

# NICE DAY FOR A WHITE WEDDING

God's gay flock searches for a home in organized religion...

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## IT WAS A NICE DAY FOR A WHITE WEDDING.

The minister, resplendent in his red and purple frock, stood solemnly in the chapel's sanctuary as the organist played the traditional wedding march. Fidgeting guests peered anxiously down the aisle as the white-clad bride gracefully slid by them, joining her nervous sweating mate before the minister.

Everything was just right: the fifty carefully chosen guests, the tasteful flower arrangements, and the joyous organ music. In fact, one hardly noticed the only thing missing was the groom. The two women, dressed in identical white suits, exchanged rings, kissed and were pronounced married before their weeping friends and relatives.

Events such as this lesbian wedding in Winnipeg are becoming more common as lesbians and gay men assert their right to participate in mainstream religious institutions.

Lesbians and gays are not only gathering together and forming their own fellowships and patronizing more liberal churches, they are even trying to educate and gain a foothold in established Christian churches.

The church has been a source of hatred and pain for lesbians and gays for centuries. Church commanders have often outright rejected their gay parishoners, and followed this rejection with persecution.

Small wonder so many lesbians and gays desert organized religion.

Reverend Charles Bidwell says turning away from religion is no solution. "Everybody is religious," says Bidwell, an Edmonton-area minister for the Metropolitan Community Church, a non-denominational church which serves lesbians and gays exclusively.

Bidwell says the need for spirituality is still there, but many lesbians and gays have knuckled under heterosexual bullying and opted for dropping out of religion. That is changing, though, as increasing numbers of them set out to reclaim the spirituality homophobics have tried to deny them.

"Gays and lesbians have gifts to offer the Christian church," says Bidwell. "One gift is our growing understanding of the importance of embodying the spirit, reuniting the body and soul, and exploring the role of sexuality and sexual expression within a spiritual context."

"How many churches really get down to talking about sexual intimacy as a loving commitment to two people," says Bidwell. "They've lost the sense of celebration of sexual joining. Sexuality is a gift from God and we should celebrate it. Too many people are willing to do it in the dark and under the sheets and hope God doesn't see."

The MCC has chapters in most major North American cities and offers a home to God's wandering gay flock.

"We say that we offer a home for Christian worship, study and fellowship for anyone who feels alienated or rejected from their home church for whatever reasons."

"We have been drawn together by a special need to find affirmation and support," he says. "This makes us a close, caring community."

A typical MCC service includes hymns, Bible readings, prayers and holy communion. "We try to incorporate things from all Christian traditions."

One stumbling block for Christian lesbians and gays is the Bible, whose interpretation, by straight men, has been used to condemn and persecute them. Bidwell says lesbians and gays are trying to reclaim the Bible by tracing the roots of its traditionally sexist and homophobic tradition.

"Because the Bible has been used by some people to condemn us for what we are," says Bidwell, "we have been forced to do in-depth study of the scripture, their context and their meaning at the time they were written before we try and apply them."

Bidwell says the book *Homosexuality, Social Tolerance and Christianity* by Yale scholar John Boswell is a good text on the evolution of biblical homophobia.

"Boswell went through how homosexuality was viewed since before Christ to the 13th century," Bidwell says. "You can see the bias of the period, how words were assigned meanings and how translation evolved."

"For example, the word 'homosexual' in the Bible was translated from the Greek word meaning spineless, gutless or soft. Later, that word was interpreted to mean effeminate and eventually homosexual," says Bidwell.

"In other cases, there is an outright condemnation of some behavior that even homosexuals will condemn — homosexual gang rape, for example. Homosexuality was not Sodom's only sin," says Bidwell.

Bidwell also points out that lesbianism is virtually ignored in the Bible "because



Illustration: Rick Janson

society was so male dominated at the time it was written."

"People will go to the Bible to re-affirm their beliefs and will read what they want to read," says Bidwell. "It seems that some people can only feel positive by attacking something else."

"I don't see how this is an acceptance of Christ's acceptance of all oppressed people," says Bidwell. "Christ was a political rebel. If Christ came and saw what was being done to lesbians and gays, he would be the first to jump right in. If Christ were sitting in this room he wouldn't go, 'Do you do this or do you do that.' He would ask, 'What is your relationship to that person like? Are you helping that person's spirit? Are you helping them be loving and caring? Do you value and love that person? Do you have power over that person?'"

Bidwell says Christians are missing Christ's message when they oppress lesbians and gays, and have a moral responsibility to speak out against their persecution.

"We tend to get so hung up with who's putting what where, when we should be much more at arms about abusive people," he says.

The MCC is not the only church lesbians and gays are flocking to in their search for a non-oppressive worship environment. Many are seeking out religious organizations which are more humanist than Christian such as the Unitarian Universalists.

It is said of the Unitarians that anything goes in their loosely structured church because they have no dogma. The church is open to anyone including atheists,

agnostics, and gays and lesbians. Unitarians have long supported gay rights, have ordained gay ministers and perform gay marriages.

Lorraine Butchart is a Unitarian church member in Edmonton, and an organizer for a local gay and lesbian Unitarian chapter. She says such a group is important to increase lesbian and gay visibility within the church.

"In spite of the fact that Unitarian Universalists are very liberal, there are still individuals who are homophobic," she says. "Also, a lot of gays and lesbians are attracted to the church because they've heard we are open to gays, so we needed a visible presence in the church — both to overcome the homophobia and to welcome first time visitors."

Butchart says a motion passed at a national Unitarian conference in Banff last year affirmed "homosexuals as worthy individuals, discouraged prejudice against gay ministers, and encouraged the ordinance of gay union services."

"We also decided at this conference to form a national organization for lesbian and gay concerns," Butchart says. The Canadian Universalists for Lesbian and Gay Concerns is much like one in the U.S., which has existed since 1971.

Butchart says the group will be organizing workshops and study services to increase general awareness within the church.

But the struggle for gay spirituality does not end with special gay ministries and liberal churches. Many lesbian and gay Christians do not want to give up their

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