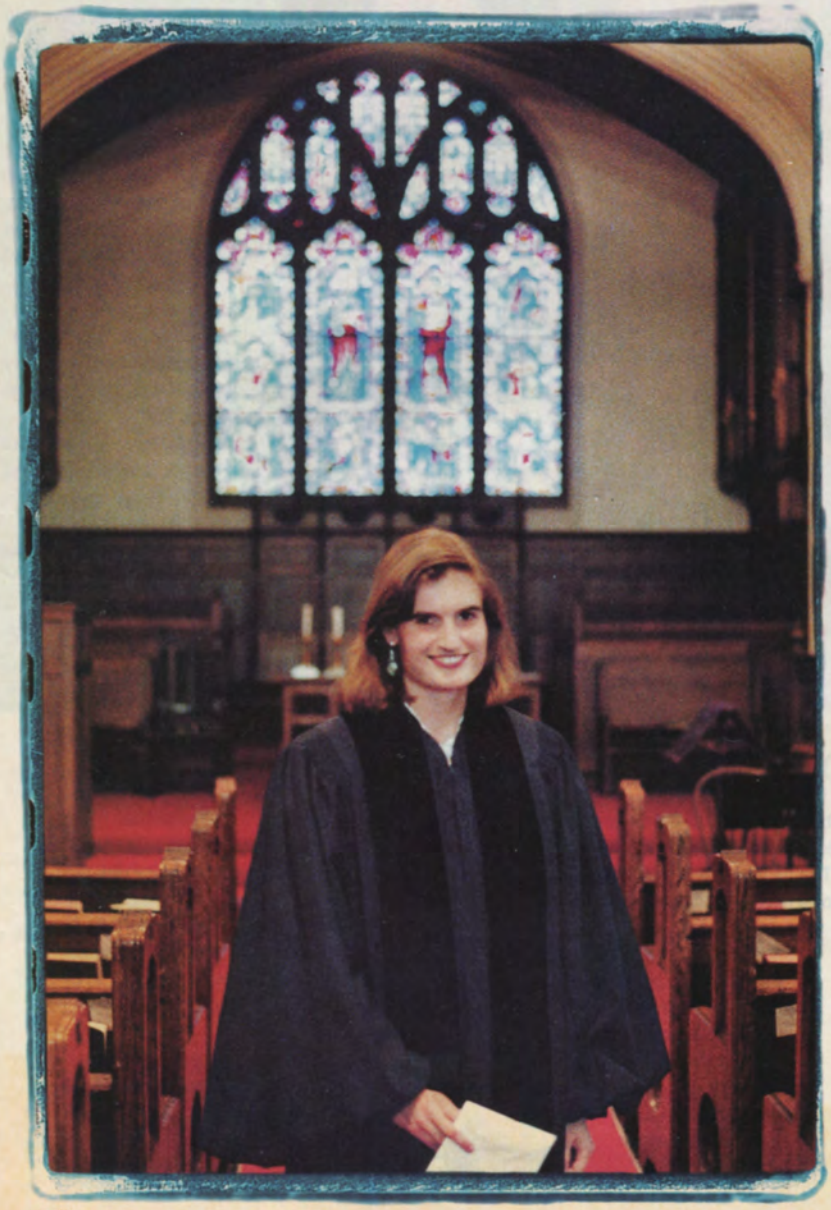
