

Gil Caldwell, King's 'foot soldier' for civil rights, works for LGBT rights, too: People

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [June 10, 2015](#) issue

Gil Caldwell, 81, visited the campus of Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina, for a glimpse of what might have been.

Some 60 years ago, Caldwell said, Duke rejected his application because of his race. He headed to Boston University School of Theology, where Martin Luther King Jr. earned his doctorate in 1955. Caldwell marched with King to protest school segregation in Boston and followed him to Washington, D.C., in 1963 for his "I Have a Dream" speech. Caldwell was a "foot soldier" in King's civil rights army, he said.

Later, he was a founder of both Black Methodists for Church Renewal and United Methodists of Color for a Fully Inclusive Church. He was in Durham this spring to close out a social justice conference focused on the full inclusion of LGBT people in the United Methodist Church.

"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.

As he walked through Duke's campus, he introduced himself to students and told them his history—the first African-American students weren't admitted to Duke until 1962, school officials said—and asked whether LGBT issues are discussed on campus.

He confronted his own views when Malcolm Boyd, an Episcopal priest and activist whose writings he admired, came out as gay in 1977. "Do you deny the impact he's had on your life?" he asked himself. "How foolish that would be."

That led Caldwell to protest United Methodist policy that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." He was arrested with others after they disrupted the denomination's General Conference in 2000. Later, he officiated at the wedding of two black gay men—"a beautiful ceremony that I will always remember."

Not everyone welcomes his perspective, including the Coalition of African American Pastors. "We did not march for same-sex marriage," said Bill Owens, the coalition's president and a civil rights activist who protested to desegregate lunch counters in Nashville, Tennessee.

Eboni Marshall Turman, director of Duke Divinity School's Office of Black Church Studies, noted that no historically black denomination has issued a formal statement of inclusion for LGBT people.

"In the African-American Christian tradition, he certainly is a pioneer," she said of Caldwell. —Religion News Service