Boy, did she come! The place was packed with TV ancillary spots set up all over the building and parking lot, there was a totally jammed street outside, cops everywhere trying to control the flow, and so on. But the point is that she came at her own expense. I think the church maybe had enough money to help with the hotel, but I’m not even sure of that, and it wouldn’t have mattered to her any more than no stipend did. She

believed in it and them, and everybody in that place knew it.” Phyllis remembered, “We stayed in touch until she became too ill. I think I even still have a carton of her books downstairs [at Lucy] that she gave me from her stock and signed, so that anybody who didn’t get a copy and wanted one could have it.”¹¹ Tammy Faye would die in July 2007.

Next, Phyllis turned to her old friend, Bishop Spong. He wasn’t the “gay icon” that Tammy Faye was, but Phyllis described him to her fellow congregants as the most eloquent and determined advocate for full LGBTQ rights that the church of the last half-century has seen. He, too, brought out big crowds at Holy Trinity, speaking over pancakes there the following year, also at Phyllis’s personal request, apparently understanding that it was good work in the world, and probably that he owed Phyllis a favor or two. That Sunday, traffic on Highland Avenue, to where the congregation had moved when the old bank building was no longer suitable, was more congested than anyone had ever seen. People were double-parking in the road to hear Spong, who they quickly realized was indeed their champion—a genuine hero of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people.

“Those two were the ones the folk most wanted to hear from, be assured by, and be affirmed by. It was just pure grace or luck or both that they were willing to come,” Phyllis remembered with a grin.¹²

5

Curiously, however, there was a way in which Phyllis could not fully commit to Holy Trinity. Her experiences there would be both profoundly rewarding and somewhat painful, as she hoped anxiously that her Episcopal Church would move swiftly toward full acceptance of LGBTQ members, including the ordination of clergy who so identify. She clung to her identity as an Episcopalian, a lay reader and eucharistic minister in that tradition, as she so often reminded people, despite the fact that her own congregation lay outside of it. She became a close friend of her pastor at Holy Trinity, Tim Meadows, an openly gay man who wanted a sustaining affiliation himself with a mainline denomination. She deeply hoped that that denomination might one day be her Episcopal Church. Meadows had already left one denomination, when

the United Methodist Church would not allow a gay man to pastor one of its churches.

One Holy Trinity member recalls how Phyllis was regarded at Holy Trinity: “She brought an intellectual component, as a scholar. She was a rock star in the religion world, which most of us did not know, at first. But Tim did. I also think that having straight allies, a long-married couple, attend, love, worship, alongside us, as one of us, was a great component to the congregation.”¹³ By that point, of course, Phyllis and Sam knew that they were not simply a straight couple—but that was mostly an understanding between them. And Phyllis watched as Sam quickly moved his official church membership to Holy Trinity, just as she felt that she could not. This caused another small emotional split between the two of them, and even between Phyllis and her own conscience. She wasn’t willing to give up her license in the Episcopal Church as a lector and lay minister. From time to time she would tell the rector at Calvary Episcopal in Memphis who she was going to visit, and when, and he would in turn provide her the consecrated bread and wine that she needed from the Calvary ambry.¹⁴

She was nevertheless assiduously working behind the scenes to lobby the Episcopal bishop of West Tennessee to change his mind regarding acceptance of LGBTQ people. Then she lobbied leaders at the national level. She believed that the Holy Spirit led her to do these things, and she would talk that way about them to friends who understood evangelical language, its power and potential. Yet, she worried. The colophon she chose for her autobiography—an obscure passage from the Book of Common Prayer’s translation of the Psalms, speaks to this in a way that she never did: “Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me, Lord God of hosts; let not those who seek you be disgraced because of me, O God of Israel” (Ps. 69:7). More than anything else, she wanted her beloved Holy Trinity to become Holy Trinity Episcopal Church. But it would never happen.

6

Phyllis was not one for causes, but this was different. Never giving lectures on this topic, or coming out and endorsing specific candidates

for positions in the church, she and Sam made a powerful point by worshipping at an openly affirming congregation and speaking openly about it in personal conversations.

But she didn't feel called to play an active part in the intellectual or doctrinal debate on the issues. In print, she wrote: "Whether any one of the combatants likes to admit it or not, either of the opposing positions of proscription or progressive revelation may be assumed with credibility." And in private, she said: "[Y]ou follow the love you're led to by every whit of Jesus' teaching and life and the Spirit's voice. Somewhere along in there you just begin to assume the doctrine thing will work itself out, but that the folks who work it out will have to be somebody other than you yourself because you're much too busy just being part of them to be able to separate out and objectify enough to parse the thing intellectually."¹⁵

She often advised colleagues who were preparing to out themselves in support of LGBTQ acceptance in the church. For example, theologian Tony Jones, before he accepted an offer from Beliefnet to publicly debate Rod Dreher, the "Crunchy Conservative," on the issue of gay marriage wrote to her asking for advice: Should he do it? If so, how? Phyllis wrote back:

