

"Couples want celebrations and blessings for their union. They want to shout it from the rooftops. But there is still no legal sanction, no special status and no benefits or privileges from the government."

BY PATRICK LEJTENYI

MONTREAL (CUP) — If you're gay, Jewish, in love and in Winnipeg, then you're in luck.

Winnipeg is the only city in Canada where a Jewish homosexual couple can be married by a rabbi with religious trappings, synagogue and all.

Rabbi Michael Levenson, a former Montrealer who's been performing same-sex marriages in the United States for five years, now presides over Winnipeg's only Reform temple.

He has yet to perform one in Canada since moving back here last September, but has five planned between March and August.

"I feel very, very strongly convinced about this," Levenson says. "There have been so many injustices against gays and lesbians by organized religion over the years, and these injustices have to be corrected."

Because there is no presiding authority over Judaism's four branches as a whole, each temple is free to choose its own policy on same-sex marriages. Levenson, with the "one hundred percent unanimous" backing of his congregation, is able to perform inter-faith marriages as well as same-sex ones.

But it hasn't earned him many friends.

Several rabbis have openly denounced Levenson's practice. In the local *Jewish Post*, five of the city's eight rabbis signed a letter condemning him.

And in the rabbi's hometown of Montreal, leading Conservative and Orthodox rabbis are also displeased with the idea.

Rabbi Reuben Poupko, of Montreal's Orthodox Beth Israel Beth Aaron synagogue, is adamant that same-sex marriages are wrong.

"It won't come as a big surprise when I say I will never sanction same-sex marriages," he says. "There is a unanimity of opinion on this. Gays should not be seeking validity from the

heterosexual community."

While Poupko does not condemn homosexuals outright, and supports gay and lesbian rights, he says biblical law is clear on the subject of same-sex unions.

"From an Orthodox standpoint, homosexual marriage is rejected by Jewish law, just as eating pork is, just as working on the Sabbath is. It is just the law, it is against the law, it is prohibited."

Levenson however, argues some Biblical laws supersede others, especially when it comes to modern social dilemmas.

"There is an adage of never separating the faithful from the congregation," he says. "We should be teaching love and a loving God so we can have normal social development, worship experience and congregation regardless of sexuality."

While Levenson is prepared to bend the rules when it comes to marrying same-sex couples, he remains strict on the matter of religious practice. Both individuals must be either Jewish or prepared to live in a Jewish home, and any children the couple adopts must be brought up Jewish as well.

Levenson's approach is not entirely unique. Reform Jews have been performing same-sex marriages for about five years, following a general meeting of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, a North American umbrella organization.

But the idea still splits the community, and not all Reform rabbis will perform the ceremonies. The final say lies with the individual rabbi and his congregation.

Although Jewish homosexual marriages in the United States are becoming increasingly common, Levenson still thinks Canada will grant official recognition to same-sex couples before the US will.

"I don't think the US will recognize gay marriages for a long time," he says.

But there's little evidence his optimism about Canada's stance on same-sex couples is well-founded.

In Quebec, for example, civil authorities still fail to recognize same-sex marriages, and same-sex

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partners are still not entitled to any of the benefits heterosexual couples receive.

In Montreal, many members of the gay and lesbian community have become disillusioned with the province's consistent balking towards same-sex marriage entitlements.

Pastor Jeems of the Eglise Communautaire du Village in Montreal's gay village, has long watched the ebb and flow of the movement.

"Catch me on a good day and I'll say six months [until same-sex couples are given equal benefits]," he says. "Things are moving, but it's hard to guess."

The non-denominational church only has about 20 members, but has performed many religious blessings for gay couples. On average, Jeems performs one blessing a month.

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"It's a small church," Jeems adds, "and the people who do decide to become members are just saying they're fed up with churches in which you have to leave your sexuality at the door."

As for Levenson, he plans to go to Ottawa soon to urge Parliament to recognize same-sex marriages.



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