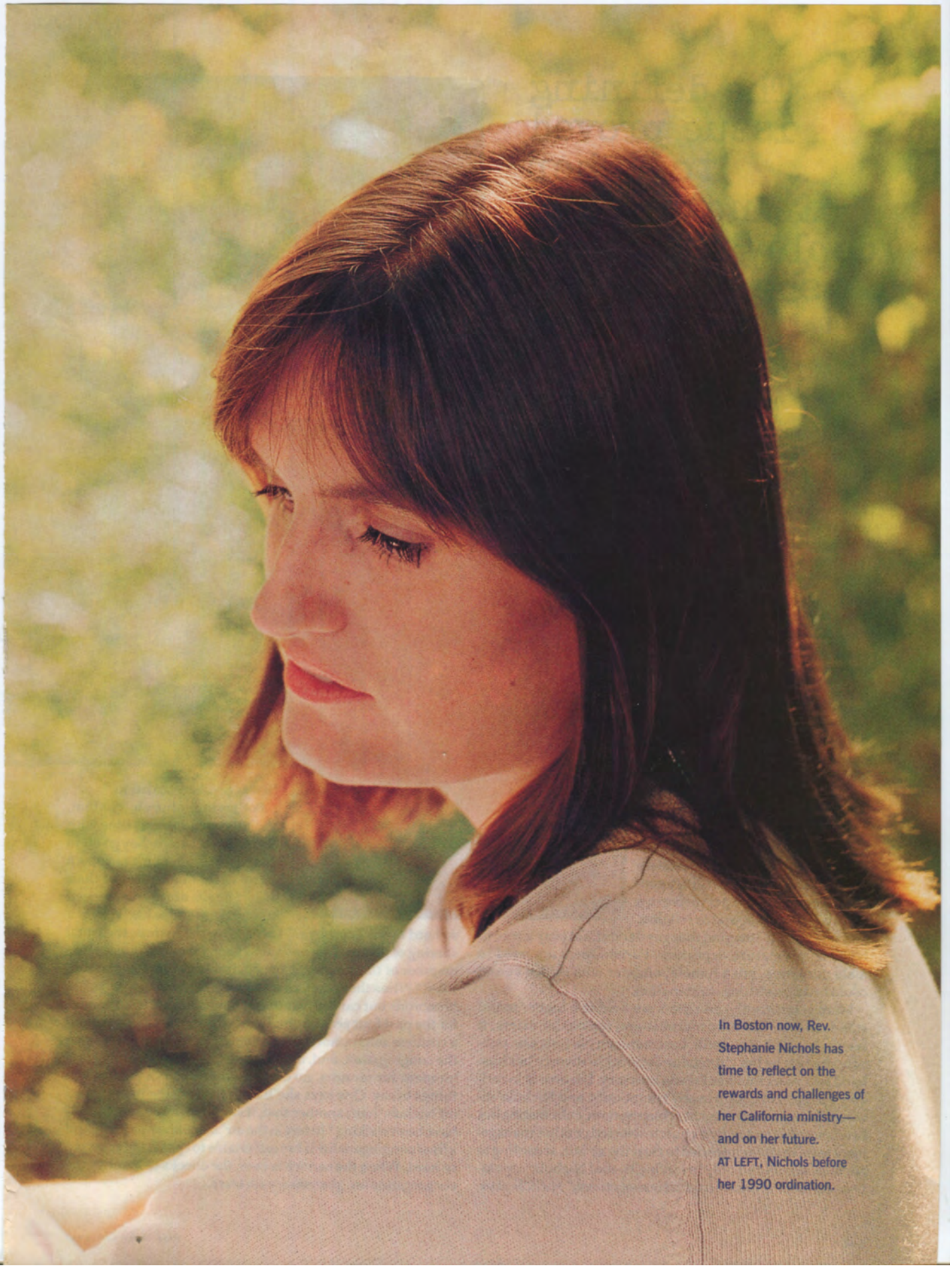
When the Minister Is a Young Woman

