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Feature: Spahr-ing partners

Rev. Janie Spahr is going to change the Presbyterian Church if she has to marry every gay and lesbian couple in the nation!

by Ronnie Cohen

When she was 12 and captain of her softball team, the Rev. Janie Spahr intentionally picked the players usually chosen last. Even as a child, she reached out to the disenfranchised and preached that everyone deserves a chance.

"When you're not picked, you know how you feel," the 65-year-old Presbyterian minister says with trademark tenderness. "Everybody has within them greatness. My greatest wish is that people will see their own greatness and believe it."

Spahr's belief in the girls on her childhood softball team not only boosted her players' self-esteem. It led them to a surprise victory. Her belief in the rights of all people to be free to be themselves—regardless of their sexual orientation—led the lesbian pastor from San Rafael to become a traveling evangelist relentlessly advocating for the church to open its doors to everyone. Her belief in the rights of homosexuals to marry prompted her to perform wedding ceremonies all over the country.

And landed her in the ecclesiastical courts.

Acting upon a complaint from a Washington fundamentalist minister, the Presbytery of the Redwoods charged Spahr with violating church law by officiating at the 2004 marriages of two lesbian couples, one in Mendocino and another in New York. The Presbytery ordered a trial, the first to charge one of its clergy with performing gay marriages. Following last year's trial, a tribunal of church elders and ministers ruled Spahr had the right to follow her conscience and preside over the marriages of same-sex couples. But, in August, a church commission acting as an appellate court decided the Redwoods tribunal erred and directed it to rebuke the beloved pastor who in 1993 earned her place in the Marin Women's Hall of Fame.

"If they want to rebuke her, they can, but we're not going to," says the Rev. Doug Huneke. Senior minister at Tiburon's Westminster Presbyterian Church and clerk of the commission that found Spahr acted within her rights, Huneke has worked with Spahr for 28 years and calls her a gay Gandhi. "Janie Spahr is the voice the church needs to hear if the church is going to enter the 21st century instead of the 14th. Why restrict God's blessing on same-gender people who are making a covenant as deep and sincere as any heterosexual couple makes?"

Spahr has appealed the rebuke directive to her church's highest court. Spahr's attorney expects the Permanent Judicial Commission of the Presbyterian General Assembly to hear the case early next year in Louisville, Kentucky.

Lawyers on both sides agree that the Presbyterian Church, with about 2.3 million members in the U.S., is divided over whether to bless same-sex marriages. Given the division, however,

the lawyers disagree about whether Spahr or any other minister has a right to perform gay weddings.

"Nobody has anything but admiration for Janie Spahr," says Stephen Taber, a San Francisco lawyer representing the Presbytery and prosecuting the case against Spahr. "What we are saying is nobody is above the law. Our position is that performing these weddings was in violation of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. The definition of a wedding is an act between a man and a woman.

"This is not an issue of whether you favor or don't favor same-sex marriage. Probably a majority of people in the Presbytery believe the laws should be changed. The rules have to be changed by the national church. It's a long, involved process."

For Spahr, marrying lesbians and gay men is a matter of conscience.

"I feel we have a responsibility in the church to be welcoming because the founder of this church was," Spahr says. The gray-haired minister wears a purple pants suit and dangling abalone earrings and speaks in a hushed voice that invites listeners to feel as though they are her intimate friends. She sits in her modest living room in the Bret Harte neighborhood of San Rafael surrounded by photographs of her sons, her granddaughter and couples she has married. When the conversation ebbs, her blue eyes dart around the room and land on an image that evokes a story. It is the stories of folks in what she calls her LGBT—or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender—community that she wants to tell.

"Come and hear the Annies and Cheryls, the Jeffs and the Davids. Listen to their love. Listen to their dreams and come be transformed. I feel like I'm inviting the church to be the church. Who do we think founded the church? He was blasphemous. So our job is to be blasphemous, to challenge the church to be welcome for all," she says.

"And the church must do this. The church must do this because if they don't, they are betraying the one who founded it. And I must be in *that* church that says 'yes' to people no matter what their color, no matter what their sexual orientation. Now that's what I know, and that's the God I know. So maybe we're talking about a different God."

Huneke and his commission found that Spahr violated no church rules because she was following her conscience in performing same-sex marriage ceremonies. Spahr's attorney, Sara Taylor, says no Presbyterian rule expressly prohibits ministers from performing homosexual marriages. Taylor contends that Spahr's conscience dictated she marry the lesbian couples.

"We're arguing that you just simply can't discriminate against LGBT people in this manner," Taylor says. "And if Janie does not marry these people, she's not being true to herself in God's love, so to speak. Had Janie not performed these weddings, she would have been violating her ordination vows in terms of everything she believes."

Like Spahr, Taylor, who lives in Novato and has donated thousands of hours to Spahr's case, understands the pain of exclusion. She is one of a group of Spahr's friends who graduated from the seminary but the church refused to ordain because they are open lesbians.