I have been in some prayer about my response since getting your note yesterday. I think the answer, if I am discerning correctly, is that you do have to accept this challenge or request or whatever it is. . . . If that be true, I would probably go in sideways through parables and/or stories rather than head-on. And I might even go sideways via Church history, a la James Boswell and *Same-Sex Union* etc. But I'm pretty sure that head-on would be (almost always is, in fact) a wreck waiting to happen.¹⁶

A few years later, when acceptance of LGBTQ Christians in churches of all kinds was still a "red line" issue (to cross the line was to move from being evangelical or United Methodist or whatever to something else—often Episcopal), one of Phyllis's closest friends, Ken Wilson, the founding pastor of the Ann Arbor Vineyard, began his own process of reevaluating his stance. Wilson was one of the most respected Vineyard leaders in the country, a real theologian-pastor, and one with a publishing track record with Thomas Nelson, a relationship that had been

initiated for him by Phyllis. She and Ken began talking about LGBTQ acceptance, and Ken began a quiet, serious study of the Bible in order to reevaluate his position, which had been, according to evangelical doctrine, exclusionary—a sort of “love the sinner, but hate the sin” approach. After his period of study, Ken was considering coming out with a new understanding. He told Phyllis that he wanted “a hush-hush by invitation only hermetically-sealed conversation with pastors . . . to discuss homosexuality and the church,” asking, “Are there a few evangelical pastors that you think we ought to invite? People who might be in a position of assessment on the issue similar to where I’m at? The higher level the better, and pastors is what I’m interested in primarily.”¹⁷

Phyllis wrote back two days later. She was stuck in a snowstorm in the North Carolina mountains with Sam.

I have struggled off and on during the night to try and come up with just one even, but no luck. . . . I was and am alarmed to realize that I don’t—which, of course, speaks volumes about the problem, doesn’t it? . . . If you . . . can pull this thing off and come up with rhetoric or exegesis that makes it possible for pastors to do what has to be done, it’ll be the greatest gift to the Church of the last quarter century at least.¹⁸

Over the next several years, Ken would send bits of research, and passages from his sermons, to Phyllis asking for her response. His final coming out wouldn’t take place for several more years, when he asked his entire congregation to discern along with him by reading a book-length study paper he’d prepared on the subject. The following winter that paper was published as *A Letter to My Congregation*, with Phyllis writing the book’s introduction. Ken lost his church as a result.

She also fumed occasionally behind the scenes, as in this email after the Episcopal Church failed again to reach positive, progressive conclusions on these issues: “My episcopakin have delayed and delayed so many times over on grappling with the biggies, that I’m truly leery of delays anymore. Though of course I am also clueless about how to out maneuver them.”¹⁹

At the same time, she sought to understand what it was like to be LGBT or Q, in private conversations, even in private prayer. At one point she felt that God had told her that full acceptance of LGBTQ

Christians was correct, even if it couldn't be demonstrated according to biblical teaching. She would say, on occasion, that she wasn't going to make theological or biblical arguments for gay equality. Her job, instead, was more pastoral. It also seems she may have asked Sam what gay sex was like, in her desire to understand, and this might explain how she came to believe that gay sex was less unitive and complete for those who engaged in it, when compared to heterosexual sex. She said to her closest spiritual friend: "I am persuaded that they [LGBTQ people] are devout and Christian and beloved. I am also more or less persuaded (I lack first-hand experience, after all) that the joining or coupling is a different and less complete one."²⁰ One can almost hear Sam explaining it to his wife this way in order to emphasize his commitment to her and to their marriage.

She was effective advocating quietly, speaking with would-be delegates of the 2003 Episcopal Church General Convention, where Gene Robinson was confirmed as the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, and later, on a smaller scale, playing an affirming role at the Wild Goose Festival in 2011, where other luminaries such as Jim Wallis of Sojourners, evangelical evangelist Tony Campolo, and singer/songwriter Michelle Shocked all spoke against inclusion. (By 2015, Wild Goose had evolved to become a completely affirming venue for LGBTQ people, and even saw the re-emergence of Campolo as a surprise guest, just one month after he finally came out with an affirming stance. Already ill, Phyllis was sorry not to be there when Campolo publicly apologized to the Wild Goose community in early July 2015.)

7

Meanwhile, at Holy Trinity Community Church, Sam was settled and active—planting trees and bushes, cooking pancake breakfasts—while Phyllis was often away over weekends. Then it came time for the congregation to vote on whether or not to affiliate with a mainline denomination, or remain an independent, community church. Many in the church prized their independence. Even Phyllis argued this point, saying to some, "Holy Trinity needs to be careful not to end up another rabbit

pelt on the belt of some denomination.” But the dominant view was that they needed the financial safety net that comes with being a part of a denomination. Membership would enable them to take advantage of loans, insurance for their pastor, and so on.