It's tough enough to lead a church, harder still when you're female—and choose to divorce.

by John Sedgwick



PHOTOGRAPHS, LEFT, COURTESY OF REV. STEPHANIE NICHOLS; RIGHT, DARRYL ESTRINE.



In Boston now, Rev. Stephanie Nichols has time to reflect on the rewards and challenges of her California ministry—and on her future. AT LEFT, Nichols before her 1990 ordination.

The defining issue proved to be her reluctance to deploy the power she possessed to protect her ministry.

The Rev. Stephanie Nichols is just 35, with long hair and soft eyes that have been darkened this Sunday with a touch of eyeshadow. As a Unitarian Universalist minister, Rev. Nichols does not always wear the heavy black robes associated with the clergy, and today she is in a gorgeous blue dress. Over her neck she's draped a flowery stole that was sewn for her by members of the search committee when she first came here to sunbaked Fresno, California. Now she is leaving this church sooner than planned, and as she steps to the pulpit to preach her last sermon, a few congregants are already dabbing at the corners of their eyes.

Of all Christian denominations, Unitarian Universalists are probably the most accepting of female ministers, with fully half of their pulpits, and two thirds of their seminaries, filled by women. Still, gender expectations are pervasive in a field as tradition-bound as religion, and it is hard to imagine that gender did not play a role in Nichols' premature departure. Parishioners are used to male ministers, but a female minister who is also young could be an unsettling combination.

More significantly, ministers are held to a higher moral standard than ordinary mortals—and female ministers, it seems, to a higher one still. Last summer, Nichols was publicly shamed by her church for deciding to divorce her husband two years into her Fresno ministry. Divorce is invariably a subject of gossip in any community, and Nichols' divorce became a subject for her congregation, culminating in a two-hour session run by a church-selected conflict-management team that was intended to clear the air but, according to Nichols, succeeded only in fouling it—and Nichols' reputation—further. "It wasn't conflict management," Nichols says. "It was conflict escalation."

Following church custom, Nichols spends some time with the children before they go off to Sunday School. She has known many of them for most of their lives. She sits down cross-legged among them and asks, "Why is it so hard to say good-bye?" Later, after the hymns, the ritual sharing of joys and sorrows, and a sacred dance offered by a member of the congregation, Nichols delivers her sermon, titled "When the Time Comes to Let It Go," and she talks in a humorous but careful way about how it's been "quite a ride" for the past four years. When she is done, she passes around a cordless microphone, Donahue-style, for responses from the congregation, and, although she has been dreading this moment for months, no one has anything but the kindest things to say. One says she'll miss the way the light played off Nichols' hair; another that, if she were his daughter, he'd have been walking "10 feet in the air" since she was born; and a final congregant finds herself unable to speak, she is crying so hard. When the service is over, the cheeks of much of the congregation are glistening with tears.

COURTESY OF REV. STEPHANIE NICHOLS

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Nichols hiking in Yosemite National Park during the summer of 1995; at a church gathering with members of the California congregation; saying good-bye to the children before they go off to their Sunday School class; preaching her final service this past spring.

The ministry is one of life's most difficult jobs, as it draws many of the more intractable elements of psychiatry, education, social work, politics and spirituality into a single low-paid, long-hours calling, but it is even more difficult for women. The Christian ministry has traditionally been a men's club, one might say the ultimate men's club. For many years, female ministers were not accepted in many denominations because they were not thought to be able to embody the male Jesus Christ, nor could they be considered an extension of his all-male discipleship. Plus, there were passages from the New Testament for potential clergywomen to contend with, such as Paul's remarks in his letters to the Corinthians and Ephesians that "women should keep silence in churches" and "be submissive."

Nichols is certainly aware of such arguments, but, like most female ministers, she is unmoved by them. She is struck more by the fact that, according to the New Testament, Christ made an effort to include women in his ministry, even though he gave them no formal role. "He welcomed Mary to talk about religion," she says, referring to one of Christ's companions in a passage from the book of Luke, "instead of just serving the food." The Catholic church, of course, still bans female priests. But, with varying degrees of strain, most Protestant denominations have accepted the idea of a female clergy, at least in principle. The Unitarian Universalists, perhaps because they believe in an abstract idea of God and do not recognize Christ as a uniquely divine being, have ordained female ministers since the mid-nineteenth century. Still, male and female ministers have reached parity only recently, and while the numbers may be even, the salaries and prestige are not. As is true for virtually all the Protestant denominations, female Unitarian Universalist clergy receive, on average, almost 20 percent less salary than men for the same workload; they are often relegated to the smaller, less desirable churches; and they are offered fewer chances for advancement. In the trade, these limitations are referred to as the "stained-glass ceiling."

All the same, while males have traditionally filled the pulpits of America's churches, females have always filled the pews: As far back as Puritan times, women have formed a majority of churchgoers in the United States. And, in most congregations, women also run the committees—on education and outreach, for example—that perform much of the real work of the church. In a recent essay in *Commonweal*, *Newsweek*'s religion editor Kenneth Woodward argued that if women were to take over pulpits, then they would have the whole thing. Possibly for this reason, Paula Nesbitt, a visiting associate professor of sociology at the University of Denver and an Episcopal priest, claims in *The Feminization of the Clergy in America* that a backlash may have set in against female clergy now that, in several denominations, they are reaching a critical mass of 30 percent of those being ordained. For instance, although individual churches may ordain female ministers, the Southern Baptist Convention voted in 1984 to strongly discourage female ordination. "They have decided that the ministerial role is not appropriate for women after all," Nesbitt says. Why? "It's the same old thing. Women who want careers are thought to be abandoning their family."