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**SPAHR SLIPPED THROUGH.** She had been married for 10 years when she was ordained as the first female Presbyterian minister in the Pittsburgh area in 1974. Five years later, Janie and Jim Spahr separated in a way that speaks volumes about the egoless minister who wins praise even from her enemies. Jim Spahr and his second wife, Jackie Spahr, remain the

reverend's staunch supporters and part of her closest circle. Explaining what her husband emeritus, as she calls him, told their then 10- and 12-year-old sons when their marriage ended, Spahr says, "Jimmy said, 'We just got new information: Daddy's a heterosexual, and Mommy's a lesbian.'"

The church's response to Janie Spahr's revelation about her sexual preference has been far less loving and tolerant than Jim Spahr's.

In 1980, while she was serving as executive director of the Oakland Council of Churches, Spahr's superiors confronted her with the knowledge that she was a lesbian. "I just wanted to do the work," Spahr says. "The first thing I kept thinking was I'm not able to do the work I was born to do."

As is typical of her, Spahr not only harbors no ill will toward the people who forced her to resign her Oakland job, she empathizes with their plight and rushes to defend them. "I think they were afraid that the council would fold. They were fearful. I can only say that I am free to be myself, and that's all we have anyway," she says.

She went on to serve at the Metropolitan Community Church, a self-proclaimed "home for queer spirituality" in San Francisco's Castro district. "When I introduced my family," Spahr says, "they all stood and clapped for five minutes. Tears came to my eyes. They knew what I had been through. I looked out there, and it was like, 'Welcome home.' And it was there that my sexuality and spirituality came together."

Soon after, AIDS slammed the gay community, and Spahr dedicated herself to caring for the dying men. "One man," she says, "said to me, 'Janie, how come they only love us when we're dying? Why don't they love us while we're living?'"

In 1982, Spahr founded the Ministry of Light, which became the Spectrum Center, as a Marin County spiritual home for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. Working out of an office in Tiburon's Westminster Presbyterian, she formed youth groups, support groups, family camps and the Marin AIDS Support Network.

"Our men were dying. We were taking care of our own. We had these family camps. Who cares if there's two mommies or two daddies? How did you know it was LGBT family camp?" she asks, smiling coyly as if telling a secret riddle. "The women played softball, and the men watched the children."

After nearly 10 years at Spectrum, Spahr put out her resume. "I wrote: 'I'm an open lesbian. God is like my grandmother, an afghan maker, where every piece is different and valued, and it's all held together by this wonderful black yarn. God's like the yarn, and we're all important.' "

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**TO SPAHR'S SURPRISE**, in November 1991, the Downtown United Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York, called her to serve as one of four co-pastors. The other pastors said the church suffered from a bad case of homophobia they hoped she would cure. But 14 Rochester area pastors challenged Spahr's appointment, forcing her through her first round of ecclesiastical trials.

As always, she turned what for most would be anger into sympathy. "I felt sadness for the church," she says. "Who are we? You raised us to tell the truth about who we are.

"I didn't cry until I saw my two sons who came to be with me. The things they heard when

we went through the trial! They somehow equated me to a child molester. Jimmy turned to me and said, "This is evil."

The regional church council ruled Spahr could take the Rochester job. But the Permanent Judicial Commission of the Presbyterian General Assembly—the same commission that will hear Spahr's appeal on the homosexual marriage rebuke—denied her call to serve in November 1992. Spahr remembers the day clearly. It was the day Bill Clinton was elected president.

So Spahr returned to San Rafael. But the Rochester church ministers could not send her home without finding a way to incorporate her into their lives and their mission.

"They said, 'Will you travel this country preaching and teaching and let people meet you and see you?' Can you imagine, when people say, 'What do you do?' I say, 'I'm a lesbian evangelist.' It's just a way of organizing so that people can see us and meet us. So that people stop being afraid."

Since 1992, the Rochester church and Westminster Presbyterian in Tiburon have sponsored Spahr, through an organization she formed called That All May Freely Serve, to travel the United States talking about opening doors to all people and challenging exclusive church structures. This summer, Spahr officially retired, though she has no plans to take to a rocking chair. Five couples, three gay and two heterosexual, are meeting with her monthly as part of her required year-long preparation for marriage. She fully intends to continue performing marriage ceremonies for all couples whose relationships she deems worthy.

"I don't care about your sexuality," Spahr says. "What is your relationship?"

"I want the church to come along. When you see how oppressive systems work, you're not only challenging the system. This isn't about gay people. This is about how people treat people of less power. It's about justice."

Some liken the roles of gays and lesbians in the church today to the roles of women in the church half a century ago. "Women had no rights or authority in the church for generations," Huneke says. "Seen and not heard. It's only been 60 or so years that the Presbyterians ordained women."

He compares Spahr to Rosa Parks, a black woman whose arrest in Alabama in 1955 after refusing to give up her seat on a city bus to a white passenger ushered in the civil rights movement.

In August 2004, Spahr presided over the Rochester marriage of Barbara Jean Douglass, 43, a social worker, and Connie Valois, 58, an occupational therapist. Douglass wore a white bridal gown, Valois a white tuxedo.