Both Pastor Tim Meadows and Phyllis wished that Holy Trinity could join the Episcopal Church, but at the time the bishop would not accept either the church or Tim, an openly gay pastor. The United Church of Christ—the mainline denomination most actively accepting of LGBTQ people, evidenced by an overwhelming “yes” vote at their 2005 General Synod in favor of gay marriage—did. Phyllis didn’t want the UCC for Holy Trinity. Sam disagreed. One year later, the congregational vote at Holy Trinity was in favor, and in 2007 the church officially joined the UCC. Soon, the congregation found themselves doing the work of denominational structures, which offered them a chance to participate with the larger church in an intellectually welcoming community. Additionally, the vestry at Holy Trinity was replaced with new bylaws and a church council. Worship changed, to the disapproval of both Phyllis and Sam. Holy Trinity started looking and feeling like many other congregations look and feel on a Sunday morning in Memphis. The anti-episcopacy of the UCC was moving in, which might have been okay, except that what had been edgy about Holy Trinity in liturgy, worship, and style, was soon gone, too. Phyllis’s warnings about denominations came true and, in the words of Timothy Meadows, “we all knew the beautiful season was over.”²¹

8

Phyllis often struggled with religious hierarchy and organization. Such struggle played a role in her cofounding The Canterbury Roundtable, a collegial working group that came together twice a year on either side of the Atlantic to discuss the future of the Anglican Communion and the theological and liturgical priorities in which its members were actively involved. Phyllis co-founded it with Megory Anderson, an American theologian who was finishing a PhD at Canterbury Christ Church University in Kent. Gareth Jones, the head of theology at Canterbury Christ Church, spearheaded the English contingent, and participants in

the U.S. included Donald Schell, Lizette Larson-Miller, and Bob Scott from Trinity Church Wall Street and The Trinity Institute. As one of those participants remembered, “It was fairly early in the time of stress within the global Anglican Communion over sexuality, so we were also aware of the importance of keeping informal lines of communication and relationship open.”²²

Perhaps unknown to the others, Phyllis possessed a keen sense of anti-clericalism and was interested in how the Roundtable might help flatten teaching authority in the Anglican Communion. A short anecdote illustrates this: While dreaming up the Roundtable, Phyllis was also one of a distinguished group of board members of a new website, funded by a millionaire in Memphis, called *Explorefaith.org*. At a board meeting in 2005, the marketer for the new site asked a group that included Phyllis, the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, the Rev. Dr. Fred Burnham, the Rt. Rev. Frederick Borsch, and the Rev. Michael Battle, PhD—how the site might reach a wider audience with its content. Someone suggested that the religious and educational titles of those writing for the site (people like Taylor, Borsch, and Battle) might be jettisoned. “People in the pews, or those who have left the pews, don’t want to see ‘The Right Reverend so-and-so.’ It’s off-putting,” he said. “If teaching is good, it doesn’t need the authority of job titles to say so.” A lively debate ensued, including some consternation, until the marketer gestured to Phyllis, who was silently grinning in the corner of the room. “What do you think?”

“I couldn’t agree more,” she said.

Throughout 2007, at Phyllis’s urging and instigation, The Canterbury Roundtable began to brainstorm and create what they offered as a potential fourth vowed order within the Communion: an order of teachers composed of secular (non-religious) scholars. As stated in a proposal that was submitted by the Roundtable to then-archbishop Rowan Williams, the purpose of the Canterbury Order of Teachers (COT) would be “so that every parish or diocese or province within the Anglican Communion, for the benefit of its clergy or laity or their associates, may have access to authoritative scholarship that is both secularly validated as academically sound and also delivered by scholars who, in making the vows of membership into the Order, have attested

to their belief in Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ and Son of God.” The proposal went on to stipulate that members of the COT would be paid for lectures, and that this process would be “administered by the Office of the Principal of the COT.” Phyllis wanted to help educate the laity, as well as find new means of employment for her friends and colleagues. The expectation was that the archbishop would formally commission the order and then appoint said principal to oversee operations. This never happened. After the formal proposal was made to Lambeth in early 2008, the idea fell quietly away.²³

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The Holy Trinity season in Phyllis’s life is ultimately a demonstration of how uneasily she made her way as a religious leader. Her license as a lector and lay eucharistic minister aside, she was usually doing very different work in religion: judging, evaluating, and explaining. But, at times, she was called upon to lead with her spiritual and religious gifts. These were tremulous but exciting moments for her. Vineyard pastor Ken Wilson remembers one of these occasions:

I invited her to speak at my then church, not to do her usual 50,000 foot assessment of what’s happening on the religious landscape, but to be the Phyllis I was getting to know. She seemed terrified, which was so difficult for me to accept at the time because I viewed her as so capable and confident and to use an old charismatic term, anointed. But she was clearly conflicted and it just didn’t make sense to me. She came in February 2005 and did narrative preaching about Melchezidek. A non-religious visitor brought by my daughter had a classic Pentecostal initiation experience during Phyllis’ talk. On Sunday, I invited her to pray over people one at a time, give a blessing with anointing of oil, like old line Pentecostal healer-line style (something we’d never done before) and she did it for maybe ninety minutes after the service ended. People just lined up and stayed like they would for a famous healer holy person.²⁴

The “50,000 foot assessment” would remain the most comfortable position for Phyllis. She would never participate again in a religious service in those more intimate capacities.