Growing up in Winchester, Massachusetts, Stephanie Nichols did not plan to become a minister, but she did not expect that such a career would be problematic for her, either. She was an enthusiastic member of the youth group at her Unitarian Universalist church when she was in high school, and especially admiring of the female minister who ran it. Nichols never thought of herself as Ms. Spirituality, but she could tell she was easy to talk to. In camp one summer, she was the only one to whom a friend confided that she had leukemia, and, when the cancer later went into remission, the two held a secret ceremony together, dumping all her pills into the toilet.

At Dartmouth, Nichols majored in math and comparative religion, but she considered the religion part a hobby. Still, she organized a group of Unitarian students and found herself increasingly involved in what she terms the "big questions"—the nature of a good life, the presence of evil and the meaning of life and death—raised by the religion courses. As graduation neared, she dutifully attended a career session by a data analysis company's recruiter, who went on about the joys of giving 70-hour weeks to the corporation.

"I could tell I was in the wrong place," Nichols says emphatically. She asked several friends if they'd think she was crazy if she became a minister. Far from it, they responded. "That felt great," Nichols says.

She chose the Starr King School for the Ministry, associated with the University of Cali- *Continued on page 238*

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one recent class how to make a delicate artichoke-heart salad, a tasty fillet of fish and a dazzling, colorful strawberry soup dessert. "Once you get the hang of it, it's actually fun," he tells his anxious students soothingly, adding that he too lives alone and cooks for himself.

Cookbooks can also be a great resource and inspiration. One helpful book is *Going Solo in the Kitchen* (Knopf), by Jane Doerfer, who teaches cooking in Apalachicola, Florida. She stresses that since you're in control, cooking can be easy, fun and healthful. Paulette Mitchell's *The 15-Minute Single Gourmet: 100 Deliciously Simple Recipes for One* (Macmillan) is another superb tool for the health-conscious lone cook. Mitchell, who runs classes for singles at Byerly's School of Culinary Arts in Minneapolis, stresses single-dish meals that include the major food groups. "Few people who cook for one are going to want to make five courses," she says, suggesting instead that solo diners make "a pasta dish or a rice dish or a stir-fry, something that would have the protein, the vegetables and the carbohydrate all in one dish." Mitchell recommends that cooks keep on hand basmati rice, which fixes in 15 minutes, and tomato and pesto paste in tubes, so that you don't waste a can of sauce each time you prepare a meal. Recipes in standard cookbooks, which usually give instructions for four, six or more servings, can also be easily adapted. Just cut the ingredients in half, or parse them finer with a calculator.

Plotkin urges solo cooks to use quality fresh ingredients and enliven their meals with a few basic tricks. For example, squeeze real lemons, rather than the packaged juice, over foods to jazz them up (try it on roasted potatoes, as is done in Greece). Add fresh garlic, rather than powdered, and freshly ground pepper. Keep a small chunk of Parmesan cheese in the refrigerator and grate it as needed instead of sprinkling the processed kind. Use plain yogurt seasoned with fresh chopped herbs as a dip.

Now the meal is on the table, maybe with a little music and a flower or two in a bud vase. Bon appétit! This might be just the beginning, says Mitchell. "If you're single, and you perfect your cooking skills, then you're ready to have guests." ANDREA SACHS is a senior reporter for *Time* magazine and an enthusiastic solo cook. She lives in New York City.

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fornia at Berkeley, where the male-to-female ratio in her class of 12 seminarians was roughly fifty-fifty. It was more distinctive for her to be young than to be female. At 22, she was half the age of many of her classmates, several of whom had come to the ministry as a second career.

Nichols did an internship at a church in Philadelphia and followed that with two interim ministries at nearby churches. In 1993, she decided she was ready to embark on her first permanent settlement and "candidated" for the Fresno appointment. The previous full-time minister was Rev. Betty Pingel, an older woman who had left after 11 years at the church, and many of the members seemed ready for a more vigorous presence. Yet even in a congregation used to female ministers, there was uncertainty about how to respond to a woman in the pulpit. Male ministers were father figures, that was easy; but female ones? "For many members, I suspect, Betty had a mother image," says Don Albright, a longtime member of the church. And Nichols? "I suppose some saw her as a daughter or a sister."

