





THE CHURCH HAD KNOWN ITS SHARE OF TROUBLES.

BUT NOTHING COMPARED WITH WHAT HAPPENED

AFTER WILLIAM DRUMHELLER TOOK THE PULPIT.

BY NEELY TUCKER

“... and now  
we can't get  
him **Out**”

HARRISONBURG, VA. —

**T**he Harrisonburg Church of Christ is an unlikely setting for a bedtime horror story, the kind of Southern Gothic tale involving murder and mendacity and money and treachery and, by many accounts, the handiwork of Satan himself. ¶ Nestled in a small town in the scenic Shenandoah Valley, the church situated on seven acres is a homey, one-story red-brick affair with a white steeple. There's a grassy yard perfect for hosting dinner on the grounds, a fellowship hall and a gravel parking lot. The people of the nondenominational church are few and mostly conservative and elderly. ¶ In the fall of 2008, this modest assembly needed a new minister. Its governing elders — Robert Thomas, a retired lieutenant from the Virginia Department of Corrections, and Gary Rexrode, a retired builder — were delighted to find that a man such as William M. Drumheller III was eager to take the job at \$600 a week with free housing in the parsonage.



ILLUSTRATION BY KAKO

The 66-year-old Virginia native was an ordained minister, held a master's in divinity degree, had served in the U.S. Navy and had run his own medical supply business. Tall, trim and bespectacled, with closely cropped gray hair and a steady blue-eyed gaze, "Bill" appeared soft of voice but firm of religious conviction, quoting scripture and sprinkling his speech with biblical observations. He laughed readily and shook hands firmly, appearing if not gregarious, then highly personable. ¶ The elders hired him immediately, and Drumheller and his wife, Joyce, moved from their North Carolina home into the church's parsonage. The new minister brought to the little congregation his gentle homilies, with titles such as "Overcoming Discouragement," and amusing, self-deprecating tales about his golf game and family life. ¶ "We all loved him," said Cathy Thomas, the elder's wife. "He could sell snow to an Eskimo." ¶ Then, early this summer, after a series of angry confrontations with the elders, sparked by scriptural interpretations about what becomes of the soul after death, Drumheller noticed that Robert Thomas and Rexrode had added their names to the list of trustees without a vote by the congregation. Drumheller notified the local court, secretly called a meeting of a few trusted church members and orchestrated a coup, stripping both elders of their positions. Drumheller and the new board moved the church's \$30,000 of savings into new bank accounts. In a later interview, he referred to the elders as a "dictatorship" and accused them of having "coronated" Rexrode's wife, Gilda, as church treasurer.

Thomas and Rexrode were so stunned that they hired a private detective to check into Drumheller's business dealings.

The investigation unearthed a stunning revelation, which soon made headlines in the Daily News-Record, the local newspaper:

Drumheller — never mind his seemingly genteel nature — had beaten his girlfriend's 14-month-old son to death in 1970.

There was more, too, lots more, for William Drumheller was not at all the man he had presented himself to be.

"I felt physically ill," Thomas recalled late this summer, sitting at the kitchen table in his quiet country house a dozen miles outside of town, a cup of coffee and a plate of banana-nut muffins on the table. Rexrode, sitting across from Thomas, gazed out the window and drummed his fingers on the wooden table.

On that August day, with its brilliant sunshine still holding the promise of long, languorous afternoons, two things were clear. One, the Harrisonburg Church of Christ was in the hands of the mysterious stranger who had blown into town and enchanted them all. And two, this tale would have no easy, Sunday-school ending.

# “Finally out for us and started the order in v

JOAN KNIGHT, WHO WAS PART OF A S

"We let a wolf into the church," Rexrode mused, "and now we can't get him out."

**D**rumheller's path from prison to the pulpit of the Harrisonburg Church of Christ was long and tumultuous, raising troubling questions about the nature of forgiveness and redemption.