The couple was named in the accusation against Spahr and testified at her trial. Douglass, who met Spahr in the 1970s when she was in her First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael youth group, told the church tribunal: "You grow up; you fall in love; you get married. That's what you do, if you have the chance. You get married in front of your family and friends. This is the ritual that solidifies the relationship."

And Douglass and Valois say their wedding has solidified their union. Were they upset that their wedding was cited in charges against Spahr? "We feel very honored that we have an opportunity to help further the conversation that needs to take place for society," Douglass says. "For us, it's like intermarriage with different race people. That used to be against the law. People used to say, 'It's in the Bible,' and 'It's God's will.' It's just an extension of the

same civil rights issues, in my opinion.

"They didn't say, 'Liberty and justice for some.' They said, 'Liberty and justice for all.' We realize society takes time to change. But at some point, the law will change."

Spahr has been a pioneer both as an ordained woman and as a lesbian preacher. According to a 2005 Presbyterian survey posted on the denomination's Web site, 25 percent of church members, 43 percent of pastors and 58 percent of specialized clergy would like to see gays and lesbians ordained as ministers. A similar split divides the church over same-gender marriages. The survey found 23 percent of church members, 35 percent of pastors and 51 percent of specialized clergy believe same-sex couples should be allowed to marry.

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**THE NUMBERS APPEAR** insufficient for an immediate change in the church's rule book because, according to attorney Taylor, two-thirds of the church must agree to enact a new law.

In the meantime, Spahr will continue to follow her conscience.

"We don't do marriages to defy the church," she said recently, sipping red wine while entertaining in her living room a couple she married. "We do marriages because it's the right thing to do.

"Don't send me into a community to do this kind of work and then tell me not to take relationships seriously. If I do, I would be going against the God who has taught me hospitality. Don't send me there. Relationships must have community and must have support to work."

Newlyweds Cynthia Martin and Selisse Berry, both 51, share their photo album with Spahr, who marvels over the community of family and friends the pair assembled to share their love and witness their marriage in July in Woodacre.

While making a toast at the wedding, Martin's father, who was raised as a Mormon and lives in rural North Carolina, said it was the most authentic marriage ceremony he had ever witnessed. Martin's mother took her daughter's wedding album to her Saturday coffee klatch and showed it to friends who never before had seen a woman who called herself a lesbian, says Martin, a retired Kodak executive.

Berry works as executive director of Out & Equal, workplace advocates for the LGBT community. At a conference she hosted in Washington, D.C., in September, Berry shared with 2,400 people pictures and stories from her wedding. Hearing that Spahr officiated, she says people kept coming up to her to say, "Janie's such a light."

"Janie's whole life has been like pebbles in the pond," Berry says. "She's changed so many people's lives."

She says she cannot visualize Spahr denying her request to perform her wedding ceremony. "I just can't imagine going to Janie and for her to say, 'Oh no, I can't do this.' That would never come out of her mouth. What a blessing for her to provide the blessing of our union."

Spahr, Berry and Martin feel joyful in the afterglow of the wedding. But frustration about being outsiders because of their sexual orientation regularly wells up.

"If we put a picture of our partner up, we're told we're flaunting," Spahr says. "We are told if

we hold hands walking down the street, we are flaunting. How do you change a system that invites people to lie about who they are? I thought speaking the truth was something to celebrate. What's worse about the church is not only that we are not welcome, but that we do not have access to God. It says it in that you are sinful, that you are less than. It gives people cause to hurt us."

Berry and Spahr met while Berry was studying at the San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo. The church's refusal to ordain Berry because she had declared herself a lesbian and its positions on homosexuality in general felt so abusive to Berry that she left it.

Spahr's ability to continue to cheerfully push for justice within the church and continually seek reconciliation with her opponents amazes Berry.

"The truth is Janie Spahr has changed the Presbyterian Church," says Berry, a petite blonde with a hint of a Southern drawl. "It's a community working. But it's the power of one person. Janie just kept showing up and showing up and showing up and embodied inclusivity. I'll get an e-mail from somebody, and they'll say, 'You're going to hell,' and I'll say, 'F--k you.' Janie gets an e-mail that says, 'You're going to hell,' and she writes back."

Spahr even put in a telephone call to the minister who urged the Presbytery to file the charges against her. The Rev. James Berkley, director of Presbyterian Action for Faith and Freedom, has made up his mind that homosexuality is sinful, and nothing is going to change it. "God in his love and his care has told us that homosexual behavior is not something we should do, and we are at our very best when we do what God commands," he says. But even Berkley has kind words about Spahr, calling her "congenial" and "full of smiles."

When asked about Berkley, Spahr changes the topic, as she does when asked whether she is in a relationship and if she has considered marriage. All she says is yes, she is in a relationship, and yes, she has considered marriage. As is her way, she prefers to turn the focus onto others.

"This really isn't about me," she says. "It's about people being free. It's about these couples, and it's about their story. It's about them, honey. It's about all the couples I've been honored to be asked to be with. And there have been so many. Being in the LGBT community has been such a great honor for me.

"Come on, Presbyterians. We can do this. We're your family. We're gonna challenge them until they do the right thing."

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