The Glass Closet

Can Father Robert Petite be true to his church while remaining true to himself? A profile of the cities' most prominent advocate of the rights of people with AIDS.

By Stephen Kimber.

"No matter what I do, I'll always think of myself as a priest. Oh, I have lots of frustrations with the institution, because it never seems to be on the edge, it always seems to be self-protective. But leave the church? It never even occurs to me to actually leave the church."

— Bob Petite

"Are you a homosexual?" For three hours, that question had hovered — wordlessly, dangerously, like an unpredictable guest at a dinner party — around the edges of the discussion.

Ostensibly, the 75 people who turned out for the extraordinary mid-October meeting of the congregation of St. George's Anglican Church on Brunswick Street hadn't come to talk about *that* question. They came instead to deal with a letter of concern 112 of the 225 members of the congregation had sent to the church's longtime parish priest. Boiled down to its essence, the letter accused Rev. Robert Petite of spending far too much time dealing with AIDS issues and far too little time tending to the spiritual and temporal needs of his own parish.

But that wasn't the only issue for parishioners. According to the letter of complaint, Petite had gone beyond merely comforting those dying of AIDS and become an "advocate for gay rights."

Petite didn't deny it. As he has said before: "The more you get involved with this disease, the more you realize how necessary it is to become a gay advocate."

Not everyone in the parish agreed with that. Some parishioners, in fact, worried that their historic north end church was becoming known as the *gay* church.

The meeting, which was closed to the press, was stormy. Parishioners flatly told Right Rev. Russell Hatton, the Anglican Church's second highest official in Nova Scotia and the man who had been asked to chair the parish meeting, that they wanted their pastor to spend more time at the church and less time working in the gay community.

Petite, for his part, conceded that, yes, he understood his parishioners' frustrations, even their anger, but no, he wouldn't — couldn't — stop doing what he was doing. "I spend a lot of my day with people who are dying," he explained. "I don't think it's a kind of thing one can say no to." But he hastened to add: "What is equally clear is that I can't continue to do these things without the parish's support."

That support, it became obvious during the meeting, was almost non-existent. After three hours of confused and often contradictory debate, about the only thing that did seem clear was that Petite and his parishioners were at loggerheads.

Photographs by Craig Benjamin

"The conversation was just going around in circles," remembers one parishioner, "and then suddenly, out of nowhere, somebody finally asked Bob directly if he was a homosexual"

Throughout the room, people could be heard sucking in their breath in apprehension. Even though everyone in the hall, including Petite, had known someone might raise the issue, no one seemed quite sure what to do when it actually happened.

Would the Bishop rule the question out of order?

Would Petite answer? And if he did, what would — or could — he say?

Despite his activism on behalf of gays, Bob Petite had never before been called on to publicly affirm or deny the speculation of many of his parishioners that he himself was gay. He had lived his life in what he sometimes described as a "glass closet," keeping his sexual preference private but never curtailing his social or political life to reduce the speculation.

In addition to his work with AIDS and gay rights groups, Petite was known to frequent Rumours, a social club for gays and lesbians located only a few blocks from the church. He also sprinkled his conversations with references that seemed to suggest he might be gay. Talking about his work helping married gay men come to terms with their homosexuality, for example, Petite would refer to his own marriage and divorce. "I know where they're coming from," he'd say. "I've been there."

These days, he openly shared his small home near the church on Brunswick Street with Eric Smith, Nova Scotia's first publicly identified AIDS carrier. Before that, Petite had lived for a number of years with another man in the church rectory. When that man committed suicide, some of his parishioners "offered Bob the kind of comfort and support you'd normally expect people to give someone who'd just lost a husband or wife," as one of Petite's friends puts it today. "No one admitted that that was what they were doing, of course, but it was clear from the way they acted that they knew that this was more than just someone who happened to live in the rectory. They knew. And they accepted it. But they chose not to acknowledge it."

The issue of gay clergy is one the Anglican Church of Canada has never really settled. The church views any sexual relationship outside heterosexual marriage as a sin, but despite that apparently clear statement of belief, bishops have a good deal of discretion about how they deal with ministers whose personal lives deviate from official church doctrine. Two Lesbian priests in Toronto, for example, recently lost their licenses to preach after one of them publicly declared her homosexuality. But at the same time in England, more than 400 homosexual Anglican ministers have been allowed to continue to preach, even though they openly belong to an organization known as the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement.

