

Q&A

Keeping Hope, Keeping Faith

PHOTO BY TIM COBURN

Lambda Legal Executive Director Kevin Cathcart and openly gay Bishop V. Gene Robinson of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire discuss the successes of the LGBT civil rights movement — and how far we have to go.

GR: In 1986, the Episcopal Church held its first conference on AIDS at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. It was through compassion about the AIDS crisis that the Episcopal Church first got involved with out gay people, and in a big way. Before then, there weren't that many out gay people. Because of the epidemic, large numbers of gay men suddenly had no choice but to come out, because people were getting sick, and it was visible.

KC: AIDS radically changed the equation. Between the epidemic and the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision upholding the legality of what were then called "sodomy" laws, there was a huge amount of institution-building in the community. That was what happened with Lambda Legal. You can look at the budget and the number of staff we had and, post-*Bowers*, there was a huge jump — because people got mad. They got mad enough to write a check. They got mad enough to join organizations like Lambda Legal and others all around the country. *Bowers* was a slap in the face while people were dying.

GR: Around that time, we formed the National Episcopal AIDS Coalitions, and created an educational campaign that turned out to be really controversial and, I think, brilliant. The campaign was "Our Church has AIDS." We had buttons, banners, slogans, everything. Of course, this is while there was still a huge stigma around the disease and gay people. I'll never forget it. One of the coalition's first conferences was at a cathedral in Cincinnati — and we were thrown out! We put up this banner that said, "Our Church has AIDS," and they went ballistic. We had to move to another building. But the underlying message was that our church has gay people. We weren't doing it for that reason, but as I look back on it now, I can see that it's another piece of that puzzle about why things have changed.

KC: One of the challenges in HIV work now is that the epidemic has almost gone underground again, because it's gone underground in the white gay community. Statistics now show that 68 percent of new cases are among African-American women. This is so vastly out of proportion to the percentages of the population. Obviously, you can't compare the world I'm living in today to the 1980s. But for many other people, gay and straight, the world looks too much like the 80s. I don't know how you keep people on fire around an issue for 20 years. But we've got to figure it out, because there are communities now that are being ravaged. I think of Washington, D.C., where the rates of HIV infection are higher per capita than almost all of Africa.

GR: It's always been a tough sell getting people to care for the poor and the dispossessed. One of the things that puzzles and frustrates me is how unwilling people are to see the connections between the "isms." When I see racism and sexism in the gay white male community, I want to grab those people and shake them, and say, "Do you not see these connections? Can't you extrapolate from your own experience and then put that to work?"

KC: Part of the problem is that some people have such a narrow, crabbed



KEVIN CATHCART AND BISHOP V. GENE ROBINSON

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view of justice. They think that dealing with sexism helps women, and dealing with racism helps people of color. Well, obviously, dealing with racism helps people of color, but what white people don’t get is that racism hurts white people, too! I don’t want to make white people out to be the big victims, because we are not, but no one can be whole in a society like our own.

GR: None of us are free until we are all free, yes.

KC: You may not see the prices that you’re paying, and you may only see the benefits you’re getting and you may decide you don’t want to risk any of those for something that’s harder to quantify. But then you will have a very narrow view of what victory is, because that victory is going to look a lot like the status quo. Aim higher! The truth is we have to raise our expectations even more. We have to push as hard as we can for justice, and that’s what we did and will continue to do in New Jersey. We fought for marriage, and even though the legislature has tried to gavel that discussion to a halt with civil unions, we will continue.

GR: As I always say, that toothpaste isn’t going to go back into the tube. I remember something you said which really helped me

be a little more patient around the marriage fight. You mentioned how, historically speaking, the Supreme Court reflects the movement that it sees in the courts around the country. There has to be a tipping point in the states before the issue can come to the Supreme Court. It’s an incremental process, and we have to be wise about it.

KC: Exactly. At the time of the *Bowers* decision, a majority of states still had sodomy laws on the books. Many things changed between 1986 and 2003 when we won *Lawrence*, but one important factor was that, thanks to our work and that of others in the movement, only 13 states still had sodomy laws on the books. At that point, the Court is much more likely to act. Successes like this can be a double-edged sword sometimes, because we’ve raised people’s expectations so quickly that some become disillusioned by any setbacks, for example in our marriage work. I’m glad that people have higher expectations — I just wish they were more connected to our history so that people wouldn’t get bogged down by their impatience at how long some of this is taking.

GR: I am incorrigibly hopeful. This is partly because I’ve seen such miracles in the past, and I think that’s what we have in store for the future. I see God’s hand at work in the numbers of people coming out, the

movement that we have made, and so on. And as a person of faith, I believe that God will not be thwarted. And because God is always for the best for us, I believe God is in our movement. That is not to say that everything we say or do is the right thing or every decision we make is the right one. But at the end of the day we are doing the work of justice.

KC: Well, even as a person who is not incorrigibly hopeful and also comes from a more secular perspective, I do think it’s a gift to be able to do this work and make a difference in the world. I see how our work touches so many people, and it’s a good thing — even though there is still a lot of hard work for us to do.