Or, possibly, a wife. She was married by now, to Bob Alei, a handsome electrical engineer she'd met on a nine-month antinuclear march across the United States in 1986. Alei and Nichols were welcomed to Fresno as a couple, receiving more invitations to cocktail parties and dinners than they could possibly accept. Alei attended services at the Fresno church regularly, much like a traditional preacher's spouse. The church seemed to like Nichols' style. "Her sermons were very personal," says Gina Hill, the current church president. "Stephanie said 'I' a lot." Adds Constance Jones, an assistant professor of psychology at California State University at Fresno: "She had an ability to listen like a good shrink. Her sermons were artistic—coherent, focused, intellectual. I liked her wit and her take on things." A few months into her ministry, three pillars of the church died in the same week, and Nichols held the church community together through three traumatic memorial services. (In coldly practical terms, older ministers will admit that nothing establishes a minister's authority like a funeral.) Later, Hank Voris, the 10-year-old son of a congregant, died in a freak

accident after running into a goal post during soccer practice, and Nichols provided comfort to the grieving family and the church community alike. "A lot of ministry is simply being present," she says. "I sat with Hank's mother and listened and expressed the same kind of shock that everyone was expressing. I tried not to let my own reaction interfere. I expressed it only to the extent that it seemed to help." Six hundred people attended the memorial service, 200 of them children about Hank's age. At such times, says Hill, "Stephanie could walk on water."

The larger community responded to her leadership as well. By the time of her final sermon, the size of the congregation would be up by 50 percent, from 200 members to 300. Yet such enormous growth brought new pressures. As a place of deep, long-held convictions, any church can quickly turn into a brutal political battleground when those convictions come into conflict. Precisely because of their liberal democratic ideals, the Unitarian Universalists seem to be more prone to divisive politicking than are more authoritarian denominations. Nichols created a stir when she decided to replace the congregants who worked part-time in the church office with professional staff.

At the same time, Nichols was discovering the extent of the spiritual demands being placed upon her by the congregation. It was like the transference that psychiatrists experience, she says, "except that just lasts an hour." Hers continued around the clock. Once, she was mortified to find a member of her congregation in the grocery store when she popped in wearing sweat clothes, and quickly got caught up in church business. "There's no boundary," she says, "no escaping being 'on.'"

As a minister, and especially as a female one, everything about her meant something; it was shot through with political-social-moral significance. Her hair was a particular problem, and she knew it was an act of open rebellion to wear it long, instead of up in a matronly bun. On the other hand, she figured her imposing height—she's five-nine—counted for her: "It gives me authority." Congregants generally watched their language around her, but they sometimes let slip a mild obscenity—quickly followed by a nervous laugh and an apology. Nichols, however, felt she was not allowed that luxury. She was caught in a moral time warp, whereby she was judged by the stricter standards of the Fifties, while everyone else needed only to meet the looser, more lax codes of the Nineties.

Nichols always had to stay "in role" as the minister. Yet, as a woman, she had to create that role, as well as play it. "With a woman minister, people have fewer stereotypes," Nichols says. "They don't quite know how to behave with you. If they met a bearded man in his fifties, he looks the part of the Unitarian minister and can step into the role quickly. With me, I get, 'You're the minister?'"

This ambiguity set the backdrop for the explosive news that Nichols was separating from her husband, something that she revealed in a personal aside after a sermon in September 1995. "There's something I should tell you," she began. She had always tried to establish a candid tone in her dealings with the congregation, and she felt obliged to be honest now. "I was always appreciated for how personal I was," says Nichols, "right up until they attacked me for it."

As a member of the church in his own right, Alei had developed his own friends in the congregation and, inevitably, some of the congregation sided with him. Compounding Nichols' image problem, at the time of her announcement her husband was just getting out of the hospital for elective surgery. When he returned, he continued to take his seat in the congregation.

