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Gay reverend retires

Lake Worth Rev. Nolan bids well

By J. W. ARNOLD
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Partners (since 1955) Robert C. Pingpank (l) and Canon Richard T. Nolan (r) in the Chapel of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Lake Worth, Fla.

As of the end of 2008, the Rev. Canon Richard Nolan has hung up his collar, after preaching his final sermon as the volunteer priest-in-residence and chaplain to Integrity, the gay Episcopalian fellowship, at St. Andrews Episcopal Church in Lake Worth.

While Nolan has led an impressive, five decade career as minister, theologian and educator, during much of that time he has also been open about his sexuality in an era when the Episcopal Church maintained a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy at best.

This may have been because Nolan didn’t see his sexual orientation as sinful because he never thought the church infallible.

“If homosexuality is a sin, then someone is saying God made a mistake,” he says. “And I don’t think He did.”

Nolan met his partner of more than 50 years, Bob Pingpank, a retired teacher, when the two were freshmen at Trinity College in Connecticut. The two soon became inseparable.

It was Pingpank who drove with Nolan a year later to Massachusetts for Nolan’s interview to begin the process to enter the priesthood. Later that evening, they encountered the priest who conducted his interview at a local gay bar. The priest told Nolan he would recommend him enthusiastically for the program.

But it wasn’t easy as Nolan journeyed through a career in the church with Pingpank along for the ride. In one parish, the two resided in a duplex with separate front doors, two kitchens, and two driveways, but “sharing one bedroom. It was all for appearances,” although some parishioners got “a clue,” he says.

During the 70s, Nolan worked very closely with youth and became concerned the kids might become the subject of teasing because their priest lived with a man. Nolan came out to the youth and gave them the option of sharing this information with their parents. Most weren't phased by the revelation.

"It was a typical New England thing that people didn't talk about," Nolan recalls. "But we talked about it. We have come such a long way since then."

In recent years since retiring to Palm Beach County, the couple have become public figures, serving as the grand marshals of the Lake Worth pride parade and the subjects of numerous news articles about the fight for gay marriage—their relationship has lasted longer than most heterosexual unions, they note.

Pingpank is still a "lay Eucharistic minister," working with the church. However, Nolan is ready to step away from the pulpit.

He says he particularly enjoyed serving the congregation at St. Andrew's, which has a large gay congregation and has been at the forefront of gay rights both in the larger Episcopal Church and the community.

"It's no longer an issue (at St. Andrews).....if someone were to come and preach on something of a gay nature, I think people would be yawning." He adds, with a chuckle, "It's great to end on a high note, rather than force the congregation to take bets on whether I'll make it through the service. It's time."