

THE PRISON CHAPLAIN WAS AN ARMED ROBBER

Yes, that right! when Richard Howell was convicted of armed robbery, he was a chaplain in a Tennessee state prison (a real chaplain, not a volunteer chaplain)! How could that be? I'll let Richard tell his own story:

RICHARD:

It is true that I was a prison chaplain at the time I was convicted of armed robbery; however, I was not a chaplain at the time the crime occurred. I was out on bond waiting trial when God saved me, cleansed me of a gay life-style, and gave me the chaplain's position. But at the time of the crime, I was suicidal, bent on destroying myself, because I was so depressed over my sexual mis-orientation. I wanted to be straight, but I couldn't straighten myself out. I was trying to destroy myself (commit suicide) when the crime occurred.

Let me start from the beginning: Because my father died when I was nine years old, I did not have a masculine father-symbol during my teenage years. I longed for such a masculine hero in my life, and this longing caused some really mixed up sexual desires in me.

Also I wanted to be a Christian. I went to a Bible College seminary, and, while I was a student, pastored a church for five years. To get my sexual orientation straightened out, I went to counseling with many pastors and psychologists, but they had no answers. The best advice they could give me was that God made me this way, and I would just have to accept it and adjust to it. I could not accept that idea either, but I had no other answers.

When it came time for my ordination, I just couldn't go through with it. I felt I would be a hypocrite if I were ordained into a Christian ministry while being a homosexual. I left the ministry.

At this time in my life I turned to the gay community and started frequenting gay bath houses, gay book stores, and gay bars. I drank heavily to help me forget my misery; however, heavy drinking compounded my misery, and I made four suicide attempts. It was during a suicide attempt that I was arrested for armed robbery.

It happened like this (I was so inebriated that I don't remember some of the details. Some of what I am writing was told me by others): To ease the pain of putting a bullet in my head, I decided to get myself very drunk. I went to a bar in Knoxville, Tennessee, and got so drunk that I became loud and abusive. Finally the management threw me out into a parking lot. For a while I walked around the parking lot. Then

I looked up, saw a woman, and in a drunken stupor, said to her, “Look out, lady, I've got a gun.” I was trying to get myself killed, and I was so desperate that I would have done anything, even armed robbery, to get myself killed. The woman became hysterical, emptied her pocketbook, dropped a few coins (that's all she had) on the ground, and fled. For this incident I was arrested and charged with armed robbery. I did not get any money and don't even remember robbing her.

While out on bond awaiting trial, I started re-examining God's word (the Bible) looking for some answers for my life, to find out where my life had gone wrong, and to find out how to get it straightened out. I re-committed myself to God, and God's word started renewing my mind, my body, and my spirit. This is the time that God came into my life, and I started denying my body of the things it wanted. At last I learned the difference between being religious and being saved from my sins by Jesus Christ; the difference between religious games and reality; the difference between accepting a church doctrine, and receiving life. God did in me what the psychologists, pastors, and theologians were unable to do.

It was at that time in my life that someone told me about an opening for a chaplain's position in a Tennessee state prison. I applied and was hired — while awaiting trial on an armed robbery charge! However, I was on the job only a few months when I

was tried, found guilty, and taken into custody at Knox County Jail.

[Editor's comment:] When I met Richard at the jail, he seemed to be a very devout Christian. At the penitentiary he met men who had known him as a chaplain (a very embarrassing position), and, even though he was now one of them, they still called him Chaplain Howell. At this penitentiary, there was a very strong community of Christian prisoners. Once Richard told me that there were several prayer groups that met daily in the prison compound. He became a leader among these prayer groups.

After doing about five years in the penitentiary, Richard is now out, married, and is available for speaking engagements. He is also a relative of the Rees Howell who was director of a Bible college in Swansea, Wales.