

Gil Caldwell, a 'foot soldier' for civil rights, turns his eye to LGBT rights

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DURHAM, N.C. (RNS) Gil Caldwell walked onto the campus of Duke Divinity School, leaning on a cane, alongside thousands of Duke alumni arriving for a reunion. But unlike the others, he wasn't returning for a stroll down memory lane.

He had come here for a glimpse of what might have been.

Some 60 years ago, Caldwell said, Duke rejected his application because of his race. But now he had arrived, at age 81, after a lifetime of civil rights activism, to finally check Duke off his bucket list.

Instead of Duke, Caldwell had headed to Boston University School of Theology, where an up-and-coming preacher named Martin Luther King Jr. earned his doctorate in 1955. Caldwell marched with King to protest school segregation in Boston, and followed him to Washington in 1963 for his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech. Caldwell was a "foot soldier" in King's civil rights army, he said.

He finally made it to Durham to close out a social justice conference focused on a newer movement—the effort to secure full inclusion of LGBT people in the United Methodist Church.

"In some ways there is a possibility that on gay rights and marriage equality, God is speaking more through the judiciary than God is speaking through the United Methodist Church," Caldwell said in his sermon at a gay-friendly United Methodist church just three miles away from the seminary he said denied him admission.

As he walked through the campus, he introduced himself to students to let them know his personal history of segregation—the first African-American students weren't admitted to Duke until 1962, school officials said—and inquired about whether LGBT issues are discussed on campus.

Unlike some of his peers who bristle at the comparison, Caldwell sees parallels between the civil rights and gay rights movements and isn't shy about saying so. He was a founder of both Black Methodists for Church Renewal and United Methodists of Color for a Fully Inclusive Church.

He had to confront his own views on tolerance when Malcolm Boyd, an Episcopal priest and activist whose writings he had admired, came out as gay in 1977.

"Do you deny the impact he's had on your life? Do you burn his books?" he asked himself. "How foolish that would be. And that, of course, was clearly an awakening for me."

Caldwell said that "epiphany moment" led him to protest the official United Methodist policy that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." He was arrested, along with gay members of his denomination, after disrupting its quadrennial General Conference in 2000. A decade and a half later, he officiated at the wedding of two black gay men—"a beautiful ceremony that I will always remember."

He contributes to the Truth in Progress website with Marilyn Bennett, a white lesbian who joined him in the 2000 act of civil disobedience. They are co-producing a documentary called *From Selma to Stonewall: Are We There Yet?* The duo, who fondly call each other "Elder Brother" and "Younger Sister," have visited sites that are key to civil and gay rights history.

Bennett, too, sees parallels in their twin fights for justice. They visited Selma, Alabama, where Caldwell marched with King 50 years ago this spring and where James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister, was fatally attacked in 1965.

"When he was there at the Reeb memorial, he was comparing how here was this white man who had come to Selma," said Bennett, 53, the former executive director of the Reconciling Ministries Network. "Gil, as a black man, as a straight man, is an ally for gays and lesbians."

Caldwell, who likes to quote King saying "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," is always looking for ways to build bridges between different groups of activists seeking justice. Gay organizations should be more inclusive of black leaders, he says, and black groups need to be more welcoming of gay leaders.

After listening to a panel here of three white gay former United Methodists, he spontaneously asked attendees to sing “There’s a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place.” He gathered black attendees over lunch to discuss the treatment of gay people at historically black colleges and universities.

Not everyone welcomes his perspective, including the Coalition of African American Pastors, a conservative group that he denounced in an open letter after the group criticized President Obama’s support of gay marriage.

“There is an ‘ugliness’ to using the Bible to deny some members of ‘God’s family’ the right to legally marry their same-sex partner,” he wrote in the 2012 open letter that appeared in the *Washington Blade*, a gay publication.

Bill Owens, the coalition’s president and a civil rights activist who protested to desegregate lunch counters in Nashville, Tenn., said he doesn’t see the parallels that Caldwell does between African-American and gay rights.

“We did not march for same-sex marriage,” Owens said.

Thomas Lambrecht, vice president of the conservative Good News movement within the United Methodist Church, said he applauds Caldwell’s decades of racial reconciliation work, but “at the same time, I don’t believe that LGBTQ rights are in the same category as racial civil rights.”

Eboni Marshall Turman, director of Duke Divinity School’s Office of Black Church Studies, said that even as the United Methodist Church grapples with next steps in its decades-long fight over homosexuality, no historically black denomination has issued a formal statement of inclusion for openly LGBT people, either.

“In the African-American Christian tradition, he certainly is a pioneer,” she said of Caldwell.

That’s exactly why Jimmy Creech recommended Caldwell to preach at the mid-April Durham conference.

“I wanted North Carolinians to know that there’s a United Methodist pastor who is African American who is very strongly in support of this,” said Creech, who was defrocked as a United Methodist minister more than a decade ago after presiding at gay weddings. “And he’s not just some young guy. He’s someone who’s been in the trenches for a long time.”

Caldwell, who declared at the conference that “God is not finished with me yet,” said he sees no immediate end to his work.

As Baltimore grappled with protests that turned violent over the death of a black man in police custody and the Supreme Court heard arguments on the national legalization of same-sex marriage, he blogged about the need for “justice multi-tasking.”

““Black and Gay Lives Matter;”” he wrote on the Truth in Progress website. “It is not either/or, but both/and.”

*These stories are part of a series on the intersection of faith, ethnicity and sexuality, with support from the Arcus Foundation.*