

## Gays should have a place within

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religions, and are taking the battle for acceptance into the pews and cathedrals of mainstream churches. Gay Anglicans, Catholics and United Church members have organized support groups which challenge their churches' prevailing homophobic theology.

Philip Knight says lesbians and gays should not all join liberal churches or gay ministries because that "leaves the mainline denominations unchallenged."

Knight, a spokesperson for a national gay Catholic group called Dignity, wants to reform his church from within. He says lesbians and gays must have a presence in their churches.

"Gays should have a place within mainline churches," says Knight. "If all the gays leave the mainline churches, the churches would say that homosexuality is not their business," he says. "But it is their business. It's their business because Christians are supposed to believe that Christianity is not a matter of cliques."

"Christianity shouldn't only be a religion for the respectable."

Like its counterparts in other denominations, Dignity chapters are active in most Canadian and U.S. cities. The group organizes masses, retreats, prayer groups, peer counselling and educational duties.

Knight says one of Dignity's goals is to "educate the church at all levels on homosexual issues."

"The psychological cruelty of the church is lessening, perhaps because groups like Dignity are educating the clergy," he says.

"Churches should deal with gays and lesbians," Knight says. "many of us think that the question of accepting homosexuals into the church is rather like the question of whether Greeks should have been allowed into the early church."

"Christ came to do away with the law," he says. "Jesus broke down the partition in the temple between Greeks and Jews. Salvation is for everyone — without exception."

Knight is upset by the Catholic church's hypocritical acceptance of lesbians and gays while rejecting their lifestyle.

"They say you can be a homosexual in our church, have a homosexual orientation, but that you can't practice. That's like saying it's okay to be a bird but you can't fly."

"God made you as you are and accepts you as you are," Knight says, "but to have marked you for involuntary chastity by your birth is an extraordinary thing for a merciful God to do. No one can tell a homosexual that it is his vocation to be chaste since a vocation has to be chosen."

Knight sees lesbians and gays propelling the Catholic church into the 20th century by forcing it to re-vamp its theology of sexuality.

The issue of sexual activity is a pressing one for lesbian and gay Christians. There is much pressure put on them by their churches, if they must be gay, to at least remain chaste. This somehow makes their gayness easier to accept.

Last August, the United Church general council debated a report which called for the ordination of openly gay or lesbian candidates. The report was eventually tabled, but not before much acrimonious

debate. The message to the Church's lesbians and gays was clear, though — stay celibate.

Reverend Eilbert Frerichs is the openly gay United Church chaplain at the University of Toronto. He is also a spokesperson for AFFIRM, the United Church group for lesbians and gays.

Frerichs says it is a lot to ask gays and lesbians, especially if they want to be ministers, to remain celibate when it is not expected of their heterosexual counterparts.

"In the Christian tradition, celibacy is seen as a special vocation, as a gift from God, given to some, not all," he says. "It's not something that can be imposed."

AFFIRM operates as a support and lobby group. Prior to last August's general council meeting in Morden, Manitoba, AFFIRM members gathered in Winnipeg to plan strategies for the meeting.

One problem lesbian and gay religious groups have is the less than full participation of lesbians.

Dignity's Knight says his group is predominantly male because "it's very hard to convince women that the Catholic Church is a place for them. Many lesbians felt that the church is totally irrelevant."

Lorraine Butchart agrees, adding "most women who have come out have already grown out of the church."

"Lesbianism tends to be more spiritual in nature," Butchart says. "Gay men have the bars and clubs as their social outlets and it's a fact of life that there is more casual sex among the men."

"I think the men search for their spiritual needs in the church because their spiritual needs aren't being met in their social outlets," she says.

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So, like the blushing brides at the lesbian wedding in Winnipeg, lesbian and gay Christians are shaping heterosexual religious traditions into something relevant to their lives and experiences.

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