



## Robinson, V. Gene (b. 1947)

by Linda Rapp

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Gene Robinson in San Francisco in 2005. Photograph by Flickr contributor janinsanfran. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.0 License.

The Right Reverend Gene Robinson is the first--and, so far, only--openly gay man to be consecrated a bishop of the Episcopal Church. His election was strongly supported by the members of the New Hampshire diocese that he has long served, but it has become a contentious issue among conservatives within the Anglican Communion.

Robinson comes from a family of modest means. His parents, Victor and Imogene Robinson, were sharecroppers on a tobacco farm in Fayette County, Kentucky.

Robinson's birth on May 29, 1947 was an extremely difficult one. After six doctors were unable to deliver him, a pediatrician used forceps to bring him into the world, albeit paralyzed on one side and with a crushed skull from the procedure. The pediatrician molded the baby's head into a normal shape in order not to add to the grief of the young parents, who he expected would soon be burying their infant.

When hospital personnel asked Victor Robinson for the name to put on the birth and death certificates of his son, he used the name that he and his wife had chosen for a hoped-for daughter, Vicki Jean, but changed the spelling of the middle name to Gene. The infelicity of the first name seemed irrelevant under the circumstances.

Even after Robinson survived a month in an incubator and his paralysis abated, doctors warned his parents to continue to expect the worst. They said "that I would never walk or talk, that I would be a total vegetable," stated Robinson. As a result, his father eventually told him, "I couldn't take any joy in you and your development because I always thought each step was going to be the last thing."

Despite the dire predictions, Robinson grew up to be a healthy, normal child. He did well academically in school and also showed musical talent, singing in a quartet and playing clarinet in award-winning school bands.

Robinson's academic excellence earned him acceptance at prestigious Princeton University, but because he was offered only a half-scholarship, his family could not afford to send him there. Instead, he took a full scholarship at the University of the South, an Episcopal college in Sewanee, Tennessee.

Robinson had grown up as a devout member of the church of the Disciples of Christ. The evangelical church, to which his parents still belong, was an important source of support to the people in the hard-scrabble region from which he came. "The church was probably the only community anybody had outside of blood kin," stated Robinson.

During the summers, the community gathered for revival meetings led by itinerant preachers. At one such meeting, the twelve-year-old Robinson accepted Jesus Christ as his savior and was baptized.

Robinson entered the University of the South in 1965 as a pre-med student with the intention of becoming a

pediatrician. He soon realized, however, that his true calling was to the priesthood, and he changed his concentration to American Studies. He felt at home in the Episcopal Church and was confirmed in that faith in his senior year. After graduating in 1969 he embarked upon studies for the ministry at the General Theological Seminary in New York City.

Robinson had recognized his homosexual orientation at a young age but repressed it out of fear of rejection by the members of his extremely conservative community. "Growing up, there was no one to say, 'Yes, I can be gay, and Christian, and a real contributor to the community,'" he recalled, "So at the age of twelve or thirteen, I began doing what an awful lot of us of that era did: we started pretending to be someone we weren't. We learned to *pretend* to be developing in the ways other kids were, which leads to a kind of self-isolation and self-alienation that is pretty horrible."

After entering the seminary, Robinson spent two years in psychological therapy, trying to change his sexual orientation.

Robinson spent his third year as a seminarian interning at the University of Vermont as a chaplain. While there, he met and began dating a student, Isabella Martin. "Desperately want[ing] to get married and have kids," Robinson was eager for the relationship to succeed. He was honest with Martin, though, telling her early on that his previous relationships had been with other men. He believed, however, that he had reached the point of being ready to be a good husband. After discussing the situation, Robinson and Martin became engaged, and they married the following summer.

Robinson received his divinity degree in 1973. He was ordained as a deacon in June of that year and as a priest in December.

Robinson's first post was in a Ridgewood, New Jersey church where he served as assistant to the rector. He was successful at parish ministry, but after about a year, he decided to take a new course: he and his wife bought part of her parents' New Hampshire farm to establish a retreat center, The Sign of the Dove. Financing the project was difficult, but Robinson's vision and commitment drew supporters and allowed him to set up a highly successful program. "It was a wonderful addition to the diocese," said the Reverend Randy Dales, "and many, many congregations utilized it."

Robinson and his wife are the parents of two daughters, Jamee and Ella, born in 1977 and 1981, respectively. He rejoiced in caring for the children. Babies "probably bring out my maternal instincts," he quipped.

