



## Churches Offer Spirituality for The Gay Community

After years of feeling persecuted and unwanted by organized religion, gays and lesbians increasingly are finding their way back to spirituality, not only in gay-oriented institutions, but also in bastions of traditionalism that are slowly opening their doors to homosexuals.

It is perhaps a sign of a collective maturity that those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered no longer look solely toward so-called gay churches and synagogues to define their spiritual lives.

And while exclusively, or predominately gay religious institutions continue to thrive, there is also a sense that their corner on the gay religious market is slowly ebbing.

"What I think you'll see happen in the next twenty years is more congregations open up to more people," says Grant Ford, pastor at The Sunshine Cathedral, Fort Lauderdale's Metropolitan Community Church.

Gay Christianity had its origins with MCC, the first church nationally to minister to openly gay and lesbian members. The church branched off in Los Angeles in 1969 specifically because of Christian institutions exclusionary views towards homosexuals. Today, there are more than 350 member churches worldwide.

In spite of the splintering, MCC is thriving. Today, the church boasts about 450 Sunday service-goers, Ford says. In addition, the organization in June will be opening the doors to its new facility, a 2.3-acre piece of property at 1480 S.W. 9th Avenue in Fort Lauderdale with three free-standing buildings totalling 23,500 square feet. The main church seats up to 875 people, while a second chapel will be able to accommodate another 250. There are also 13 meeting rooms, a 150-seat fellowship hall and parking for more than 350 cars.

The church's heyday in terms of membership was back in the late 1980's, when the AIDS epidemic had gathered full steam. The victims of the disease and their friends and family were facing their own mortality, Ford says. It was also a time when few mainstream religious organizations were turning their backs on gay followers. Ironically, it was the advent and success of so-called AIDS cocktails, which slowed down mortality rates, which has hurt church membership recently, according to Ford.

"The thing you always used to hear people say is 'The first thing I did when I came out was stop going to church or synagogue,'" says Rabbi Greg Kanter of Congregation Etz Chaim in Wilton Manors. That is changing.

Today, there are literally dozens of religious institutions which cater exclusively, or predominately to gays and lesbians. Many have an open-arms policy to people of all political and sexual stripes. Still other more traditional organizations have spearheaded individual outreach programs to various minority groups, among them gays and

lesbians.

Gay branches of existing religious institutions have popped up everywhere, offering men and women many alternatives to "gay churches". In addition to these organizations, there are a litany of other more-specific groups. Consequently, many offer outreach programs designed exclusively for gays and lesbians. Among them are: Integrity, a group for gay Episcopalians; Dignity, for gay Catholics; and Fellowship Tabernacle, for gay blacks.

"I think more gays and lesbians are asking themselves 'What do I exist for and what is this all about,'" says Rev. Deanna Jaworski, senior pastor at Church of the Holy SpiritSong in Deerfield Beach. SpiritSong is "an evangelical, musical ministry whose primary focus is to share the gospel of Jesus Christ," she says.

Jaworski, who in 1987 came out as a lesbian and was subsequently excommunicated from her church for being "a reproach to the cross of Jesus Christ", lived a number of years angry at God.

"I had been told that there was no place for me in God's family," Jaworski says.

But she fought through it, determined to live her life as a gay woman and a Christian. She later was ordained into the SpiritSong ministry. In those early days, there were only about 20 people participating in her weekly Bible study. Last week, there were 75, many of whom are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered, she says.

"The team here is not committed to church. We're not committed to ministries. We're not committed socials. We're committed to Christ," Jaworski says.

Among Jews, many have found Congregation Etz Chaim, which counts about 250 local households as members. That is a marked improvement from the 100 or so people who attended services when Kanter took over in 1995.

"The desire has always been there (for gay Jews to have a place to worship)," Kanter says. "We've always wanted to have a place to express ourselves spiritually. It's just human to want to express your spirituality."

While the reformed branch of Judaism has become safe haven for some gay Jews, congregations like Etz Chaim materialized as a response to the more conservative and traditional manifestations of the religion, Kanter says.

And more clergy are standing up and defending the place of homosexuals in their churches and synagogues. In Christian churches, more are challenging the notion that homosexuality is un-Christian, or that they do not belong there.

"We do believe the Bible is the inspired word of God. We do not believe the Bible is to be taken literally," says Willfred Jack Noble, minister at First Presbyterian Church of Pompano Beach. "We're not literalists and we take a certain pride in not being literalists.

God created us with brains, and he expects us to use them. It's become a divisive issue in this country, and the Church is the place that ought to be leading the way. We are all God's children, and (gays and lesbians) have as much right to sit at the table as Joe Q. Heterosexual."

While the church does not officially chart the sexuality of its members, it is not considered as a litmus test for prospective worshippers, Noble says.

First Presbyterian is a member of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., a more liberal Presbyterianism than a church such as Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, which belongs to the Presbyterian Church of America.

Still others, such as Unitarian Universalists, revel in embracing their diversity and in their liberal reading of Christian scripture and thus have always been a favorite of gays and lesbians.

"We try to live in the world as we find it," says Tapscott, who estimates that 15-20 percent of her 135-member congregation is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. "Jesus never said anything about homosexuality. What he said was all about accepting and loving."

Unitarian Universalists endorse the concept of individuals developing their own personal theology and the innate self-worth of that ideal. The church also stresses "the worth and dignity of each human being", a belief that appeals to many minority groups. It counts liberal Christians, humanists, theists, Jews and pagans among its members.

"We are a deliberately diverse and inclusive community," Tapscott says. "We pride ourselves on disagreeing. We really try to honor each other. For us, it's not about having a common belief system but about a common quest and a desire to support each other in that quest," Tapscott says. "We think there are many paths to God."

But it is not only where, but also how, lesbians and gays worship that has changed over the years.

"Gays and lesbians used to come as a reaction to the church," Sunshine Cathedral's Ford says. "Now, people come out of the spiritual yearnings of adulthood. It's not how do I escape hell but how do I get a little slice of heaven now."

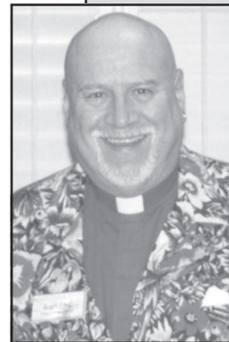
As for those who insist homosexuality is an abomination, SpiritSong's Jaworski says, "I pray for those people. God created us with free will and lets us make our own decisions. We just have to try to agree to disagree."

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First Presbyterian's Noble says many misinterpret the Bible. "Jesus never said anything about homosexuality. Paul did, but Jesus did not. That's why we believe the scriptures should be interpreted."

Agrees Ford, "Everyone is worried about homosexuality, but I don't see it. You have to read the Bible or any other sacred text very carefully and look for the truth in it."

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