No one knows for certain what the church hierarchy in Nova Scotia would do if one of its ministers publicly declared his homosexuality. An Anglican minister in Nova Scotia did quietly resign from the ministry after his homosexuality became known to members of his parish, but that was 30 years ago and church officials say they know of no recent case in which a priest's homosexuality has become an issue. "The Anglican Church tends to respond only to scandal," suggests one clergyman. "If you do things that the church doesn't approve of, but you do them quietly, then nothing will likely happen to you. But if you take that extra step and say, 'Look. I'm a homosexual and I'm proud of it,' well, that might force the Bishop into taking action."

For all the "statements" he may have appeared to make by the way he conducted his life, Bob Petite had never once taken that "extra step." He lived his life in a delicate balance between openness and discretion. But that balance was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain — largely because of AIDS.

While the disease itself has devastated the gay community, the sexual bigotry AIDS unleashed among some politicians and segments of the straight community has also, ironically, forced many gays to become more open and assertive about their own rights in society.

Bob Petite was in the forefront of that struggle. "Lots of people want to make a distinction between AIDS and gay," he explains. "But right now, the largest portion of those affected by this disease are gay men. The government's response to AIDS, the community's response to AIDS — they're all influenced by the fact that AIDS is still primarily a gay disease, and that people still see homosexuality as a controversial issue."

All this was in the air when Petite was asked to finally define his own sexuality. Petite hesitated. There was an uncomfortable silence in the meeting room. Bishop Hatton looked expectantly at his priest.

"Are you a homosexual?" the questioner demanded again.

Finally, Robert Petite, a trim, handsome man with an intense, almost brooding appearance, answered simply and quietly. He told the meeting that he didn't think it was appropriate or necessary for him to make any comment about his own sexual preferences.

But the mere fact that the question had been asked at all "seemed to take the fight out of Bob," recalls a parishioner. "You could see it in his face as he answered the question." A few minutes later, Petite made the entire evening's discussion irrelevant with a sudden, dramatic announcement that he would be applying to the diocese for a leave of absence beginning in the fall of 1989. He planned, he told parishioners, to go to the United States to get more training in how to minister to those suffering from terminal illnesses.

Although Petite would insist later that he made his decision to leave St. George's long before the parish meeting, it's difficult to believe that the timing of his announcement didn't reflect, at least to some degree, a response to what happened at the parish meeting that night. Petite himself acknowledges as much. "The feelings at that meeting," he allowed later, "were such that I'm not sure I would have been able to stay, even if I'd wanted to."

The next day, the newspaper carried only a small item about the closed-door parish meeting. Church officials did their best to put the happiest possible face on what was clearly an unhappy situation. Yes, they told reporters, the meeting had helped clear up whatever misunderstandings there might have been between the minister and his parishioners, and no, the parishioners hadn't asked for Bob Petite's resignation.

But no matter how the facts were glossed, the simple truth remained that Bob Petite, the cities most important and influential spokesman for the rights of AIDS sufferers and homosexuals, was leaving. And he might not be back.

"Imagine having to conceal from your family, your friends and the people you work with a very important part of who you are as a human being. Imagine the oppression in that."
Svend Robinson, federal MP
Speaking to a Halifax AIDS Vigil, May 1988

Bob Petite has forgotten to turn on his telephone answering machine this morning, and the phone starts ringing almost as soon as we sit down to begin our interview. For 15 minutes, the calls don't let up long enough for Petite to even switch the machine on. As soon as he hangs up from one call, the phone rings again. All the calls are about AIDS. "He's Dr. Schlech's patient, is he?" he asks one caller. "Okay, you tell him I'll meet him at the bus station when he gets in on Wednesday night. Just tell him he'll know me because I'll be the one with the clerical collar on."

Despite the traumas of the past six months, Petite insists he hasn't given up on trying to combine his spiritual calling with his social cause. "My life has unfolded in some extraordinary ways," he acknowledges, "but there are dangers in trying to discern God's will."

For Petite, "God's will" is that he be a priest. He says he can't remember a time, in fact, when he didn't want to be one. In Belleoram, the tiny Newfoundland fishing community of 500 where he was born in 1946, "the priest was everything — the social leader, the educational leader, the religious leader. And since everyone in the community was Anglican," he adds, "the religious and secular roles were mixed together. If you didn't go to Sunday School one Sunday, you'd hear about when you went to regular school the next day."

Despite his mother's caution — "Don't be a priest," she told him, "because people expect so much of their priests, and you'll always have to live up to those expectations" — and the family's eventual move to the less sheltered, less Anglican world of Spryfield when he was nine, Petite never abandoned his dream of becoming a priest.

