



Seminary must survive for gay rights and for Chelsea

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By Matt Foreman

Look across the political landscape and you won't find many profiles in courage when it comes to fighting for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (L.G.B.T.) people. In fact, elected officials who actually have been willing to risk their seats by taking a stand for us are few and far between.

Contrast that with what is going on within many religious denominations, perhaps most notably the Episcopal Church. The church is facing the real threat of schism here at home and of being expelled from the worldwide Anglican Communion. Why? Because it will not back down from taking a stand for us. It refuses to stop ordaining openly gay and lesbian people as priests. It refuses to rescind its election of Gene Robinson as a bishop — the first openly gay, noncelibate priest to be ordained in the Anglican Communion — and it continues to nominate gay and lesbian priests in elections for bishops. It refuses to back away from blessing our unions. In sum, it categorically rejects those who insist that same-sex love is abominably sinful.

All of this has received such widespread attention because the Episcopal Church has always had an influence on American culture disproportionate to the size of its membership. Most of America's founders and 13 presidents, for example, were Episcopalian.

If you think it is L.G.B.T. people alone who are leading the charge in the Episcopal Church, you are wrong. It is the core — i.e., heterosexual — bedrock, laity and clergy alike, who believe in our fundamental humanity. This deep-seated conviction comes from literally millions of heart-to-heart conversations over many years. But it is also clear that the way in which Episcopalian clergy, and by extension the laity, have been educated provides the scriptural, intellectual and visceral foundation of this revolution.

The seminary that has led the way in building this foundation is General Theological Seminary in New York, the oldest seminary in the entire Anglican Communion. It was heavily involved in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s and played an essential role in opening the priesthood to women. General Theological Seminary's graduates include dozens of church bishops at the forefront of the fight for L.G.B.T. rights as well as hundreds of clergy and, yes, Gene Robinson. Right now, one of the nominees in the election for bishop of the diocese of Newark is a gay G.T.S. alumnus.

Like many small educational institutions, G.T.S. is facing tough times. It is burdened by the enormous cost of maintaining dozens of historic buildings, costs compounded by years of deferred maintenance. Its ugly 1960s building fronting Ninth Ave. is also falling apart. And conservative dioceses across the country are refusing to send seminarians to G.T.S. precisely because it is pro-L.G.B.T.

G.T.S. is thinking creatively about raising money. It is converting buildings on 10th Ave. into a conference center named after Archbishop Desmond Tutu, another champion of full inclusion for L.G.B.T people. But that is not enough and the seminary's most significant tangible asset is the land it sits on. So, like every other landowner in Manhattan, it wants to draw on that asset, tear down the monstrosity on Ninth Ave. and replace it with a new seminary building topped by (gasp!) apartments that would be sold at market rates, thereby generating the money the seminary desperately needs to survive.

The opposition's vitriol has been appalling, with no appreciation of the seminary's plight, its essential role in moving society on the rights of women and L.G.B.T. people or, for that matter, any respect for what the seminary actually does.

Residents of the 15-story building across the street denounce the seminary as violating the scale of the avenue for proposing a building that is the exact same height as their own. Residents of the multimillion-dollar townhouses on the adjacent "seminary" blocks say that they do not care if the seminary goes under, failing to recognize that when Chelsea was redlined in the 1960s and 1970s, the seminary provided deeply discounted mortgages for scores of the very same townhouses these landowners now enjoy.

I went to a public meeting and was disgusted by my neighbors mocking the gay seminarians who shared their experiences of G.T.S.

There is probably a middle ground between the seminary's proposal and those who think it would be better to have a big-box store on Ninth Ave. than to give G.T.S. an inch. The only way to get there, however, is through genuine dialogue, not by the vicious demagoguery fueled by some elected state officials and knee-jerk absolutists.

The national L.G.B.T. community needs General Theological Seminary to survive and thrive. So does Chelsea.

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