As the crisis deepened, Nichols often consulted a small handbook called *A Machiavellian View of the Ministry,* by a retired Unitarian minister named Rev. Brandoch Lovely. It offered sage counsel on critical matters that are never fully discussed in seminary, in chapters such as "How Dress, Age and Counseling Affect the Minister's Image" and "How to Use Your Spouse." Lovely himself had undergone a divorce and his ministry was nearly wrecked by it. But Nichols was unable to bring herself to follow his key recommendation that, whatever may be the actual case, the minister should get the spouse to take the blame for the breakup. "Otherwise," Nichols explains, "the message to the congregation is, 'I could leave you.'"

Her announcement, however, only raised more questions. Like a politician caught in a scandal, Nichols tried stonewalling—and became so guarded she hardly recognized herself. She removed all but the blandest personal references from her sermons. Still, the gossip would not die. Finally, she sent a letter to the con- *Continued on page 240*

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gregation denying that she had had an affair, but acknowledging she was the one to initiate the separation. This was the first news that some members of the congregation had received on the matter, and it just aroused curiosity all the more. Even now, however, Nichols will not reveal what provoked her to end her marriage. "That's very personal," she says, obviously pained.

It was at the peak of her distress in the summer of 1996 that the church board summoned the conflict-management team. They met with Nichols and for more than a week talked to any members of the congregation who wanted to speak with them. Among the rumors circulating were charges of adultery. The team disseminated a report saying that the congregation should "cease examining" these issues and move forward. Then in August all interested congregants met in the sanctuary to discuss the matter. "That was the worst two hours of my life, certainly of my professional life," Nichols says. In theory, the purpose of the meeting was to figure out how the church could "go forward together." The participants were told not to "rehash past charges," but, as she says, "people who still wanted to get me had one last chance." Among many other things, she was accused of having a "containing" style, by which they meant that she suppressed bad news. "They thought I was only interested in saving face," she says.

At one point, Nichols asked a colleague how many ministers who had gone through this process were still in their jobs a year later. She was told not one. It was around then she decided she would have to leave, too. To her credit, Nichols stayed for another year, in order to see the church through the turmoil. The week before her final service, she got to the point where she could jokingly allude to her troubles—and some members of the congregation could laugh.

Would a clergyman have suffered this fate? Without finding a male Nichols counterpart caught in exactly the same circumstance, we'll never know for sure. Most of the Fresno congregants, confident of their own liberalism, insist that gender was not a factor, but do allow that Nichols' youth had an effect. And *youth* might be taken as code for *female* in a culture where women still lack the seniority of men in most professions.

As matters unfolded, the defining issue in Nichols' ministry proved not to be the divorce itself but her handling of the ensuing controversy, chiefly her reluctance to deploy the power she possessed to protect her ministry. (Indeed, the major lesson of Nichols' treasured *A Machiavellian View of the Ministry* is that power is what the ministry is all about.) Because women in our society have had less experience with power, they are often less able, or willing, to wield it. Of course, they also run the risk of being considered dictatorial (or "bitchy") if they try—especially in an environment that is supposedly as genteel as the Unitarian Universalist church. Once the crisis broke, Nichols threw away much of her power by revealing the most damaging information about herself—that the divorce was her idea—and by allowing her husband to talk about her among the congregation. She gradually surrendered control of her fate to others, culminating in the torturous conflict-management session that she felt amounted to open fire on her. Experienced ministers would have made sure that they dominated communication.

"A minister's best tool is the pulpit," says Rev. Robbie Cranch, a consultant to the Unitarian district that includes Nichols' former Fresno church. "When you sense there are misgivings about your ministry, the worst thing you can do is pretend that they are not there." While Cranch thinks Nichols was right to announce her divorce from the pulpit, she believes that addressing critics in a sermon is a judgment call. "In any other church crisis, you're going to respond. You need to be a guide for the emotional process." That certainly doesn't require a man, but it does require assertive leadership, which has historically been a masculine skill.

Now, in the aftermath of the big blowup, Nichols is determined to limit the fallout. The controversy surrounding her divorce may have ended her Fresno ministry prematurely, but she is loath to let it obscure her accomplishments there. A few nights before she left for Boston, where she planned to resettle for a sabbatical, Nichols had dinner with the mother of the young boy who had died. "We talked about Hank, and we got out the photographs again," she says. "That's what I'll remember most from Fresno—those moments of pure ministry. The rest of it? That's just a little piece."

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