After graduating from the University of King's College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1969 — the same year he got married — Petite says he decided to go to Toronto's Trinity College to study divinity because he "wanted to get away and get a different approach to things."

After graduating in 1972, Petite returned to Halifax as a priest-assistant at All Saints Cathedral, where he specialized in youth work. He helped set up The Crypt, a coffee house in the church basement where he often counselled young people who'd gotten involved in religious cults like the Children of God or become caught up in the drug scene.

He brought much the same hands-on approach to his next posting as the Anglican chaplain for both Dalhousie University and King's College. "You quickly discover that people just don't come to see the university chaplain," he says, "so you have to make yourself available to them." Petite jokes that he ended up spending so much time in the university's Grawood Lounge talking with students that he became known as "Father Ten-Penny."

During that process, he says he met quite a few young people who were struggling, not only to come to terms with their own homosexuality but also trying to reconcile it with the religious beliefs they'd grown up with. As a result, Petite and the university's Roman Catholic chaplain started a discussion group "to talk about the problems of being gay and Christian in a liturgical context." The group, known as Sparrow ("God sees each little sparrow..."), not only offered students a chance to openly discuss their problems, but also provided them with mutual moral support too.

"Sparrow had the blessing of both bishops," Petite points out. "All I was told at the time was that we shouldn't be seen to be doing only this, and that our involvement shouldn't have a high profile." Fourteen years later, the group still exists, although Petite himself is no longer involved.

In 1977, wanting to find out "if I would like parish life," Petite moved to Antigonish to become a parish priest. He describes the job — ministering to three congregations, including two in rural areas around Antigonish, as well as acting as part-time chaplain for Anglican students at St. Frances Xavier University — as an "ideal situation for me, combining parish work with my work with young people. And it went well. But at the end of the three years there, I had decided to leave the ministry. I had some real doubts about whether I should remain a priest."

Part of the problem was simply his discomfort at dealing with parish life. "There are so many social things to deal with in a parish and I had the feeling that the parish itself was too comfortable, too concerned about keeping up its own thing."

But Petite's doubts were also personal. Although he is reluctant to go into detail, he admits that his marriage — by this time, Petite and his wife had three children — simply wasn't working out.

"I tried to resign to the Bishop in 1980," Petite remembers. "I wasn't sure what I was going to do next, but I decided I should find something else. But Bishop Hatfield convinced me that I still had a lot to offer to the church, and that I shouldn't resign. In the summer of 1980, he asked me to go to St. George's." Petite laughs. "It was supposed to be for eight months. I was there for nine years."

When Petite took up his duties at the inner city parish, he was supposed to close down the church, which was suffering from a combination of declining membership and the fact that most of its remaining parishioners were members of financially hard-pressed working-class families, most of them originally from Newfoundland. "The parish hadn't been able to afford to pay its diocese allotment for years," Petite remembers. "It was a very challenging place to be."

After "resolving" his marital difficulties — he and his wife agreed to split up — Petite not only quickly found that he was comfortable back in Halifax, "which really is my home," but that he was also at ease in this parish among a transplanted Newfoundland flock. "The first time I was in the pulpit, I said to them, 'Listen, my only qualification to be your parish priest is that I'm a Newfoundlander too.' We seemed to have a rapport from the beginning."

Far from shutting the church down, Petite helped breathe new life into it. He developed what he calls a "strong music program with a choral Eucharist every week and a reasonable preaching ministry." Today Petite remembers fondly that "I got a lot of good feedback from my preaching. It was one of the most rewarding things I did in the parish."

Petite also became involved again in the gay community. "I was called on from time to time to do some counselling," he says simply.

Petite's involvement with AIDS began in 1985 when the family of a man dying of the disease asked Petite to counsel them. Shortly after that, he helped organize the Metro Area Committee on AIDS, the first local support group for people with AIDS. He became its vice chairman and, later, was chairman of another support group, Church Members Assembled to Respond to AIDS. He was also appointed to the Anglican Church's National Consultation Committee on AIDS and became a non-medical member of the Ward 8A health team at the Victoria General Hospital, the group that deals with local AIDS patients on a day-to-day basis.

It soon became difficult to imagine a local AIDS-related event or issue in which Bob Petite wouldn't be involved. He was part of a small group of intermediaries who arranged for Scott Wentzell — a Halifax man accused of knowingly spreading the AIDS virus by having unprotected sex with a pregnant woman — to turn himself in to authorities last summer, for example. And his counselling was largely responsible for helping Halifax AIDS victim Peter Wood not only come to terms with his disease but also to "turn it into a positive thing" by organizing the Nova Scotia Persons-With-AIDS Coalition, a self-help and lobby group for people with AIDS.

