

# Gays and the Church

by Gilbert Bouchard  
and Danielle Comeau

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 nervously 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 parishioners, 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 offer 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 reason."

"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 interpretation.

"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 to 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 though 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, guileless 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 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 organisations 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 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 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."

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.

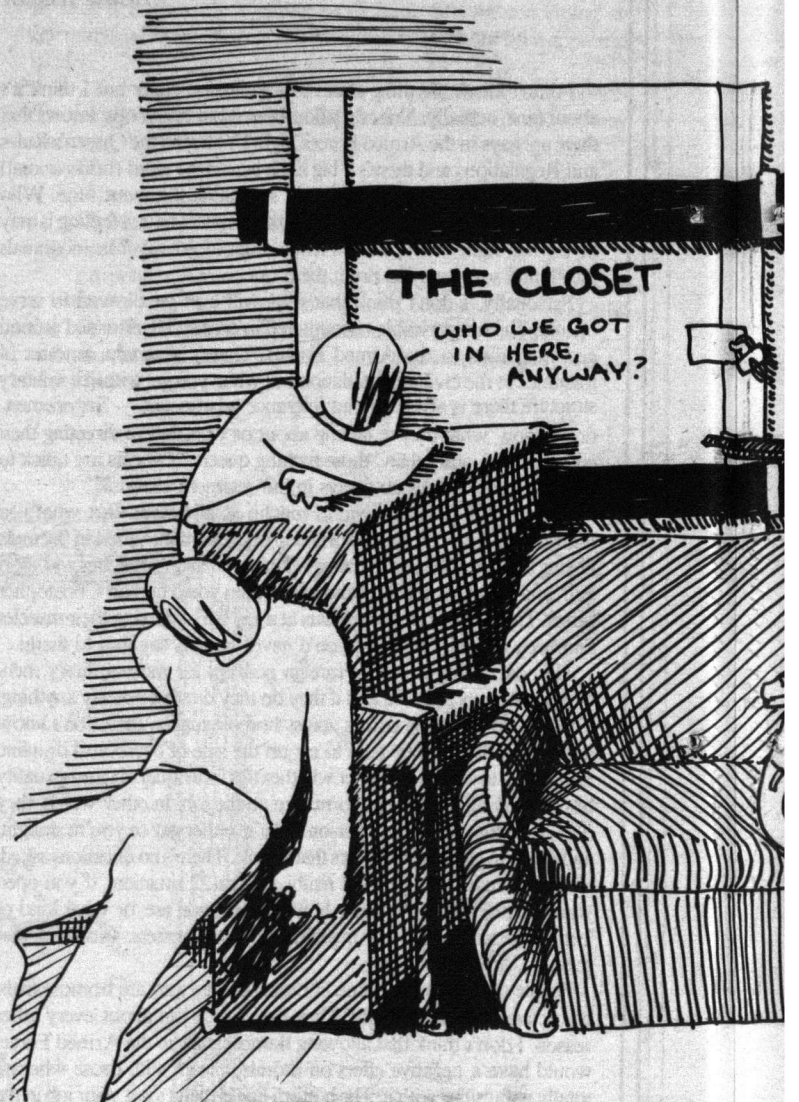
Dignity's Knight says his group is predominately male because "it's very hard to convince women that the Catholic Church is a place for them. Many lesbians feel that the Church is totally irrelevant."

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 bar 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.

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.



# Gays and th

by Denise Whalen

Campus homosexuals comprise about 16 to 20 per cent of the students employed by the Students' Union. Although these figures may elicit raised eyebrows among the uninformed, these numbers are generally in line with homosexual representation within the population at large.

You can find homosexuals working at almost every Students' Union outlet on campus—L'Express, Store Plus More, the Games Area, Dewey's, and possibly others as well. Their invisibility protects them from any blatant form of verbal or physical abuse. The possibility of this type of harassment taking place is believed to be quite remote by most gay Students' Union employees, given the relatively relaxed working conditions and enlightened attitudes of their straight colleagues. The general rule is that gay employees will come out to selected fellow workers, but not to supervisors.

An employee of Dewey's, who wishes to remain anonymous, considers herself very fortunate since she has come out to almost all her colleagues and has not been rejected by any of them. Her situation is also quite unique in that her fellow workers also know and accept her lesbian lover. They are looked upon as a couple and treated as such. "This acceptance definitely helps to keep our relationship a stable one."

An employee of L'Express, who also wishes to remain anonymous, has come out of the closet to those employees with whom he works on a regular basis. His decision to come out—and this seems to be the rule rather than the exception—was not a spontaneous one. Danica Frazer, also a L'Express employee, gets along extremely well with her gay colleagues, and has never seen any homophobic behaviour directed toward them.

Other heterosexual Students' Union employees also seem to echo this "live and let live" attitude. John Lamb, a Store Plus More employee, believes that things would change very little if a gay employee came out to him. "I would respect their right to privacy as long as they didn't push it. Of course I would feel uncomfortable if approached on the job by a fellow employee, but I wouldn't expect to be propositioned by a customer either. One thing that would change for