

The thirty-three-year-old Unitarian minister James Stoll did not “come out,” if by that we mean a singular, dramatic event. He went on a coming-out tour. He first announced his homosexuality on September 5, 1969, to Student Religious Liberals, the association of college Unitarians, at their convention in Laforet, Colorado. The next spring, on May 10, 1970—Mother’s Day—he gave a speech called “On Being a Homosexual” at Honolulu’s First Unitarian Church, where Stoll knew the pastor, the Rev. Gene Bridges, from the antiwar movement. At about the same time, Stoll discussed his homosexuality at churches in Sepulveda and Burbank, California.¹

The Rev. James Stoll was the first minister of any American religious denomination, and probably in the world, to publicly admit his homosexuality.² Stoll came out of the closet before the Stonewall riots, before AIDS, before scholars considered it important to “out” Walt Whitman or Noël Coward or Langston Hughes, before they tried to out Emily Dickinson. *Gay* could still be used to mean happy. The most important openly homosexual American was Allen Ginsberg, whom most Americans had not heard of. People did not suspect others, least of all ministers, of being homosexual.

Stoll was a minister of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and his act was the first to help make the Unitarians the most welcoming denomination for homosexuals. Unitarians were first to have an openly gay minister; first officially to condemn discrimination against homosexuals; and first to take official church stances on matters of especial importance to the gay and lesbian community. After Stoll’s coming out, gay Unitarians soon organized into the first powerful gay religious organization. Stoll was a controversial man who promoted the decriminalization of marijuana (at a time when few did) and who had lost his last pulpit after making sexual advances toward pubescent boys; soon after coming out, Stoll vanished from the Unitarian scene. But the Unitarians embraced his vision of gay liberation, and when Stoll died twenty-five years later,