Although he could joke later on, at the time Robinson struggled with the fact that despite his genuine affection for his wife, his joy in fatherhood, and his attempts to change his sexual orientation, he could no longer deny that he was gay. Reading John Fortunato's *Embracing the Exile: Healing Journeys for Gay Christians* (1982), he said, "changed my life" and "unlocked the rest of my life for me." Robinson was finally at peace with the idea that God loved him as he was, a gay man.

While Robinson was coming to terms with his homosexuality, he and his wife went through several years of therapy before concluding in 1986 that divorce would be best for both of them. When they received their divorce decree, they were accompanied by a priest, to whose church they then went for a special ceremony in which they promised to work together in raising their children, returned their wedding rings to each other, and received Communion together.

In addition to running retreats at the Sign of the Dove, Robinson had spent seven years as Youth Ministries Coordinator for seven New England dioceses (1978-1985) and had become the Executive Secretary of Province I of the church in 1983, but he feared that he might not be able to continue as a priest once it was

known that he was divorcing because he was gay. Robinson and his soon-to-be-ex-wife went together to discuss the situation with their bishop.

The Right Reverend Douglas Theuner later stated, "Now, this was 1986, so I could have said, 'Well, fella, you're out altogether.' But that never occurred to me to do, frankly."

In fact, Theuner was so impressed with Robinson--"I've never met anybody yet who didn't recognize his competence," he stated--that in 1988 he took him on as his Canon to the Ordinary (i.e., executive assistant).

In that role, Robinson successfully undertook numerous projects, including AIDS education, clergy wellness, and combating prejudice in all its forms. Louie Crew, the founder of Integrity, an organization of glbtq Episcopalians and their allies, believes that Robinson was effective because "he was in a class all by himself--not drawing attention to himself, but in group process, in getting people to understand what conflicts we needed to resolve, what vision we needed to shape, and all the while never dropping a stitch from the tapestry we were trying to weave together, because he kept track of them all. He's brilliant, and extremely sensitive to people's needs without being maudlin about it: this wonderful sense of inspiring the best that you can do working together."

In addition to having success in his work, Robinson found happiness in his personal life. In 1986, needing to use or lose his frequent-flyer miles, he went to St. Croix after seeing a travel ad in *The Advocate*, and he met Mark Andrew, who was then working at the Peace Corps office in Washington, D.C. After a year and a half of long-distance dating, Andrew moved to New Hampshire to share his life with Robinson.

Andrew worked in a New Hampshire HIV/AIDS program and subsequently got a job with the state's Department of Safety.

Robinson's work in the diocese of New Hampshire and the wider church impressed people so much that many suggested that he would make a good bishop. Robinson himself had been feeling such a vocation. After prayerful consideration and discussions with his family and colleagues including Bishop Theuner--all of whom were extremely supportive--he decided to become a candidate for the episcopate.

The first five times that he participated in the election process, he received strong consideration but was not nominated, mainly because the dioceses were wary of the controversy that would inevitably come with the prospect of an openly gay bishop. Robinson did receive nominations in the dioceses of Newark, New Jersey and Rochester, New York in 1998 and 1999, respectively, but was not elected.

In 2003 Robinson was one of five nominees for bishop of New Hampshire. With a strong show of support from the people whom he had long served, he won a majority of both the clergy and lay ballots at the election convention on June 7.

The election needed to be ratified at the General Convention of the church in August. Approval is usually routine, but in Robinson's case the ensuing two months were tumultuous. Some conservative Episcopalians, including a group of bishops known as the American Anglican Council, were vocal in their opposition to Robinson. In July an international group of conservative Anglican clergy--many from the southern hemisphere--issued a statement that if Robinson's election were confirmed and if liturgies for the blessing of same-sex unions were adopted at the upcoming General Convention, it "would shatter the church," a statement that was in some ways a self-fulfilling prophecy since events would prove that they were prepared to do exactly that.

Robinson not only came under close scrutiny but was also the subject of various false reports, including

ones that he had abandoned his wife and family for Andrew and that he was responsible for a web site that was two links away from a site with pornographic content.

The first claim was vigorously denied by his family. Indeed, Ella Robinson spoke before the Committee on the Consecration of Bishops and read a letter of support from her mother. Church leaders investigating the second charge quickly determined that although Robinson had co-founded Concord Outright, a support organization for glbtq teens, in 1995, he had not been involved with the group since 1998 and that the link in question on their web site had been added years later.

