

Gene Robinson takes on more risky ventures: Bishop publishes first book

by [John Dart](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

The death threats have lessened over the five years since Episcopalians affirmed V. Gene Robinson's election as their church's first openly gay bishop. But the man who symbolizes, for many, a defiance of a traditional understanding of scripture and sexual morality will soon be in a risky spotlight again.

His first book is out this month, he will tie the civil-union knot with his male partner in June under a new state law, and he will be an uninvited bishop hanging "around the edges" this July in England during the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops.

"Going to Lambeth, though not as a participant, puts me in a certain amount of danger," Robinson said in an interview. Robinson and his partner, Mark Andrews, wore bullet-proof vests at the bishop's consecration in November 2003, and they had security protection for a few months before and after that event.

Since January 1, New Hampshire has allowed same-gender civil unions that carry many of the legal, financial and insurance benefits that accompany traditional marriage in the state.

"I'm certainly not going to put myself at physical risk without providing my partner with the protections that civil law provides," he said. "That's no more and no less than any husband or wife would want to do for his or her spouse."

On the steps of the state capitol in Concord, the couple's lawyer will solemnize the union. "Then we will go across the street to St. Paul's Church for prayers of thanksgiving and blessing for our union," Robinson wrote in his book, *In the Eye of the Storm* (Seabury).

The couple considered omitting the blessing and simply taking part in a eucharistic service, but decided that even that would be taken by opponents as "an intentional affront" to the worldwide Anglican Communion. "And because the blessing of [same-sex] unions has gone on in the Diocese of New Hampshire since 1996 (seven years

before my election), why should the bishop not be entitled to the same pastoral care offered to other people in the diocese?"

In a foreword to the book, Nobel peace laureate Desmond Tutu, the retired archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, declared that Robinson does not demonize his opponents or act in a vengeful way.

"After all the calumny heaped upon him he might have been forgiven for hoping that his adversaries would end up in the warmer place," Tutu said. "The Bible has been used to justify racism, slavery, and the humiliation of women," he said, adding that now gay men and lesbian women are being "penalized for something about which they could do nothing—their sexual orientation."

Robinson was asked to write his book by Nancy Fitzgerald, executive editor of Episcopal-related Church Publishing. "Beyond identifying him as the 'gay bishop,' most people know next to nothing about who this man is," she said. Some of his sermons and lectures were reworked for chapters, and Robinson wrote new material during a sabbatical trip around the Pacific Rim with his partner last fall.

Interviewed at New York's General Theological Seminary, from which he graduated in 1973, Robinson was asked to identify the most common misstatement made about him. "The most persistent and hurtful one is that I abandoned my wife and children to move in with my lover." It was an amicable divorce, he said.

"I did not meet the person who has been my partner for 20 years until two months after my wife was remarried," he said. "My daughters could not be more devoted to me; one was with me at the 2003 Episcopal General Convention, and my former wife was one of my presenters at my consecration."

He and his wife "went back to church to end the marriage," he said. "We asked for each other's forgiveness, pledged our joint raising of our children, and gave our wedding rings back to each other" in the context of a Eucharist. "It was one of the most feeling and wonderful moments of my life."

Robinson said he hopes that readers of his book will find out "how theologically conservative I am." Many conservative Episcopalians, he said, have told him they see the church's relaxed stance on gay and lesbian people "as a precursor to the deconstruction of virtually everything that we believe."

Some critics, he said, may be thinking of John Shelby Spong, the former bishop of Newark, New Jersey, an early advocate of gay and lesbian inclusion in church life. "Either he evolved, or devolved, depending on your perspective, into serious questioning of the bodily resurrection, the virgin birth and the divinity of Christ," Robinson said.

"There are still people who write asking me to relinquish my office, but I say that I could be hit and killed by a bus this afternoon and this issue would simply not go away." He said he has no interest in being a martyr. "Frankly, because of the resurrection and my faith, I don't go into this fearfully. It has to do with what God is doing in the world with God's gay and lesbian children."