

Episcopal bishop who won heresy trial dies at 87

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WASHINGTON (RNS) The Rt. Rev. Walter C. Righter, an Episcopal bishop whose victory at a 1996 heresy trial played a key role in the push for gay rights in the church, died on Sunday (Sept. 11) at the age of 87.

"I look around the Episcopal Church today where there are no impediments to the ordination of gay or lesbian members ... none of that would have happened without Bishop Righter's leadership," said the Rev. Susan Russell of All Saints Church in Pasadena, Calif., former president of the pro-gay group Integrity USA.

Righter was bishop of Iowa from 1972 to 1988, during which time he ordained the first female deacon in Iowa. From 1989 to 1991, he served as assistant bishop in the Diocese of Newark.

Righter ordained Barry Lee Stopfel, a noncelibate gay man, as a deacon in 1990. Ten bishops brought charges against Righter, alleging that he violated both the doctrine of the church and his ordination vows by ordaining Stopfel.

In a verdict issued on May 15, 1996, a church court stated that the Episcopal Church "has no doctrine prohibiting the ordination of homosexuals," and that Bishop Righter did not contradict any "core doctrine" of the church.

A member of the court, Bishop Cabell Tennis, told The New York Times that the verdict offered neither an opinion "on the morality of same-gender relationships" nor guidance on whether a bishop "should or should not" ordain sexually active gays and lesbians.

When asked after the trial to speculate on the future of homosexuality in the church, Righter told The Times, "I think we're making too much out of the bedroom."

The Episcopal Church now has two openly gay bishops and allows for the ordination of gays and lesbians in most dioceses, and will likely debate formalized rites for same-sex unions at its General Convention next year.

"When the history of the movement for the full inclusion of the LGBT community in our church is written, there is no doubt that Walter Righter will be one of its great heroes," said Russell.