



## OUTCAST MINISTER

### IN MEMORY OF GENE LEGGETT, 1935–1987

by Rachel Jennings

*“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not!”—Luke 13:34 (KJV)*

Before Harvey Milk, before Stonewall, he was trapped on a ledge in the half-dark of the sixties. Thus, Rev. Gene Leggett, a Methodist pastor in Austin, Texas, shared the news of his love for a man with his hovering but distant wife. The Hebrew prophets, the Christian fathers of ages past had no idea what this man and woman signified or were about as they clung together, holding hands, that night on the veranda.

It was a layman in the congregation who suspected all. He knew the minister’s bishop, fellow clergy, old professors at Union and Perkins seminaries had not a clue who the minister might be. Like the Pharisees who spied on Jesus to catch him in unseemly acts, the man hired a detective to surveil Rev. Leggett and snag him in a net.

Reported to Bishop Slater and condemned, he defended himself with eloquence at the Southwest Texas Annual Conference. Even when he was silent, however, delegates felt his presence. He sent ripples through the air. Each man who caught his eye forgot why they were there, asking instead the questions any man might ask another. No one knew whether to laicize or lay him, defrock or deflower him. In the end, the august body revoked his ordination.

The former pastor returned in restrained protest year after year throughout the seventies, the early eighties, to the ordinations of new pastors at Annual Conference each spring.

Gene Leggett was declared “unacceptable for the ministry” by the Methodist Church after he publicly announced he was a homosexual. Here he holds a shepherd’s staff in front of his Dallas home, which he opened to youths, both homosexual and straight. “In my head,” he says, “I have started my own church.” He was a major figure in LGBT activism in religious spheres.

Bound and gagged with a satin stole, Gene Leggett knelt quietly at the communion rail, trussed like Isaac on Abraham’s altar or a fancy pullet for Sunday dinner. He was the center of attention. Each ordinand felt drawn to him as a disciple to a teacher. Each ordinand hid from him as a guilt-stricken jailer shies from an innocent man. If you ask an older pastor about Gene Leggett, he will say, “I saw him! I will never forget seeing him that day I was ordained.”