At the last moment Robinson's confirmation was nearly derailed when a man accused him of "homosexual harassment" in the form of inappropriate touching at a meeting of Province I in 1999. Bishop Gordon Scruton investigated the allegation and discovered that the touching consisted of Robinson's placing a hand on the complainant's arm or back during two conversations. Although the accuser said that the contact, which took place in public, made him uncomfortable, "he acknowledged," wrote Scruton, "that other people could have seen the exchange as natural and normal." The man declined to make a formal charge against Robinson. With the matter closed, the House of Bishops proceeded to the vote on Robinson, who was elected by a comfortable margin.

Robinson's election set off a media frenzy as print and broadcast news outlets clamored for interviews. After Robinson returned to New Hampshire, he was deluged with mail. Some of it was hateful, and some writers even made death threats, but Robinson also received scores of letters and e-mails each day from glbtq people, many of whom felt that it was too risky for them to come out of the closet but who found encouragement in Robinson's election.

In advance of his consecration on November 2, 2003, Robinson made a point of visiting as many of the parishes in his diocese as possible in order to meet with church members and respond to their questions and concerns personally.

Due to intense media interest, Robinson's consecration ceremony took place at the 6,000-seat Whittemore Center, the hockey rink of the University of New Hampshire, the largest venue available in the area. Because of the threats against Robinson, police provided high security, but no violence occurred. The notoriously homophobic Baptist preacher Fred Phelps of Topeka, Kansas turned up with about a dozen protesters, but they were far outnumbered by some 300 University of New Hampshire students staging a counter-protest.

Robinson stated, "It's important to note that the day before the consecration I received a note from Matthew Shepard's mother, which was just so meaningful to me. In it she said, 'I know that Matthew will be smiling down upon you tomorrow.' I think of that in relation to what Fred Phelps is doing."

Inside the ice arena, the traditional ceremony of installation went on without incident. Sharing the solemn but joyous occasion with Robinson were his life partner, his two daughters, and his ex-wife.

After becoming a bishop, Robinson continued his visits to congregations because he saw it as "an enormous educational and spiritual opportunity" to have "remarkably deep and meaningful discussions about what we really believe and why we believe it."

In a December 2003 interview in *The Advocate* Robinson stated, "I want my ministry to be about noticing people on the edges and bringing them into the center of the church." This goal was rendered more difficult in 2005 when a commission of the Anglican Church called for a moratorium on the ordination of homosexual bishops and on blessings for same-sex couples.

Ever optimistic, Robinson said, "I believe with my whole heart that the Archbishop of Nigeria [Peter Akinola, a staunch opponent of the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy] and I are going to be in Heaven together. And we're going to get along together because God won't have it any other way. So we better start practicing now."

The issues remain divisive and unresolved, however. Several conservative congregations have left the Episcopal Church over the question of Robinson's ordination and have affiliated themselves with Akinola, who supports draconian legislation in Nigeria that prescribes prison sentences for homosexual activity and even positive discussion of homosexual issues.

At a summit of the worldwide Anglican Communion in February 2007, Anglican leaders called upon the American church to ban the blessing of same-sex couples and the election of gay bishops by September 30 or face expulsion from the Anglican Communion. It is unclear what the response of the Episcopal Church will be to this ultimatum, but it has a history of cautious support of gay people and a theological tradition generally opposed to the fundamentalism that characterizes many of the conservatives.

Since Robinson became a bishop, his workload has been enormous. In addition to performing his duties in the church, he is frequently invited to address organizations promoting social justice. Eventually stress took a toll on him, and he found himself becoming dependent on alcohol. Although his work had in no way suffered, he voluntarily sought treatment in February 2006.

Robinson and his family appeared in Daniel Karlslake's documentary *For the Bible Tells Me So*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2007. The poignant film tells the diverse stories of five Christian families in which a son or daughter came out as gay or lesbian. Reviewer Kyle Buchanan stated that "few gay viewers and their families will be unable to relate to that journey or to this film's sensitive, moving depiction of it."

The central message that Robinson wishes to impart through his ministry is "that God loves us beyond our wildest imagining . . . but," he concedes, "for oppressed people, that message is harder to believe. I think that for people of color, for women, for gay and lesbian folk, they've been told that they are 'less than' for so long that it comes as especially good news to them, but it's also harder for them to believe."

With specific regard to glbtq people, he stated, "We've had more and more people coming out, more and more people becoming self-affirming. Still, self affirmation only goes so far. But if I say, in a clerical collar, that God thinks I'm all right, it carries a different weight: it means that I have the audacity to say, 'Not only am I self-affirming, but God is affirming me.'"

On June 7, 2008, Robinson and Andrew entered into a civil union in advance of his trip to England to attend the once-in-a-decade Lambeth Conference, from which Robinson has been excluded from full participation.

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