

Behind church doors: A PBS documentary

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [December 28, 2004](#) issue

When award-winning documentary filmmakers Alan and Susan Raymond set out to make *The Congregation*, they may have imagined they were taking a respite from the hot topics of their previous films—wartime Bosnia, New York police, and homosexuality in America. But the two years they spent observing First United Methodist Church of Germantown in Philadelphia turned out to be anything but placid.

The Raymonds captured on film associate minister Beth Stroud's coming out as a lesbian, which led to her defrocking this month by her denomination (see [news report](#) in this issue). When the film airs on PBS on December 29, viewers will likely be lured by references to this controversy. (The video can be obtained at www.videoverite.tv.)

The film begins, however, with another kind of controversy: the conflict between parishioners who support the new pastor, Fred Day, and those loyal to the dynamic preaching and activist politics of the previous minister, Ted Loder, who served the church for 37 years. One squirms as members openly discuss Day's failings, and one feels for Day as people leave the church, budget problems arise and consultants are brought in to arbitrate. Day tries to stay above the fray, aware that the dispute is more about the church's discernment of its soul than about his career. But it is hard to believe him as he insists he does not take the criticism personally.

Stroud's coming-out takes over the latter half of the movie. Surprisingly, the event reunites the congregation. Stroud seems an exemplary minister to youth; she presents her faith to teenagers with sensitivity. She is consistently affable. In her coming-out sermon she notes her partner's skittishness at being a pastor's wife, and promises her that she doesn't have to wear a big hat unless she wants to. The film can be seen as an apologia on Stroud's behalf.

The film might have been called *The Ministers*, since we learn very little about anyone else in the congregation. The filmmakers reveal their lack of familiarity with mainline church life when they depict Day as “a conservative” in contrast to his predecessor, even though Day addresses the Lord’s Prayer to “our Father/Mother,” strongly supports Stroud’s ministry, and leads a march against the war in Iraq. The real dispute at the church seems to have been over liturgical priorities and difficult decisions about the upkeep of a historic building. The filmmakers mistakenly try to fit these issues into “conservative” and “liberal” categories.

Stroud’s coming-out is the religious highlight of the movie. Members applaud and weep, and Day breathlessly wishes similar experiences for the entire church. The church displays the sort of euphoria with which evangelical Methodists once greeted altar calls. Since the film includes no voice defending the denomination’s stance against homosexual practice, viewers are left to assume that such people must be mindless monsters. The film would have benefited from some documentary balance on this score.

The strength of *The Congregation* is the patience of its pacing. It provides long glimpses of church services, special music offerings, and contentious committee meetings. We come to feel we know the place, even if we don’t get to know particular lay members. We see the raw guts of church work as a committee argues over how to pay for a new floor.

Such glimpses of ordinary church life are what the Raymonds originally sought to explore. What they got, theologically and politically, turned out to be a bit more than they were equipped to handle.