The son of a railroad brakeman and the child of divorce, Drumheller was raised mostly by his fundamentalist Methodist grandparents in Clifton Forge, Va. He joined the Navy after high school and "explored the world and many of its opportunities," he said in an interview. He married at 19 and had two children, settling in Illinois. The marriage wasn't happy — his wife com-

plained to his father that he drank, couldn't keep a job and was "being cruel" to their children, his father said in a letter to the Illinois courts pleading for leniency for his son.

By 1970, Drumheller was working at a Shell station in the Chicago suburbs when he began an extramarital affair with Mary Breitweiser, a 22-year-old divorcee who worked nights on the assembly line at the Chicago Rawhide Co., he later told a prison psychiatrist. He left his family for Breitweiser and her 14-month-old son, David.

Three weeks later, Drumheller became angry when the child wouldn't come when called. He beat him to death. "I reached around in front of him and swung my hand (in a closed fist) and caught him in the stomach which jerked him off the floor up to me," he told the court in a written statement. David's "hands curled in and his legs drew up underneath him." He lapsed into convulsions and died.

The autopsy said the cause of death was "explosive rupture of the stomach." The child's lungs also had burst. He had deep bruises on his thighs and buttocks. He had severe brain damage from a blow to the head. Drumheller acknowledged to the court that he had "chronically" abused the child. He was particularly angered, he told the psychiatrist, because the child would not cry when spanked.

# ur congregation has someone to fight stand with us to restore our church to which it was intended by Scripture.”

A SMALL FACTION OF CHURCH MEMBERS WHO SUPPORTED DRUMHELLER



**William M. Drumheller III, who in January 2009 took the pulpit at the Harrisonburg Church of Christ, was involved in court hearings in October over who should govern the church.**

The psychiatrist's diagnosis: "Inadequate personality with strong anti-social features."

A jury convicted him of murder. It sentenced him to 70 to 125 years.

But once incarcerated at the Stateville Correctional Center, Drumheller began impressing nearly everyone he met as a sincere man who had made a horrific mistake, recalls Peter Bumpass, volunteer chaplain at the prison for nearly 30 years. "Everyone thought the world of Bill. ... it just seemed like a one-time incident that got out of hand."

PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE OLLIVER

An appellate panel reduced Drumheller's sentence, and with Bumpass's enthusiastic support, he was granted parole after 12 years. Drumheller joined Bumpass's church, got a job through Bumpass running a medical supply business, met a woman in the congregation, married and had two sons. His life, which had been condemned to the miseries of prison, seemed to have blossomed anew.

But by the late 1980s, this feel-good narrative collapsed. He had another adulterous affair — this time with a church friend's wife — Bumpass and the woman's husband recalled in recent interviews. Both marriages ended. The congregation, which had believed in Drumheller's rebirth as evidence of the Christian power of forgiveness and redemption, was mortified, Bumpass remembers.

"We certainly felt betrayed," he said.

Drumheller left the church, divorced his wife, and married the woman with whom he was having an affair.

By 1989, he was running a Medicare scam, he acknowledged in a guilty plea in federal court. The case was so blatant that it was held up by the federal government as one of the nation's worst cases of Medicare fraud.

"Drumheller obtained names and health insurance claim numbers of nursing facility patients," June Gibbs Brown, inspector general of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, testified to a congressional subcommittee. "He then forged physicians' signatures ... and filed claims for equipment ... which he never provided." Her statement said that former employees of Drumheller gave statements about "episodes of sexual misconduct and violence" by Drumheller.

He got a five-month prison term and an order to pay \$59,000 in restitution.

Meanwhile, life at home was abusive, say Drumheller's son, Peter, his stepson, Brad Karas, and stepdaughter, Amanda Jones.

Peter Drumheller, 28, now works at a construction job in Chicago. Reached by phone, he said his father beat him, his brother and his mother. "I was so near to death with him so many times," he said, his voice shaking. "You'd just have to run and hope he didn't find you." He said he has been "on suicide watch" in hospitals because of childhood physical abuse by his father.

He hasn't seen or heard from his father in 17 years, Peter said.

Brad Karas said he did not live with his mother —