By Emily E. Gifford

For decades during the mid-20th century, from his offices at Christ Church Cathedral in Hartford and in the field, Canon Clinton Jones worked diligently to help members of Hartford’s gay community, including transgendered men and transsexuals seeking gender reassignment surgery, in any way he could, from individual counseling to assistance dealing with employment and housing discrimination. On occasion, he opened his home to people whose sexual identity had left them, literally, with nowhere else to go. In helping those who, in the 1960s, were considered among “the least” of society, Jones was a progressive, even revolutionary figure, yet one who presented himself to the world as a kindly, mild-mannered, and nearly Victorian cleric.

Jones was born in Brookfield, Connecticut, on November 16, 1916, to Clinton Robert Jones and Henriette Elizabeth Morehouse Jones. In later years, he remembered his childhood in rural, bucolic Brookfield, a small town between Danbury and New Milford: “My father had a large farm; we had cattle, chickens, all sorts of things…raised vegetables, sold them, things like that.”

Jones’s family was well established in Brookfield. His mother’s family had been among the founding parishioners of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church there in the 18th century. His mother served as the church organist, encouraging her son to view church attendance and religious participation as a natural part of life. Jones was also inspired by an early role model, Charles Carpenter, the Episcopal priest serving at St. Paul’s, whom Jones later described as a “gentle, kind pastor.”

Jones graduated from Brookfield’s one-room schoolhouse to attend Danbury High School. While his mother hoped that he would attend Yale University to study law, Jones began looking at other possibilities for his future after she died in 1933, when he was a junior in high school. He chose to attend Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. He was attracted to the school because, as he reflected in an oral history:

Emmy Gifford is an independent historian specializing in religion and social movements in the United States. Canon Clinton Jones was the subject of her 2011 Central Connecticut State University master’s thesis.

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interview conducted in 2002, Bard "had a whole new educational program, which was very, very modern, very liberal." 

Again speaking in his 2002 interview, Jones recounted his calling to the ministry: "Little by little...by the end of my second year [of college], I began to think [the ministry was] the way I should go." After graduating, Jones attended General Theological Seminary in New York, completing his studies in 1941, when he was 24. He served as a chaplain in the Maritime Commission in New London for a year before moving in 1946 to Hartford, where he joined the staff at Christ Church Cathedral. 

Within two years, Jones was appointed a senior administrative priest, or canon, of the church. As Canon Jones of Christ Church Cathedral, he had a significant role in church administration and broad latitude in defining his own duties. The first major project Jones tackled in his new position was revitalizing the Episcopal Church's summer youth programs in the Hartford area. He proved so adept at the work that he eventually administered church summer youth programs throughout southern New England. Jones was a highly intelligent and resourceful man, and, once he had sorted out the youth programs, no one at Christ Church Cathedral was quite sure what he should turn his hand to next. In the early 1960s he began working on the Rehabilitation Committee of the Greater Hartford Council of Churches, a group that studied a variety of issues, including the lack of local resources to treat drug addiction and the problems of helping people make the transition from long-term in-patient treatment for mental illnesses back to day-to-day life.

As reported in a profile of Jones published in The Hartford Courant in 1986, and further detailed in his 2002 interview, while Jones was working with the Rehabilitation Committee, he heard that a homosexual youth living at an East Hartford school had been accused of molesting a boy and was consequently fired. Jones, after making sure the student's well-being was attended to, was concerned that the man had been accused because he was gay rather than because he was guilty. Looking back on the incident in 2002, Jones offered no opinion about the janitor's guilt. Rather, he described his own investigation into the situation as spurring him to action on behalf of Hartford area "sexual minorities," to use Jones's preferred term, one that emphasized his belief that gay and transgendered people should be accepted as a natural part of society.

The Rehabilitation Committee began to study and explore issues related to homosexuality, but Jones and other members realized that there were so many matters to be addressed that a new committee was needed. The group quietly found volunteers, including Trinity College psychology professor George Higgins and attorney Donald Cantor. Discretion was definitely the watchword. When the sub-committee first met, at the Hartford YMCA, they used only the word "homosexuality" to direct members to the right meeting room. The YMCA, concerned about how such signs might look to others, asked them to come up with a more discreet name. The group decided that "Project H" was a sufficiently vague name. Project H members, including Higgins and Cantor, noted that most passing-by automatically assumed that the project was dealing with problems associated with heroin. In later years, Jones and other members of Project H would remember that story as a prime example of how disdainful people had to be about the topic of homosexuality. There were other similar incidents. In a letter inviting committee members to a dinner at which a representative of the George W. Henry Foundation, a New York City social service group for homosexuals and transsexuals, would speak, the committee chair, Robert Casstevens, cautioned, "We do not want publicity since at this point we are not prepared to deal with questions and inquiries" [emphasis in the original].

Jones was particularly impressed with the Henry Foundation, which was founded in the aftermath of World War II as gay men leaving the military were granted to New York and other cities. The foundation provided its clients with both practical help with discrimination and legal issues and individual counseling. In 1965, Jones founded a Hartford chapter of the foundation; he seems to have been unique in the country in pursuing such an association. Keith Brown, a pioneer of the gay rights movement in Hartford, later noted, "I don't remember a period of similar Henry Foundation cells doing counseling work in other parts of the country." The historical record supports Brown's impression.

In addition to trying to help the foundation increase its scope beyond New York, Jones, on a personal level, sought to increase his skills as a church counselor and refine his own religious view on homosexuality by pursuing a master's degree in sacred theology at New York Theological Seminary. His thesis, Counseling and the Male Homosexual, reflects the synthesis of his two main concerns in improving his work.

Although instances in which mainstream religious institutions and leaders responded publicly to homosexuality were not especially abundant in the 1960s, neither were they completely absent. A 1963 article in Christian Century addressed the issue, characterizing homosexuals as either "sinful" or "sick [and] unreasonable." This attitude was completely opposite to Jones's, who believed that homosexuality was not a disease. His belief about the origins of homosexuality might be best characterized by the more modern phrase "born that way." As we would only later learn, Jones himself was homosexual.

Some other clergy members shared his belief, or at least his view that homosexuals should not be rejected by the church solely on the basis of their sexual orientation. In San Francisco, a group of Protestants in 1965 formed a committee that worked closely with gay rights groups in that city. Troy Perry, working in Los Angeles, even went farther in 1968, establishing the

Clinton R. Jones
Understanding Gay Relatives and Friends

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Cathedral invitation to a dinner in honor of the Rev. Canon Clinton Jones, 2005, CCSU Special Collections

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The 2002 oral history interview of Canon Clinton Jones is available online from the GLBTQ Digital Archives (http://content.library.ccsu.edu/digitalcollections/GLBTQ/live/2002/5) along with other oral histories of Hartford-area gay rights activists, including Keith Brown.

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