"After I got the diagnosis that I had AIDS, I was just a wreck," Wood remembers now. "Somebody had given me Bob's number, so I phoned him. This was the first time I ever talked to this guy and, 20 minutes later, he was at my door. That's been typical of my experience — everyone's experience — with him. He's an incredible person. He kept coming to see me and encouraging me — I would have called it pestering at the time — to get out and do something. Eventually, he enabled me to see this not as some punishment from God but as a challenge from Him. That was how I came to organize the Persons With AIDS Coalition."

The more Petite became involved with people suffering from AIDS, however, the more convinced he became that the solution to the growing AIDS epidemic would have to be a political one.

"Right now, we don't even know how many HIV-positives [people who carry the AIDS virus] there are in Nova Scotia," Petite complains today, an edge of frustration creeping into his voice. "The government has a list. It says there are 170 of them. But you can't trust the government's figures. The government said there were only two AIDS deaths in Nova Scotia last year, and yet we buried *seven* people in just the three months leading up to Christmas last year. So where do they come up with just two deaths? Dr. [David] MacLean [of the Atlantic Health Unit] estimates there are 2-3,000 HIV-positives in Nova Scotia. But who really knows?"

Although a provincially-appointed task force recommended last year that the persons being tested for AIDS should be guaranteed confidentiality, the government rejected that recommendation — along with others providing for protections for gays and AIDS sufferers under the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act — out of hand. To Petite, the realities are simple, if sobering. "The best estimate we have now is that a cure for AIDS is at least 10 years away," he says. "While we wait for that to happen, we know that the best way to slow down the spread of the disease is early diagnosis. But we can't expect it to happen until the government makes it easier for people to take the tests without fear that the results are going to be disclosed. Until we have those kind of laws, the situation isn't going to get better."

Petite has done what he can, appearing before the province's law amendments committee, making public speeches, lobbying government officials on the need for changes, but he worries that the government "simply wants to use the fact that the most of those who now have AIDS are homosexual to divide people into 'us' and 'them,' the infected and the uninfected.

"I had this conversation a while ago with a very high level government official," Petite says, "and I was pressing him on why there was no human rights protection to protect those with AIDS. His answer — can you believe this? — 'If we brought in that sort of legislation, we might be seen to be justifying immoral behavior.'" He pauses to let what he has just said sink in. "To me, that is an extraordinary statement for a government official to make in this day and age."

Petite's growing conviction that politicians won't act until they feel direct pressure was at the heart of his decision to invite federal NDP member of parliament Svend Robinson, the country's first openly homosexual federal politician, to address an AIDS Vigil at St. George's last spring.

This decision to link AIDS so closely with gay rights upset some of his fellow board members at the Metro Area Committee on AIDS, one of the sponsors of the Vigil. "But I didn't want it to be just a quiet little prayer service," Petite says today. "I wanted it to be a platform to raise the human rights issues that are also part of this disease."

The Vigil was a turning point, not only for the cities' gay community — Peter Wood calls it "the most significant event ever in the local gay community" — but also for Petite's own future at St. George's. Five hundred people attended the candlelight Vigil at the church. After the service ended, they marched, still carrying their candles, to city hall, where speakers spontaneously decided to call out the names of 47 Nova Scotians — friends and lovers of those in attendance — who had died of AIDS.

Not surprisingly, the Vigil brought even more media attention to the church and its rector. "For the parish," concedes Petite now, "the Vigil was the straw that broke the camel's back."

Even before he first received the letter of concern from his parishioners last July — which singled out the Vigil as one of the parishioners' grounds for complaint — Bob Petite admits he had heard rumblings of discontent within his congregation. Some parishioners complained openly that it was easier to see Petite on television or read about him in the newspapers than it was to get to talk to him face-to-face in his office in the church. After one Sunday morning service, an elderly parishioner had even

asked him: "Do I have to have AIDS to get you to come visit me?" She said later she was joking, but Petite knew the joke was pointed. During the summer, a few disgruntled members of his parish had taken their concerns to Petite's boss, Bishop Arthur Peters, and some had even left St. George's to join other congregations.

