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Sausalito Presbyterian Church welcomes first openly gay pastor

By Rob Rogers
Marin Independent Journal

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When he was 18 years old, Paul Mowry came out to his mother as a gay man.

"She said, 'I love you and support you — but two things pain me,'" Mowry said. "One is that I think you would make a great dad, and I'd hate to have you not have that experience. The other is that Presbyterians don't ordain gay people."

Mowry's mother mentioned ordination because Mowry — whose father, grandfather and great-grandfather had all served as Presbyterian ministers — had felt called to the cloth "ever since I was a really small child," he said.

On Sunday, Mowry's long-held dream came true, as the Sausalito Presbyterian Church ordained the Pittsburgh native as its newest pastor, the first openly gay pastor in the church's history.

For the ministers and parishioners of the hillside church, the arrival of Mowry — a highly-regarded graduate of New York's Union Theological Seminary — was cause for celebration.



Paul Mowry, with his sister, Judith Mowry, partner Joe Silverman and daughter Ellie, after being ordained. (Special to the IJ/Michael Short)



Paul Mowry is seen in the center during the 'Laying on of Hands and Prayer of Ordination and Installation.' The Sausalito Presbyterian Church became the first congregation in the nation to call an openly gay and partnered pastor to lead it. (Special to the IJ/Michael Short)

"Paul preached here as part of his interview, and when I heard him, I thought 'I hope they call him. I hope they don't let him get away,' " said the Rev. Daniel Christian, pastor of St. Luke Presbyterian Church in San Rafael, who took part in Sunday's event. "I'm really happy that he's here."

For the Rev. Mowry, the event marked the latest stage in a long journey that had taken him through careers in the film industry and in corporate banking, and from decades of self-doubt to an acceptance of his

mission.

"I've always been the person who was most likely to get into a conversation with someone who was trying to understand their place in the universe," said Mowry, who recently moved to Sausalito with his partner and their 5-year-old daughter.

Mowry left his home in Pittsburgh at the age of 18 to study film at New York University, and made that city his home for nearly the next 20 years. He spent much of that time working in production, most notably as a director's assistant

on the 1989 Meryl Streep-Roseanne Barr comedy "She-Devil."



Paul Mowry and long time partner Joe Silverman share a moment during the ceremony. (Special to the IJ/Michael Short)

"Roseanne

had been rumored to be difficult to work with, but on this film she was absolutely fun and agreeable — even though this was a difficult time in her life, when her first marriage was breaking up," Mowry said.

Hoping to give himself time to work on a screenplay, Mowry decided to take a temporary job with a Wall Street bank. He did so well at his job that the company hired him full-time as an officer.

"I really enjoyed the challenge of humanizing an environment like that," Mowry said.

Mowry admits that he had considered seeking ordination in another Christian denomination that welcomed gay men and women as ministers, such as the Episcopal

Church or the United Church of Christ. But his ties to the Presbyterian Church were simply too strong, he said, even though he had drifted in and out of the church over the years as he had wrestled with his conscience.



Paul Mowry picks up his daughter, Ellie, during the ceremony Sunday at the Sausalito Presbyterian Church. (Special to the IJ/Michael Short)

"My father, grandfather and great-grandfather were Presbyterian ministers. I still have some of the handwritten sermons my great-great-grandfather wrote in the 1790s," Mowry said. "I'm proud of all the denominations that have moved forward on this issue, but I guess I've always felt bonded to the Presbyterians."

Spurred by his friends, his partner and his mother, Mowry decided to take the risk of entering the seminary, knowing there was little chance he would ever be ordained as a Presbyterian minister.

But last year, a majority of the Presbyterian Church in the United States voted to permit the ordination of partnered homosexuals.

"This was an issue that Presbyterians had been debating openly and honestly for the last 30 years," Mowry said. "It's just amazing that the church voted to change its constitution while I was in the process of being called. The timing has baffled everyone I know."

Mowry said he was overjoyed by the church's decision, though he recognizes that it has led to some dissension within the church's membership.

"The church is at its best when it creates an environment in which people can see each other's humanity," Mowry said. "If the church is doing its job, it's pulling together people from all walks of life, with different points of view — so of course there are going to be theological differences. The work of Christ is to bring everybody together not in unanimity, but in unity. We don't have to agree on anything except that we love God, and believe that we have been called together."

Although he is one of the first openly gay Presbyterians to be ordained as a minister, Mowry said the response he has received from others within the church has been almost universally positive.

Each Presbyterian church chooses its own pastor, and Mowry said he was thrilled that the Sausalito congregation had chosen him.

"This is a church that is very diverse politically, socially and theologically. It's perhaps the greatest range of people assembled under one roof that I've ever experienced," said Mowry, who admitted that living on a Sausalito hillside was quite a departure from the New York City apartment he inhabited for two decades.

Mowry's mother, who is 90 years old, was unable to travel from her home in Portland, Ore. to attend her son's ordination. Yet she was able to watch the ceremony, thanks to a laptop computer, a webcam and the video chat program Skype.

"She had been working hard inside the church to change things," Mowry said. "At one point, she got fed up, and stopped going to church. She said she was a Presbyterian in exile, and told me 'I'll come back when they're willing to ordain you.' "

When Mowry told her he was applying to seminary, and planned to become a minister, his mother "made such a joyful noise," Mowry said. "Had I known, I would have recorded it."