According to a number of Petite's supporters, his most vociferous opponents within the church were actually in-the-closet gays and lesbians who'd first been attracted to join St. George's because of Petite's reputation for sympathy and understanding. Peter Wood, who was born and grew up in the parish, insists that "it wasn't the members of the traditional congregation who were the most upset by what Bob was doing." He pauses, considers. "I'm going to say it flat out. The people who fought against Bob Petite the loudest were the gay members of the parish who were so insecure about their own sexuality that they began to see Bob as a danger to them. In the beginning, they'd been happy to have him as their pastor because he did understand them and their situation. But the minute Bob started doing things that attracted publicity and St. George's got to be known as the gay church, well, that was too much. Bob had to go."

Petite himself doesn't talk publicly about those who opposed him and he's careful to make the point that "what happened at St. George's would have happened at any parish in the city. There's not a parish in the community that wouldn't support the idea of having their priest at the bedside of the dying," he notes. "That's the easy kind of pastoral work the community can support. Motherhood stuff. The problem came when I began to raise other issues — the issue of human rights, the issue of the government's response to AIDS. That's when the community began to find the whole situation more difficult to handle. Many people in the parish did try to understand, did try to be supportive, but I pushed and pushed and pushed them to go further, and finally the elasticity just broke."

There are those who will tell you that this "pushing" is part of a larger and more complex pattern of behavior for Petite, that he seems to want to force others to deal with his own sexuality, but he won't — or can't — bring it up directly. "If you look at the issue of Bob's own sexuality," says an Anglican clergyman who has known him for 20 years, "you'll see that much of what he's been doing for the last 10 years has been attempting to force people to deal with the issue by doing everything short of standing up in the pulpit and proclaiming himself. He wants people to say, 'Look Bob, you're okay and it's okay.' But people aren't ready to do that. Bob knows that, but he can't let it go. He has to keep pushing, almost daring people — the people at St. George's, the Bishop — to tell him no. Bob wants to be able to be a priest and to be what he wants to be too. But he can't. And it's cost him."

But on this February morning, sitting in the living room of his home where the walls are decorated with paintings by his ex-wife and where the coffee table is littered with books and pamphlets with titles such as *Christian Social Tolerance and Homosexuality,* Bob Petite would rather talk about the issues of AIDS and gay rights than about the issues of personal choice and personal cost.

Of the fateful parish meeting last October, his only public comment is that it was a "very productive, straightforward, honest family discussion." And he makes the point over and over that he doesn't blame his parishioners for what happened: "I want to make it clear that I never had any difficulty with the fact that they had concerns," he says at one point. "Sometimes, this issue gets talked about in a way that makes them seem like ogres and me seem like a martyr. But that simply isn't true."

Still, despite his claim that he made his own decision to leave the parish, Petite admits he isn't sure even now where he'll be going or what he'll be doing when he finishes at St, George's in September. "I'm hoping to go to Chicago," he says. "I've applied for a residency in clinical pastoral education there and I'm just waiting to hear back. What I want to do is learn to work with the dying — not just people with AIDS, but with cancer victims too." He stops, then adds pointedly. "And I want to do it as a chaplain."

Why is it so important for him to remain in the church? Why not escape the frustrations of the glass closet, leave the priesthood and take a secular post counselling the terminally ill? Bob Petite seems almost surprised anyone would even ask such questions. "Everything I am," he says simply, "I owe the church. My education, my community life, my appreciation for art and music — I owe it all to the church. I just can't imagine living my life any other way."

Even if he does remain in the priesthood, however, Petite knows there are no guarantees he will ever be able to return to Nova Scotia to work. And that's something he wants to do almost as badly as he wants to remain a priest. "In Halifax, I think I can make a difference," he explains. "This is my roots, where my family is, where my friends are. If I go to Toronto for five days, I get homesick. But I knew when I asked for a leave of absence from the diocese that I might be cutting off my options to return. It will be depend on what's available and whether people still want me when I finish my training." Petite knows, as do others, that his high public profile will make it more difficult for him to get a parish or any church-appointed posting in Halifax.

"The possibility that Bob might not be back really frightens me," says Peter Wood. "There's no one as important in my life — or in the lives of others with this disease — than Bob. I just don't know how we'll be able to replace someone like that."

For his part, Bob Petite says it will be difficult to leave. "I know there's a good chance that many of the people I deal with who have AIDS now might not be around when I come back. That tears my guts out. And it'll tear my guts out the last time I go down the altar rail at St. George's too."

He pauses. "I'd like to come back here, but if I can't make a contribution here, well, then I'll go somewhere else and make it. You know, people say to me, 'You must get discouraged working with people with AIDS all the time.' But I don't. I'm a Christian and I believe certain things are true. Death itself doesn't stop everything. Neither does being in one particular job or another. You have to keep going because there are always still sorrows to be healed. And mercy, mercy everywhere." ❑